Topic Choice/Inquiry: A Strategy for Increasing Motivation in English Communications

Rachel Reynolds

Vancouver Island University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if the implementation of Topic Choice/Inquiry had an impact on increasing student motivation towards improving both the quantity and quality of writing. This study was conducted with a sample population of 19 participants who were English Communications 12 students in the fall of 2014. A mixed method exploratory strategy was used consisting of a pre and post-intervention five point Likert scale survey and a pre and post intervention essay. The teaching intervention of Topic Choice/Inquiry was three months in duration. This teaching intervention was created based on four areas deemed integral for developing motivation towards writing. Post-intervention survey results yielded increases in all four motivational areas with noticeable increase revealed in the area of supportive context. Participants indicated interest and connection to be influential motivators towards writing. The overall positive results obtained from this study indicate the importance of addressing motivational factors when designing writing strategies for English Communications 12 students to help promote their success.
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Chapter 1: Problem to be Investigated

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if implementing the instructional strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry in English Communications 12 classes had an impact on increasing student motivation towards improving both the quantity and quality of writing. Effective writing skills are not only required by post-secondary institutions, but also by many of today’s employers. According to Wagner and Kegan (2006), success in today’s global knowledge economy requires new literacy capabilities that not only demand the ability to be able to write clearly and concisely, but also the ability to reason and analyze information effectively. This can be problematic for learners who struggle with the complexities and difficulties of the complex cognitive process of writing. “Becoming an able writer brings great intellectual and social rewards, but the extended nature and difficulty of this process creates unique motivational challenges” (Bruning & Horn, 2000, p. 25). Bruning and Horn (2000) identified four sets of factors as being integral for developing and maintaining motivation towards writing. These four conditions encompass: nurturing students’ functional beliefs about writing; fostering student engagement through authentic writing goals and contexts; providing a supportive context for writing; and creating a positive emotional environment that offers students autonomy, positive feedback, and trust. Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional intervention was designed by this current researcher based on the aforementioned conditions in an effort to positively increase motivation towards writing for English Communications 12 students.

This researcher recognized the fact that literacy skills are critical for success in today’s society. As well as higher level literacy skills, employers are also demanding employees have
solid interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, technology skills, and critical thinking skills. Forty-two percent of all Canadians do not have the level of literacy skills required to be successful in today’s workplace (Unlocking Canada’s Potential, 2007), and this is a situation that this researcher felt needed to be addressed at the classroom level for senior students. “There is widespread agreement that knowledge and skills, including literacy, are vital to Canada’s economy and to the social well-being of individuals” (Unlocking Canada’s Potential, 2007. p.6). Ensuring that students graduate with adequate literacy skills is important to enable them to have opportunities for a positive future. “Over the past several years, there has been a surge of interest in understanding how best to prepare students for the higher than ever literacy demands of the technological society in which we live” (Ganske, Monroe, & Strickland, 2003, p. 118). The Ministry of Education’s British Columbia Education Plan (2015), emphasizes the importance of schools maintaining high standards in the foundation skills of literacy as well, but suggests that flexibility in the curriculum that allows students more opportunities to pursue their interests could help promote engagement which could in turn increase achievement. To this end, this current study examines the impact of offering Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional strategy as a means of motivating students to achieve higher success in writing in order that they are prepared to successfully meet the literacy demands of the 21st century.

As a senior English teacher, this researcher observed general apathy and a lack of motivation, as well as poor quality of written output among English Communications 12 students that was troubling and begging for intervention. “Our education system was never designed to deliver the kind of results we now need to equip students for today’s world- and tomorrow’s” (Wagner & Kegan, 2006, p.1). As effective educators, therefore, we need to “rethink and redesign” in order to help students become more motivated towards writing in order that they
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graduate high school with the necessary communication skills they require to be successful (Wagner & Kegan, 2006, p.1). This current study builds upon the existing research in both the fields of motivation and writing and will be used to address the significant problem of students’ lack of motivation to write. This area of research needs further exploration as little research has been done that specifically addresses creating instructional strategies related exclusively to students’ motivation and writing performance (Lam & Law, 2007).

Historically English Communications 12 classes have always been taught in teacher directed and controlled format. High absenteeism and low performance results in students’ writing suggested that the traditional delivery or style of instruction should be addressed, and alternative styles should be investigated. Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan’s research (1991) on self-determination proposed that learning contexts that support students’ autonomy will promote motivation towards learning, and traditional teacher controlled formats are demotivating for student progress towards learning (Deci et al, 1991). Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional strategy is an approach for teaching writing that is teacher guided rather than controlled.

Furthermore, Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional strategy allows students the choice to write about subjects that they deem interesting and relevant to their lives. When teachers relate writing instruction to students’ interests, activities, and experiences, they help them discover the value and meaning in the process (Lam & Law, 2007). In a study conducted by Hawthorne (2008) regarding barriers to engagement for high school students, findings suggested that “interest in a topic and the perceived relevance of the task to the student is the main factor influencing engagement” (p. 30). Having control and discovering value and meaning in their writing activities can raise students’ self-confidence as studies have proven that if students are
interested in the subject they are writing about, their writing will improve (Hawthorne, 2008). This success can then influence motivation positively by raising levels of self-efficacy in students (Pajares, 2003). Raising self-efficacy beliefs for students, promoting autonomy and authenticity, ensuring interest and value, and ensuring support, are all components offered through Topic Choice/Inquiry instruction and all reflect the components proposed by Bruning and Horn (2000) as important for developing and maintaining motivation towards writing.

The goal of this study is to assist teachers in developing and implementing instructional strategies for English Communications 12 students that will positively motivate them to improve both the quantity and quality of their writing, as well as deepen their learning. A common theme in the research on motivation and writing is the importance of offering students writing tasks that have relevance to their lives, because if students can find connection in subject material this can heighten the value that they place on the writing task (Hawthorne, 2008). “Students need to be motivated to enter, persist, and succeed in this ill-defined problem space we call writing” (Bruning & Horn, 2000, p.26).

Therefore, in order to increase motivation towards writing for these struggling students, this researcher suggests it is necessary for teachers to re-design their instructional practices. Students should be offered activities that encourage their sense of self-efficacy by providing authentic goals and contexts that promote value and meaning, and that allow all learners the opportunity to be successful.

Justification of the Study

Many new challenges exist for educators today. Realities such as living in a consumer oriented society that offers more distractions, less home support, and fewer classroom supports
are all factors that impact learning. Many English Communications 12 students struggle with multiple issues, and a lot of these students have a long history of academic failure. Other issues, such as: little home support, substance abuse, and emotional or physical issues can also affect these students negatively. Poor attendance, frequent tardiness, failure to complete assignments, failure to achieve passing marks, and off-task behaviours, can all be possible results of the above conditions. Many of these English Communications 12 students exhibit overall low motivation and disengagement towards traditional classroom activities, and research highlights that students with a history of multiple challenges often find poor success in writing activities without a context of support (Bruning & Horn, 2000). Through the implementation of Topic Choice/Inquiry strategy, students are offered autonomy to explore material that they can connect to and they find meaningful. The teacher’s role as it changes from directive to supportive is to offer effective feedback and autonomy for the students. This type of context is a framework supportive of motivation and, “developing writers need to experience writing task conditions supportive of motivation” (Bruning & Horn, 2000, p.34). Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional strategy is an example of an adaptive change that can be implemented in place of obsolete traditional teaching strategies that are just not producing the results today’s students need (Wagner & Kegan, 2006).

The context of this study is Alberni District Secondary School. As a community, Port Alberni faces multiple challenges. Statistics show, compared to other cities on Vancouver Island, Port Alberni has a higher unemployment rate and a lower median family income. According to Port Alberni Community Health Facts, less than 50% of the population has any post-secondary education, there is a 40% illiteracy rate, and Port Alberni continues to have one of the highest crime rates in the country (Vancouver Island Health Authority, 2013). There is an
overall low importance placed on formal education in this community, and as a result, this has created a negative impact on student achievement. Alberni District Secondary School (ADSS), the only high school located in Port Alberni, has a student population of 950. This student population is comprised of 75% non-Aboriginal students and 25% Aboriginal students according to this school’s records. A primary concern at this high school is low student graduation rate. ADSS has a 65% completion rate for non-Aboriginal students, and a 40% school completion rate for Aboriginal students as compared to British Columbia’s overall rates of 81% for non-Aboriginal students and 54% for Aboriginal students (British Columbia’s Teachers Federation, 2012). A component of English Communications 12 is a provincial exam that is worth 40% of the total course mark. Graduation is contingent on students passing either English 12 or English Communications 12. Not being able to write effectively prevents some students from graduating, as 85% of the English Communications 12 provincial exam focuses on writing. Raising achievement levels for students by identifying, developing, and implementing strategies that support student engagement towards reading and writing is defined as one of this school’s achievement goals.

Another justification towards this issue addresses the future of English Communications 12 students. Although a large percentage of these students are not targeted to pursue post-secondary academic education, many will go on to work in the trades, sales, or service industries where effective writing skills will still be required. As technology further permeates society and changes the way people communicate, we should not lose sight of the fact that literacy skills are still very important. In order to attain higher cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem solving it is necessary that students have a firm understanding of the basic skills of
communication. Educators should keep in mind this in mind in order to help prepare students for a future where literacy demands may even increase (Ganske et al., 2003).

Finally, for many English Communications 12 students, this class may be the last formal academic class they will be enrolled in, and therefore the last opportunity many will have to receive writing instruction. In order for these students to become successful in writing, educators must rethink and redesign more effective instructional strategies that motivate students and allow all students to work towards their full potential. The constructs of self-efficacy, authenticity, autonomy, value and meaning can “capture the essence of the teaching that specifically develops students’ motivation to write” (Lam & Law, 2007, p. 146), and one of the main challenges stated in the current School District Literacy Plan (School District #70, 2014-15) realizing the goal of keeping learners motivated.

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

This current study has sought to answer the question of whether implementing the instructional strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry for English Communications 12 will improve students’ motivation towards writing. This researcher’s hypothesis was that this study would show a positive increase in student motivation towards writing through the intervention of Topic Choice/Inquiry instruction. This researcher expected this result because this instructional approach addresses factors proposed by Bruning and Horn (2000) as being essential for developing and maintaining motivation, specifically: writing beliefs, interest and authenticity, a supportive context, and an environment of trust and empowerment. As well, according to Deci et al. (1991), these conditions promote students to be self-determined, and if students become self-determined they can become more motivated towards writing.
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Definition of Key Terms

**English Communications 12 classes** are those classes that offer basic English skills in reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and presenting, to those students who have failed to achieve higher than 50-60% in their previous English class.

**Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional strategy** refers to a three month instructional intervention designed by this researcher that is student driven and teacher guided and supported. This instructional design offers students autonomy and the control to choose topics that are interesting and relevant to their lives. Students may or may not have prior knowledge regarding their area of interest. Through this instructional strategy, the English Communications 12 learning outcomes (reading, writing, listening, viewing, speaking, and presenting) are all addressed. As well, this instructional strategy incorporates the use of technology. Students set their own goals within the framework of the instructional strategy and meet with the teacher and their peers for feedback and support throughout the process. Students choose an area of interest and then spend six weeks immersed in their topic: researching, reading, taking notes, and journaling. After this, they present their topic in a format of their choosing and then write a formal essay which is evaluated using the standard Communications 12 Scoring Guide for Composition (Appendix E). This instructional unit is culminated with a reflection activity in which students address what they had already known, what they learned, and how will they use this in their futures.

For the purpose of this study the term **motivation** refers to what prompts or influences students towards engagement in learning. A lot of research exists on motivation and it is a very complex theory. This current study focused on research conducted by Bruning and Horn (2000)
who revealed some significant revelations into both “the need to emphasize motivation to write” and also what factors should be considered (p. 26). There are “four clusters of conditions [they] consider most critical in developing writing motivation…” (Bruning and Horn, 2000, p.27). These conditions are nurturing functional beliefs about the nature of writing, fostering student engagement through authentic goals and contexts, providing a supportive context for writing, and creating a positive emotional environment. For this current study this researcher created four areas of motivation based on these conditions (see Table 1).

**Self-Efficacy** is “an ability construct, popularized by Bandura, that refers to an individuals’ beliefs about their capabilities to perform well” (as cited in Graham and Weiner, 1996, p. 74). Schunk (1991) suggested that persons with a high sense of self-efficacy have more self-confidence and self-belief; they believe they are capable, they select tasks at which they can succeed at, and they persist longer with these tasks, expending more effort. Research conducted by Margolis and McCabe (2004) indicated that students who have high levels of self-efficacy will try harder at academic tasks, whereas students who have low self-efficacy have low self-confidence and therefore will not make the effort needed to master academics for fear they will fail.

**Self-Determination Theory** was a motivational theory proposed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan in 1991 (Deci et al., 1991). Self-determination theory proposed that motivation is dependent on the satisfaction of the innate human needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. This theory regarding motivation differed from others in the fact that this theory proposed the importance of intrinsic motivation versus extrinsic. In other words, this theory focused on the “distinction between self-determined and controlled types of intentional regulation” (Dec et al., 1991, p. 326). Thusly, this theory emphasized the importance of creating
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self-determined students who were intentionally motivated towards growth and learning. They concluded that students become self-determined if they are able to experience success, are part of a positive and caring environment, and are given control or choice in their activities (Deci, et al., 1991).

Brief Overview of the Study

This action research study used a mixed methods exploratory design to determine if the instructional strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry positively affected students’ motivation towards writing. Participants in this study were 19 students from an English Communications 12 class. After distributing and receiving consent letters from the participants, this researcher began this study by administering a survey on writing attitudes to the participants (Appendix D). This anonymous and voluntary survey contained 14 statements relating to writing and motivation. Students were also asked to respond to two open-ended questions at the end of the survey. The responses of this survey were measured on a five point Likert scale, and the results were examined to determine participants’ beliefs and attitudes towards motivation and writing.

In the next step in this study, the participants were asked to compose an essay based on a teacher selected topic. This composition was then evaluated using a Communications 12 Scoring Guide for Composition (Appendix E). Students then participated in a three month instructional intervention that included brainstorming, researching, reading, note taking, journaling, presenting, writing, and reflecting. During this instructional intervention support and effective feedback were ongoing. Class discussions where students shared their learning were also conducted throughout. At the end of the instructional intervention the participants wrote a second essay, but this time the essay was based on their topic of interest. Next, participants were
asked to complete the survey a second time. This second survey was also anonymous and voluntary.

Finally, the data that was collected from the fourteen questions on the pre and post intervention surveys was analyzed to determine if any changes had occurred in the participants' attitudes and beliefs about writing from pre intervention to post intervention; specifically, the participants’ self-perceptions of self-efficacy, value, meaning, interest, and autonomy were analyzed for changes. Next, the data from the open-ended questions was studied to determine if there were any emergent themes to inform the quantitative data that was collected. The pre and post essays that were evaluated by the six point scoring guide were then analyzed to determine if the quantity and quality of the participants’ writing showed improvement after the instructional intervention of Topic Choice/Inquiry was implemented.
Chapter 2: Background and Review of Related literature

Introduction

This chapter examines relevant research and theories surrounding motivation and writing. The focus was directed on examining factors that have been studied as having a positive influence on raising motivation levels towards writing in order to inform the design of instructional practices for struggling senior writers. This literature review begins with an overview of the history of motivation and learning, and then uses factors of motivation based on clusters proposed by Bruning and Horn (2000) as organization headers for the body of research literature studied. These headings are: writing beliefs, interest and authenticity, providing a supportive context, and creating an environment of trust and empowerment.

It is apparent to this researcher that although much research has been conducted on theories of motivation and on the cognitive processes of writing, there is less that has been done regarding specific instructional strategies that have been created based on motivational constructs and the results of implementing these for senior struggling writers. This researcher’s belief can be supported by Lam and Law (2007) who state that, “in the existing literature, little research has been done to examine motivating instructional practices comprehensively and to investigate how they relate to students’ motivation and performance in writing” (p. 156). This can also be supported by Boscolo and Hidi (2007) who state that, “in spite of the significant increase of motivational research over the past two and half decades, on the one hand, and the remarkable development of writing studies, on the other, the topic at the intersection of the two fields has been only partially explored” (p. 4). This study hopes to add to the existing body of research surrounding how to increase motivation for senior struggling writers through redesigned instructional strategies.
Overview of Motivation

Motivation can be defined as “the study of why people think and behave as they do” (Graham & Weiner, 1996, p.63). According to Weiner (1990), motivation has been assiduously studied for over sixty years during which time it has greatly evolved. Experimentation and study into motivation first began on rats where the focus was on drive, instincts, and needs. Then in the 1960s, educational research into motivation became more prominent, and the shift in studying motivation moved towards human cognition and issues associated with success, failure, and achievement. Individuals and their differences were measured, and achievement needs, anxiety, and locus of control were devised to identify persons thought to differ in motivationally significant ways. This new focus generated a vast amount of research (Graham & Weiner, 1996, p. 65).

It was at this time that motivational research began to study the ‘self’ for the first time. The term self-efficacy originated by research conducted by Bandura in 1977 (as cited in Schunk, 1991, p. 208). “According to Bandura, how people behave can often be better predicted by the beliefs they hold about their capabilities” (as cited in Pajares, 2003, p.140). This area of study became very popular, and many were interested in how this affected students in the classroom. Formal theories of the earlier studies began to fade and what remained were “varieties of cognitive approaches to motivation; the main theories today are based on the interrelated cognitions of causal ascriptions, efficacy and control beliefs, helplessness, and thoughts about the goals for which one is striving” (Weiner, 1990, p. 621).

Weiner (1990), however, also concluded that such a huge focus on self was too narrow, and motivation must be considered within the context of social values (p. 620-621). As well, he proposed that as important as focusing on the self and human achievement was to the study of
motivation, how achievement behaviour influences and affects others was also an important area to be studied. He concluded that how students related in the classroom to other students and how to motivate students to be successful within the social context of the classroom was an area that required further research and that there were still “many uncharted areas” to study (Weiner, 1990, p. 622). According to Pajares (2003), research into self-efficacy and writing, although having received some attention, has not received enough to truly understand the interplay between them (p. 141).

The areas of motivational research that particularly concern this researcher are the theories of Social Learning and Social Cognition. Social Learning stresses the importance of teacher and peer modeling. “Social Cognition Theory proposes reciprocal determination as a primary factor in both learning and motivation” (Huit, 2011, p. 9). It follows, therefore, from this theory, that a person’s behaviour, characteristics, and environment all influence and in turn are influenced by each other. Bandura’s (1986) concepts of self-efficacy and self-regulation are imbedded in Social Cognition Theory. Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional strategy is developed around the concepts of what motivates students within the context of the learning institution.

Bruning and Horn, (2000) determined from their research into motivation that there were four sets of factors that were integral for developing and maintaining motivation towards writing. Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional strategy is based on these four sets of factors. Table 1 outlines the four areas that this researcher used in this current study.
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<tr>
<th>Motivational Areas</th>
<th>Motivational Enhancing Conditions</th>
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<td><strong>Area One</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Beliefs – Value of Writing/Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>• Assigning writing tasks that encourage student success</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Providing opportunities for students to practice and thus build their expertise</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Encouraging students to realize the many benefits that come from being able to write competently</td>
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<td><strong>Area Two</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Interest and Authenticity</td>
<td>• Encouraging students to explore topics of personal interest that they can connect with</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Providing opportunities for students to write for a variety of audiences in order to explore the purpose of writing</td>
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<td><strong>Area Three</strong></td>
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<td>Supportive Context</td>
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<td><strong>Area Four</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Environment of Trust and Empowerment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Offering students choice over their writing assignments</td>
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<td>• Allowing students to feel in control of their writing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Providing opportunities for learners to engage in peer discussions and use peer support</td>
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</table>

*Note.* Based on motivational clusters proposed by Bruning and Horn, 2000
Writing Beliefs

Nurturing functional beliefs about writing is the first area of motivational factors that Bruning and Horn (2000) propose. Area one in this study of motivational areas (Table 1) encompasses writing beliefs which refers to the value students put onto the writing task as well as how they view themselves as writers. These functional beliefs can be defined as “the beliefs that directly, but implicitly guide our cognition, our understanding of things, our perception, and our actions” (Allport, 2011, p. 1). For students, the belief they have in their writing ability can be linked to the concept of self-efficacy, a term Bandura explored and defined in 1986 as “people’s judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances (as cited in Schunk, 1991, p. 207). If people function with a moderate to high level of self-efficacy they will feel more capable, and this in turn can allow them to have more confidence in their ability to succeed. In contrast, people with low levels of self-efficacy tend to have lower levels of self-confidence, and this can affect their outlook regarding their ability to be successful. In terms of writing, therefore, it follows that educators should focus on promoting higher levels of self-efficacy in their struggling students in order to raise motivation levels.

Schunk (1991) investigated self-efficacy in terms of academic motivation. He determined that self-efficacy or “personal expectancy” was a strong predictor of academic achievement and that “heightened self-efficacy sustains motivation and improves skill development” (p. 213). Assisting students to set their own goals, offering them material that they feel capable of processing, giving effective feedback, and offering teacher and peer modeling are all strategies that educators can employ to raise levels of self-efficacy in students.
The above was further substantiated by Pajares (2003). In his study on self-efficacy, Pajares (2003) proposed that, “Judgements of personal efficacy affect what students do by influencing the choices they make, the effort they expend, the persistence and perseverance they exert when obstacles arise, and the thought patterns and emotional reactions they experience” (p. 140).

In addition, Margolis and McCabe (2004) studied self-efficacy as a key to improving the motivation of struggling learners. They also proposed that students require a high level of self-efficacy in order for them to expend the effort to be successful at tasks and that it is up to teachers to develop or nurture these self-efficacy levels in students. They recommended that struggling learners who have a history of poor academic success require tasks that are not too complex or onerous, but at the same time offer challenge (Margolis & McCabe, 2004). Their studies into self-efficacy support the importance of designing instructional strategies that work towards raising students’ levels of self-efficacy in order to promote motivation.

**Interest and Authenticity**

As shown in Table 1, the second area in this study is interest and authenticity. This is based on Bruning and Horn’s (2000) research that focused on fostering student engagement through authentic writing and contexts. Students need to feel that the writing activities they complete in the classroom have value and are not artificial. “Having genuine reasons for writing almost certainly has motivational consequences” (Bruning & Horn, 2000, p. 30). In 2012, Susan Heinitz conducted a field project where she studied authentic writing tasks and students’ attitudes toward writing. She defined an authentic writing task as one where “the students write for real reasons and for real people”, and she focused her research on the importance of
“connecting learning to the world beyond the classroom” (Heinitz, 2012, p.8). She also based her study on Bruning and Horn’s (2000) four areas of motivation, but focused solely on nurturing functional beliefs and using authentic goals in writing in order to improve students’ attitudes towards writing. She proposed that “Showing students the relevance of their learning to their own lives should improve attitude and motivation” (Heinitz, 2012, p. 13).

The results of her study showed that although the students were engaged in the writing unit, excited about it, and learned from it, the results did not indicate a significant change in the students’ attitudes towards writing. One of the biggest limitations to her study is that the survey she used provided limited information. It did not provide information regarding the causes for poor attitudes or any strategies to improve attitudes (Heinitz, 2012). Although she stated, “They felt a connection and an important purpose in what they were doing”, her sample population was very small with only fifteen students, and the study was of a short duration (three weeks) (Heinitz, 2012, p.8). A further area that makes her study less relevant to this researcher’s study is that she studied a sample population comprised of grade four and five students.

Magnifico (2010) proposed that, “there were three factors that seem to particularly influence writing achievement: perception of how important a task is, students’ interest in the task, and their perception of how useful the task may be, which is often influenced by a task’s authenticity” (p.178). With a focus on audience, she suggested that technological advances have changed the dynamics of writing and therefore educators need to design new literacy environments for students to promote engagement. She proposed that “Giving students opportunities to interact with multiple real critics of their work may motivate them not only to write….but also to take on new literacies and see themselves as writers in ways that would be
Writer’s beliefs about their abilities are influenced by internal factors as well as external factors, and Magnifico proposed that it is these external factors that can help motivate students, particularly teenagers, to write because they have increased access to authentic audiences as they are more connected with social media. “Whether in classrooms and motivated by a teacher-evaluator audience, or motivated by the desire for membership in a community, the feedback that a writer gets from her audience is crucial to her continued work and her identity as a writer” (Magnifico, 2010, p.178). If students are given opportunities to write for real purposes and for real audiences this can encourage them to find their voice and have opportunities where they can gain confidence. Writing for an authentic audience is becoming a more important skill, but little research has been conducted so far in this area.

Finally, Bruning and Horn (2000) proposed that “Interest is another powerful motivator” because interest can impact how much attention a student devotes to an activity and how much effort they put in to completing it (p.30). Hidi and Renninger (2006) studied interest and the influence it exerted on educational learning and proposed that interest had been found to influence attention, goals, and levels of learning. It follows, therefore, that if students are given the opportunity of choice and to be able to study material that they can connect to or are interested in, this could help to increase their motivation to write. They proposed that two types of interest, situational and individual, were the primary focus for educational research to date and both have been found to positively impact learning and contribute to cognitive performance (Hidi and Renninger, 2006).
Ganske et al. (2003) proposed that “Students need occasions to write about what they know on topics of interest, because they are apt to be motivated when the purpose is authentic” (p.124). Struggling students often avoid writing as too many negative experiences can inhibit them from even trying. Writing in an area of interest could raise their confidence level enough to take a risk.

**Supportive Environment of Trust, Choice and Empowerment**

As outlined in Table 1, the third and fourth areas are supportive context and environment of trust, choice and empowerment. These areas are based on Bruning and Horn’s (2000) conditions that suggested the importance of both a supportive context and a positive emotional environment as factors to help promote motivation for struggling writers. Struggling students often have a history of repeated negative experiences when it comes to writing and the anxiety this can cause could be a reason why they often appear to have little motivation towards writing. Ganske et al. (2003) studied struggling writers and proposed that “Efforts to motivate disengaged learners should start with consideration of the class environment and the extent to which it encourages success and engagement” (p.123). A classroom environment should be a place where learners feel safe, well supported, and valued. If a teacher can create this type of environment, it follows that students could feel more motivated. When it comes to struggling writers “we can only help these students develop a real sense of belonging if we enable them to be active learners…” (Ganske et al., 2003, p.126).

A context that is nurturing and supportive includes employing various strategies. Some of these strategies include offering supported instruction, teacher modeling, peer modeling, effective feedback, and opportunities for practice. Listening and observing students in order to
understand their learning better is also important (Margolis & McCabe, 2004). Hattie and Timperley (2007) suggested that feedback can have a powerful influence on student achievement, but that this feedback must be effective and allow students to see where they started from, how they are doing along the way, and where should they go next (p.88). Hattie and Timperley (2007) also studied the relationship between effective feedback and the classroom environment, stating the importance of a positive safe environment where students do not feel any sense of personal risk from responding publicly and sometimes not being successful.

Furthermore, when focusing on a positive emotional environment, engagement in writing tasks can be influenced by student’s perceptions of how interested their teachers are in them as students. (Hawthorne, 2008, p. 41). Teachers who genuinely care about their students’ success, and offer ongoing encouragement can help motivate reluctant students into wanting to be successful. Cooperative learning where students share ideas, successes, and learning can also encourage a positive environment. Creating a positive environment where all students feel safe and supported was foremost in mind to this researcher when designing Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional strategy, because students “….will likely invest in activities that they find interesting or valuable, if their environment is safe and supportive, and if difficulties do not lead to embarrassment or comparisons with more successful peers” (Margolis & McCabe, 2004, p. 247).

Self-Determination Theory

Furthering the importance of offering students a positive and supportive environment in order to promote motivation is the self-determination theory (Deci et al., 1991). This theory suggested that students will be more motivated if they are able to become self-determined.
Learning environments with instructional strategies that include inflexible deadlines and strict guidelines can limit creativity and heighten competition. This type of environment can be too controlling, and it is this control that can diminish students from becoming self-determined. In contrast, learning environments that offer students support, autonomy, and flexibility allow students the opportunity to feel independent and competent, and this can increase their chances of becoming self-determined. According to Deci et al., (1991) students who are self-determined will be intentionally motivated towards growth or learning if they can experience being part of a caring and positive social environment that at the same time offers effective support. “Self-determination theory when applied to the realm of education, is concerned primarily with promoting in students an interest in learning, a valuing of education, and a confidence in their own capacities and attributes” (Deci et al., 1991, p. 325).

Studies Involving Instructional Strategies

The following empirical studies examined specific instructional strategies that were based on motivational constructs. As previously stated in this current research, little research has been done that comprehensively examines the intersection between the above motivational constructs and instructional strategies. The following studies also underscore the need for further exploration into this area.

According to Lam and Law (2007), the purpose of their study was to examine specific instructional strategies and their relation to motivation towards writing. The participants in their study were six teacher interns from the University of Hong Kong and their 209 seventh and eighth grade students from four different secondary schools in Hong Kong. All four secondary schools involved in their study were located in middle-lower social economic status areas of
Hong Kong. The six interns participated voluntarily in the research with the assurance that their identities while participating in the study would remain anonymous and their role would not affect their training performance (Lam & Law, 2007).

Lam and Law’s study (2007) addressed three areas: teacher instruction, motivation, and writing performance. Their procedure consisted of two consecutive 40 minute instruction sessions where the teacher interns taught the students how to write expository essays. The students’ essays were graded by two research assistants who were blind to the purpose of the study. After a week the interns had a final instruction session with the participating students where they returned their graded essays and spent time giving the students feedback on how to make improvements. Their study concluded with the assistants asking the students to complete a questionnaire based on their learning experience and the teacher’s instructional practices used during the three instructional sessions. The questionnaire was designed to measure student responses on six subscales targeted specifically to the lessons. These subscales were: challenge, real-life significance, curiosity, autonomy, recognition, and evaluation (Lam & Law, 2007). The students’ responses towards their teacher’s instructional practices were measured using a 6-point Likert scale. Next, their motivation was measured by a 6-point Likert scale as well. Finally, to measure the area of writing performance, the students were given two writing assignments, one administered before the lessons and one administered after.

The results of Lam and Law’s study (2007) revealed that the “constructs of instructional practices correlated highly with that of motivation but slightly with that of writing performance. The correlation between the constructs of motivation and writing performance was also slight” (p. 155). These findings suggested that there was a significant link between instructional practices and motivation, but not as strong a link between either instructional practices and
resulting writing performance, or motivation and resulting writing performance. Lam and Law (2007) did, however, observe an, “… indirect effect from instructional practices on writing performance through motivation” (p. 156).

The outcome of this study adds to the existing knowledge surrounding the relationship between instructional activities and motivation. Their results can help inform teachers when planning writing activities that will be motivating for students. Although the time span for this study was brief, one of the strengths of Lam and Law’s study (2007) was in the specificity of its design. Their study measured the three areas of instructional practice, motivation, and writing performance separately, and then used these results to observe links.

Although there are strengths to Lam and Law’s study (2007), a few limitations are evident. These authors used teacher interns to administer the sessions with the participating students. The interns’ lack of experience, plus the fact that they could have felt pressure in their roles, could have had an impact on student responses. As well, their study relied on student data alone, and no addition of third party data (other teachers for example), which may have added strength to their findings.

Regarding its specific relevance to this researcher’s study, Lam and Law’s study (2007) used participants from the seventh and eighth grades, and not senior English students. Their study also did not indicate the level of ability these students were at academically (high, average, or low). Finally, their study was conducted in Hong Kong in a Chinese Language Teaching class, and therefore cultural differences surrounding instructional practices and teaching need to be considered when examining results for relevancy to this researcher’s study.
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The relevancy of Lam and Law’s study (2007) to this researcher’s study is in its theoretical foundation. Their study identified factors of motivation proposed by Bruning and Horn (2000). Bruning and Horn (2000) proposed there were clusters of conditions that influenced student motivation towards writing. These four components were: nurturing students’ functional beliefs about writing, fostering student engagement through authentic goals and contexts, providing a supportive context for writing, and creating a positive emotional environment (Bruning & Horn, 2000). The subscales used by Lam and Law (2007) in their study reflected these four clusters, and their results revealed “…that students will be motivated when their teachers provide them with challenging tasks, ensure real-life significance in their learning activities, [and] stimulate their curiosity…” (p. 158). For this reason, Lam and Law’s study (2007) supports this researcher’s hypothesis that implementing topic choice as an instructional strategy will help to motivate struggling writers.

Hawthorne’s 2008 study, entitled, “Students’ beliefs about barriers to engagement with writing in secondary school English: A focus group study”, explores students’ thoughts about writing tasks with a focus on what teachers can do to promote engagement through their instructional practice. Hawthorne’s purpose was to explore how the students in his focus groups felt about what “…they liked or disliked and what helped or hindered their engagement with writing in classroom situations” (Hawthorne, 2008, p. 32). Although research showed there was a good level of understanding of the writing process overall, Hawthorne felt there was much more to learn about how to develop motivation to write and that the reluctance some students felt towards writing needed to be further addressed. His hypothesis was that students would be able to clearly describe what was de-motivating to them (Hawthorne, 2008).
The participants in Hawthorne’s study (2008) were Grade 10 students (N=28, 15 boys and 13 girls) from two secondary schools located in different parts of Auckland, New Zealand. One school was rated as a decile 7 on a socio-economic scale of 10 (10 being high), and the other school was rated as a decile 4. Both of these secondary schools were comprised of ethnically diverse populations of students. Hawthorne used a qualitative approach involving focus groups and discussion questions in an attempt to gain understanding into the students’ beliefs about writing.

The procedure implemented by Hawthorne (2008) began with an initial questionnaire which he administered to two different classrooms of Grade 10 students. Out of these results, he formed four focus groups (two from each class) on which to do his research, one reluctant group and one engaged group from each school (N=28). Hawthorne (2008) acted as his own facilitator in his study, and in discussion format he asked the students to respond to a range of guiding questions. Upon conclusion of these questioning sessions, he had a compilation of 591 audiotaped comments. From these transcripts, Hawthorne analyzed and coded the participants’ responses into six broad categories or themes. In an attempt to increase reliability, he also had one of the classroom teachers independently code as well. The final categories Hawthorne established were: interest and relevance, choice and control, environmental factors, knowledge, self-belief, and teacher influencing (Hawthorne, 2008). He also used independent t-tests to compare the frequency of comments made between groups.

Hawthorne’s results revealed some striking commonalities, as well as significant differences between the engaged and the reluctant focus groups. The predominant category commented on was that of interest and relevance; 40% from engaged groups and 33% from reluctant groups (Hawthorne, 2008). This suggested that interest and relevance were significant
factors encouraging engagement in writing for all groups. Differences in frequency between the groups showed up predominantly in the categories of teacher factors, choice, control, and self-belief. “The engaged students made 66% of the comments associated with the effects of having choice or control, or the lack of it, on their engagement to write” (Hawthorne, 2008, p.38). This finding indicated that the engaged group of students recognized the importance of topic choice in engaging them in the writing process.

Another finding from his study was that the “students in the reluctant groups made 61% of the comments in the self-belief category” (Hawthorne, 2008, p.38). This percentage, along with specific comments, indicated that the students in the reluctant groups held negative beliefs about themselves as writers, and they felt de-motivated when they had no connection or background knowledge on the topic they were asked to write about. The reluctant groups “spoke personally about how experiencing failure, or believing that they would fail, was an important factor in hindering their engagement with writing” (Hawthorne, 2008, p.39).

The strength of Hawthorne’s study (2008) was in the amount of data he collected, considering his relatively small group of participants (591 comments for 28 students). By carefully analyzing the participants’ responses, this study includes specific findings regarding how students felt about the writing process. Hawthorne’s study (2008) offers a valid contribution by offering suggestions to teachers to help promote student engagement in the process of writing through promoting student self-belief, offering choice for topics of interest in which students consider themselves knowledgeable, and ensuring students have a supportive environment where they can engage in meaningful activities that have relevancy to their lives.
A weakness to Hawthorne’s study (2008) is that his findings are based on percentages of comments resulting exclusively from two discussion sessions. His results would have been strengthened if he had used additional measurement tools as well, such as surveys or attitude scales. Another limitation was that Hawthorne acted as his own facilitator in his study, and by not including a third party, this could have added personal bias to his findings. His study also does not include the questionnaire that he used, which would have added clarity to his overall findings.

Hawthorne (2008) acknowledges that there are issues that exist in secondary schools that may inhibit teachers implementing some of these instructional strategies, such as time constraints and the pressure of having to administer prescribed tests for national assessment. He further acknowledges gender differences which became apparent while analyzing his results and suggests that further investigation into this area, and in the area of motivation in general, is necessary (Hawthorne, 2008).

Hawthorne’s study (2008) is relevant to this researcher’s study and supports previous research that suggests the positive impact of topic knowledge and interest on motivation towards writing. Hawthorne suggested that topic knowledge and interest are “…particularly important with the most reluctant writers who often lack both the skills in how to write in particular styles, as well as lacking topic knowledge to have anything to actually write about” (2008, p. 40). The six categories that Hawthorne proposes for enhancing motivation are based on Bruning and Horn’s (2000) proposed four components which also support this researcher’s study.

Zumbrunn and Krause’s study (2012) of the principles of effective writing instruction revealed recommendations for best practices in writing offered by experts in the writing field.
Their study argues the importance of writing as a fundamental skill both for students while they are in school, and also when they are finished school. They also state that “significant concerns exist, however, about student writing in all grades…”, and that significant concerns exist around variability in teachers’ writing instruction (Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012, p. 346). Their purpose therefore, was to investigate and ultimately discover principles that prompt effective writing instruction for all students.

The participants in their study were seven leading authorities in the field of writing who were nominated by their peers. These writing experts were interviewed regarding their beliefs encompassing effective writing instruction. Their interview questions were designed to obtain very specific and quality responses. An example of one of the questions used in this study was, “How do effective writing instructors reach all writers across ability levels?” (Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012, p. 347).

The findings from Zumbrunn and Krause’s study (2012) resulted in five major themes which they presented as principles of effective writing instruction. These principles for effective writing instruction were to include the impact of the instructor’s own writing beliefs, to always encourage student motivation and engagement, to begin with clear and deliberate planning, to write daily, and finally to ensure that writing is a scaffolded collaboration between teachers and students (Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012).

One of the strengths of Zumbrunn and Krause’s study (2012) was that it was conducted very recently. Education is an evolving discipline and therefore information that is not current needs to be evaluated closely for relevancy to what is currently happening in education. Another strength of their study was that the participants are proven experts in their field, and this enriched
their results and added to the trustworthiness of their study. This study contributes to the area of improving writing instruction by offering recommendations in five guiding principles to help “…educators create writing classrooms that value and encourage increased student writing and engagement” (Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012, p.347).

A weakness to Zumbrunn and Krause’s study (2012) is in its simplicity. It was limited with a small number of participants. Although the researchers interviewed experts in the field of writing, the addition of student participants on which to test these principles would have added strength to their study. Specific to this researcher’s study, is that Zumbrunn and Krause’s study (2012) was not theoretically based on theories of motivation and was not very comprehensive. Although their study’s purpose focused on effective writing instruction, the basis for conducting their qualitative study was to increase national writing levels in the United States.

The relevancy of Zumbrunn and Krause’s study (2012) to this researcher’s study is that their findings support this researcher’s hypothesis that implementing topic choice will motivate struggling writers. A topic choice teaching approach encourages student motivation and engagement, encompasses planning as well as flexibility, can occur daily, and can be a scaffolded collaboration between teachers and students. Zumbrunn and Krause’s study (2012) also supports the research that writing is both a complex and challenging skill that is fundamental for all students.
Chapter 3: Procedures and Methods

Description of the Research Design

The issue this study sought to address was if implementing the instructional strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry in English Communications 12 classes had an impact on increasing student motivation towards improving both the quantity and quality of writing. The strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry was developed to address factors such as: writing beliefs, self-efficacy, interest and authenticity, choice, feedback, and learning environment; factors deemed as integral towards developing and maintaining motivation towards writing.

The research design of this current study was a mixed methods exploratory approach. This study began with a survey (Appendix D) administered to student participants before the instructional intervention strategy and again after the instructional intervention. This survey was made up of fourteen statements and two qualitative open-ended questions that were intended to elicit insight into the student participants’ attitudes on what they perceived motivated them towards writing. In addition to this survey, the students were asked to write two essays, one before the instructional intervention and one after the instructional intervention. The first essay the students were asked to write was based on a teacher selected topic, and the second essay was based on a topic of their choice. The students’ writing was then evaluated using a Communications 12 Scoring Guide for Composition (Appendix E). The purpose for this quantitative measure was to elicit insight into whether students’ writing showed any improvements, both in quantity and quality, as a result of the instructional intervention. The instructional intervention was a unit on topic choice/inquiry that was three months in duration and was taught to all of the English Communications 12 students whether they were study participants or not.
This researcher worked throughout this study with a research assistant. The research assistant, who was also a teacher in the school, was responsible for determining which students received consent for the study and creating a coded list for the study. The research assistant was also responsible for marking pre and post intervention essays and ensured all materials connected with this study were locked in the school safe.

**Description of the Sample**

The research for this study was conducted at Alberni District Secondary School which is located on Central Vancouver Island in Port Alberni. Alberni District Secondary School had a student population of 950. The student population was comprised of 75% non-Aboriginal students and 25% Aboriginal students of Nuu-Chah-Nulth First Nations ancestry. There were 58 teachers employed at this school and 28 support staff. The school also had four school based counselors, two youth care workers, and one Nuu-Chah-Nulth Education worker. This high school had an attached youth health care centre that was set up to provide services for all of the students at this school and also in the community. The mission statement for this high school was to provide every opportunity for all students to be successful in all endeavours and to help create citizens of a world that cannot yet fully be envisioned.

The sample group chosen for this study was an English Communications 12 class comprised of 21 students. Nineteen of these students were participants in this study. There were eleven males and eight females in this participant group, and five of these students identified themselves as First Nations. The students enrolled in this class were those students whose final grade in the previous mainstream English class was below 55%. Although there were students in this class designated as having learning disabilities, many of them struggled with multiple issues, both in their home lives as well as in their academic lives. An overall lack of motivation
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towards writing was very apparent in this sample group of students before the study began. This sample group was chosen as a sample of convenience as it was the only English Communications 12 class that semester in the school. The researcher for this study was also the teacher for this class. The researcher had eight years’ experience teaching senior English classes at this school, and had taught an English Communications 12 class the previous year.

**Instruments Used**

The instruments used in this study were a pre and post-intervention Likert scale survey (Appendix D) and a pre and post-intervention essay write. The pre-intervention essay was based on a teacher selected topic and the post-intervention essay was based on a student selected topic of interest. The purpose of these instruments was to gain insight into participant attitudes towards both motivation and writing. This researcher designed these instruments based on a study conducted by Lam and Law (2007) which investigated the relationship between motivational factors and instructional practices using an instructional writing intervention and a survey instrument. Their survey instruments sought to measure students’ perceptions based on factors such as task value, real-life significance, interest, autonomy, and positive teacher feedback (factors that they attributed to earlier research conducted by Bruning and Horn, 2000). Lam and Law’s study (2007) revealed that when teachers adopted more motivating teaching strategies, the students were then more motivated to write. This current researcher’s Likert scale survey statements were carefully created in an attempt to gain meaningful results on motivational factors critical to writing development which is an area where there has been relatively little research (Bruning & Horn, 2000).

The survey for this study was administered twice in an anonymous and paper-based format. It consisted of two parts and was administered both before the instructional intervention
and also after the instructional intervention. The first part of the survey asked the students to respond to fourteen statements based on the factors identified by Bruning and Horn (2000) as being important to developing and maintaining motivation towards writing. Questions one to five were created to address participants’ beliefs about writing (area one as outlined in Table 1), questions six, seven, and nine were created to address interest and authenticity (area two as outlined in Table 1), and questions ten, eleven, and twelve were created to address a supportive context (area three as outlined in Table 1), and questions eight, thirteen, and fourteen were created to address an environment of trust, choice and empowerment. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of two open-ended questions that were designed in an attempt to gain further insight into the students’ perceptions surrounding what motivated them and whether having choice helped motivate them towards improving their writing.

The responses to the first fourteen statements on the survey were quantitative in nature and were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. The students were asked to circle responses of strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree. The students also had a choice of a circling a neutral response which fell in the middle of the continuum scale. The response of strongly disagree was given a numeric value of one, disagree was given a numeric value of two, neutral was given a numeric value of three, agree was given a numeric value of four, and strongly agree was given a numeric value of five. These questions were designed to be analyzed for mean and then percent change in mean. The last two open-ended questions on the survey were qualitative in nature and designed to be analyzed for emergent themes. The significance of administering this survey twice (pre and post) was to determine if students’ perceptions had changed from before the instructional intervention to after the instructional intervention.
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This study also involved having the student participants complete two essays. Student participants completed an essay on a teacher chosen topic before the instructional intervention, and they completed a second essay based on their topic of choice after the instructional intervention. Both of these essays were evaluated by the research assistant, who is also an English teacher, using a Communications 12 Scoring Guide for Composition (Appendix E). The purpose of having the students write these two essays was to observe any changes that may have occurred concerning both the quantity and quality of their writing.

Procedures Followed

The procedures followed in this action research project began by the researcher seeking ethics approval through the Vancouver Island University Research Ethics Board. Once the ethics approval was granted, this researcher then sought and gained approval from the District #70 School Board, as well as the principal of Alberni District Secondary School. Next, this researcher, as the teacher, began the study by reading the Student Recruitment Script (Appendix A) to all of the students in the class. At this time a Parent/Guardian Consent Letter (Appendix B) and a Student Assent Letter (Appendix C) were also sent home with all of the students in this class, with a time line of one week for the letters to be returned to the school office where a drop box was set up. A pre-addressed postage paid envelope was also sent home to ensure as many returns as possible. When the signed consent and assent letters were returned to the drop-box, they were collected by the research assistant who created a coded list of those students who had received consent. She then locked the coded list and the letters in the school safe.

The next step in the procedure for this study was administering the pre-intervention Likert scale survey. This researcher, as the teacher, handed out survey forms (Appendix D) to all of the students in the class as part of the normal classroom instruction. When the students
completed the survey, the surveys were put into a large brown envelope labelled ‘Survey 1’ and turned over to the research assistant. She then retrieved from the school safe the list of coded names and coded the surveys and removed the names for those students who had been given consent for participation in the study. A copy of these surveys were then made and kept for data analysis. The original surveys (the full set) were set aside and examined after the study concluded in order to inform this researcher’s teaching practice.

The next day this researcher, as the teacher, conducted an essay write with all of the students as part of their regular classroom instruction. This essay was 300 words and was on the teacher prompt, ‘Differing points of view make life interesting’. When the students completed the essay, this researcher, as the teacher, marked all of the essays using the English Communications 12 Provincial Scoring Guide for Composition (Appendix E) and recorded the essay marks in the mark book as a regular part of the classroom evaluation. These marks were also recorded for all of the students on an Essay Mark Recording Sheet (Appendix F) and used as part of the data for this research. This scoring sheet was sealed in a small envelope and put, along with the essays, into a new large brown envelope labelled ‘Essay 1’.

Next, this ‘Essay 1’ envelope was given to the research assistant. Referring back to the coded name list, she remarked the essays for the student participants using the same English Communications 12 Provincial Scoring Guide for Composition (Appendix E) and recorded these marks on a new scoring sheet using the coded names. This second marking was performed to add strength to the results, and to help alleviate any bias. After she evaluated and recorded the essays, she put this scoring sheet into the envelope labelled ‘Essay 1’. She then handed back all of the essays to this researcher, who as the teacher then returned these essays to the students.
This researcher, as the teacher, next began a topic choice writing instruction unit with all of the students in this class. When this three month unit was completed, this researcher conducted a second essay write of 300 words based on a topic of the students’ choice. When the students finished writing their essays, this researcher, as the teacher, evaluated the essays using the English Communications 12 Provincial Scoring Guide for Composition (Appendix E). The results were recorded for classroom purposes by this researcher, as the teacher, and then recorded again on a new Essay Mark Recording Sheet (Appendix F) and sealed in a second small envelope which was put into a new large brown envelope labelled ‘Essay 2’.

This envelope was then turned over to the research assistant. Using the coded list once again (which was in the locked safe), she remarked the essays using the English Communications 12 Scoring Guide for Composition (Appendix E). She recorded these marks on a new Essay Mark Recording Sheet (Appendix F) that was provided to her and put this scoring sheet in the large brown envelope labelled ‘Essay 2’ which she then locked in the school safe. She returned the essays to the researcher, as the teacher, who then returned them to the students in the class.

Finally, the last step in this study was having the students complete the post-intervention Likert scale survey (Appendix D) for the second time as part of their regular classroom work. When the students completed the surveys, they were placed in a new large brown envelope labelled ‘Survey 2’, which was then locked in the school safe along with the other three envelopes. The same procedure that was used for ‘Survey 1’ was then implemented in order to create a coded and anonymized data set for data analysis. After this was completed, this researcher gathered all of the envelopes from the locked school safe and analyzed the data collected from the surveys and from the essay scoring sheets. After the data was analyzed and
the study was completed, the entire data set of surveys (Survey 1 and 2), was examined to inform this researcher’s teaching practice.

**Discussion of Validity**

This study was vulnerable to several limitations and threats to validity. Firstly, after extensive research, this researcher concluded that the concept of motivation was somewhat complex and often ambiguous. The issue of writing, as well, is somewhat complex, as it has been studied as both an emotional as well as a cognitive activity (Lam & Law, 2007). Thus, in an attempt to study this issue in a meaningful way, this researcher focused on the factors that were most commonly identified and discussed in the literature as being important for developing and maintaining motivation towards writing. These factors were the four components originally proposed by Bruning and Horn in their 2000 study and referred to in many other studies of this subject.

Based on these factors, the 14 statements and the two questions on the survey were developed to specifically measure the students’ responses to these aforementioned factors. The statements and questions were created using language that was deemed understandable and non-threatening to the student participants in this sample population. This researcher also attempted to address threats to validity by having the surveys anonymous. Although this researcher, as the teacher, implemented the instructional intervention strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry, having an independent teacher evaluate both of the essays, and using the English Communications 12 Provincial Scoring Guide consistently were also attempts to alleviate internal threat to this study. If disagreement occurred in the essay scores, this researcher chose the second essay score to be included for analysis in this study. Other steps, such as ensuring all surveys and essays were
One of the main limitations to this study is the fact that only one English Communications 12 class was studied as part of this research. This affects the generalizability of this study as a larger population sample would have added strength to the results. The return of the parent/guardian consent letters also affected the strength of this study, as two of the letters were not returned out of the twenty-one. Regarding the sample population itself, attendance issues for a few of the students became a concern. With a lot of extra support and additional time, these students did complete the instructional unit.

The fact that the same survey was given to the student participants a second time was not considered a threat to validity as a time period of three months in between was deemed long enough for the students to have not fully remembered all of the statements. Several interruptions in the instructional intervention, due to assemblies and a professional development day for teachers, were also not deemed to have had a significant impact on the results. Location was also looked at as a possible factor affecting validity, as both surveys and essay writes were conducted in the students’ regular classroom, but this was believed in the end to not have had any significant effect on the results.

**Data Analysis**

After this research period concluded, this researcher retrieved the four envelopes containing the two surveys and the two essays completed by the study participants and analyzed the data. The analyzing took place in one of the schools’ meeting rooms located in the office of the school. The surveys were scored first by adding up the numeric values given to each response (from 1-5), and the mean for each of these categories was calculated, as well as the
percent change in mean. This data was then presented in table format. Next, the total was calculated for the motivational areas, as well as the change from pre intervention to post intervention (numeric increase and percent increase). This data was also presented in table format. The student responses to the two open-ended questions were then analyzed and categorized by this researcher into emergent themes and percentages and presented in graph format.

Finally, the results from the two essays that the student participants had written were analyzed to note the differences, if any, between scores when students were asked to write to a teacher selected topic, versus writing to a prompt that they had chosen. These results which included the group average and numeric change were represented in table and graph format.
Chapter 4: Findings and Results

The purpose of this study was to determine if implementing the instructional strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry in English Communications 12 had an impact on increasing student motivation towards writing. The participating students were those enrolled in English Communications 12 in the fall semester of 2014. There were 19 participating students from the total enrollment in this class of 21 students. All 19 participants in this sample population completed an identical pre-intervention 5-point Likert scale survey and post-intervention Likert scale survey that was made up of 14 questions and two open-ended questions (Appendix D).

The survey questions were based on motivational areas created based on research conducted by Bruning and Horn (2000). The Likert-scale survey was made up of 14 five point questions where participants chose a response from a scale of one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). In Table 2, this researcher displayed the mean for all 14 individual questions from first the pre-intervention Likert scale survey (S1) and then the post-intervention Likert scale survey (S2). Then, this researcher calculated the percent change in mean from the pre-intervention Likert scale survey (S1) to the post-intervention Likert scale survey (S2).
Table 2 – Summary of Responses From Pre-Interventions Survey (S1) and Post-Intervention Survey (S2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #</th>
<th>Motivational Areas</th>
<th>Mean S1</th>
<th>Mean S2</th>
<th>Percent Change in Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Value (A-1)</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>Decrease of 9.9% *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Value (A-1)</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>No change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Self-efficacy (A-1)</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>Increase of 17% *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Beliefs (A-1)</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>Increase of 6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Self-efficacy (A-1)</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>Increase of 8.1% *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Authenticity (A-2)</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>Increase of 8.9% *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Interest (A-2)</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>Decrease of 6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Choice (A-4)</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>Increase of 2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Connection (A-2)</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>No change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Effective Feedback (A-3)</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>Increase of 9.3% *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Effective Feedback (A-3)</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>Increase of 15% *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Support (A-3)</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>Increase of 13% *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Autonomy (A-4)</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>No change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Environment (A-4)</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>Increase of 14% *</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Meaningful change noted if increase or decrease is at least 5%

n=19

Note. Motivational areas according to Bruning and Horn (2000)

(A-1) Writing Beliefs – Value of Writing/Self-Efficacy
(A-2) Interest and Authenticity
(A-3) Supportive Context
(A-4) Environment of Trust and Empowerment/Choice
This researcher began the data analysis by examining the percent change in mean from the pre-intervention survey (S1) responses to the post-intervention survey (S2) responses. Meaningful change in mean was noted if there was an increase or decrease of at least 5%. From the 14 participant responses examined, nine out of the 14 questions displayed meaningful positive change from the pre-intervention survey (S1) to the post-intervention survey (S2).

In area one (writing beliefs), question three that addressed self-efficacy revealed the highest positive change of 17%. Next, in area three (supportive context), question eleven that addressed effective feedback showed a positive meaningful change of 15%, and question twelve that addressed the impact of teacher support on motivation displayed meaningful positive change of 13%. Finally, in area four (environment of trust and choice), question fourteen that addressed the impact of the classroom environment on motivation displayed a positive increase of 14%.

Positive and meaningful change also occurred in the following responses. Area one (writing beliefs) question four that addressed participants feeling nervous while writing increased by 6.3%, and question five that addressed participants feeling confident in writing increased by 8.1%. In area two (interest and authenticity) responses to question six that addressed writing in school showed a positive increase of 8.9%, and in area three (supportive context) question ten that addressed teacher feedback in helping motivation revealed a positive increase of 9.3%.

Also noted from the results were some decreases in change in mean for participant responses from the pre-survey (S1) to the post-survey (S2). A meaningful decrease of 9.9% percent occurred in area one (writing beliefs) question one that addressed writing value. A meaningful decrease of 6.3% was also noted in area two (interest and authenticity) question seven that addressed interest towards teacher topics. Three participant responses exhibited no
change from pre-survey (S1) to post-survey (S2). These questions were: area one (writing beliefs) question two that addressed writing value; area two (interest and authenticity) question nine that addressed topic connection; and area four (environment of trust and choice) question thirteen that addressed independent writing.

Table 3 presents a compressed summary of the changes in responses from the individual 14 questions from the pre-intervention survey (S1) to the post-intervention survey (S2) grouped under the four motivational areas.
Table 3 – Changes in Responses From Pre-Survey (S1) to Post-Survey (S2) Grouped by Motivational Areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivational Areas</th>
<th>Total S1</th>
<th>Total S2</th>
<th>Numeric Increase</th>
<th>Percent Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A-1) Writing Beliefs (5 questions)</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>+11</td>
<td>3.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A-2) Interest and Authenticity (3 questions)</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>+3</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A-3) Supportive Context (3 questions)</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>+24</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A-4) Environment of Trust and Empowerment/Choice (3 questions)</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>+9</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=19

Note. Motivational areas according to Bruning and Horn (2000)

- (A-1) Writing Beliefs – Value of Writing/Self-Efficacy
- (A-2) Interest and Authenticity
- (A-3) Supportive Context
- (A-4) Environment of Trust and Empowerment/Choice
Table 3 also displays the numeric increase and the percent increase from the pre-intervention survey (S1) to the post-intervention survey (S2). All four areas displayed a positive increase. The most meaningful change occurred in motivational area three (supportive context). This area displayed a positive increase of 12.2%. The next most meaningful increase occurred in area four (environment of trust and choice) which displayed a positive increase of 6.6%. Area one (writing beliefs) indicated a positive increase of 3.32%, and finally area two (interest and authenticity resulted in a positive increase of 1.5%.

Figure 1 displays the results of the first open-ended question that was included on both the pre-intervention survey (S1) and the post-intervention survey (S2). This question was, “What motivates you to write?” From the pre-intervention survey (S1), all of the 19 participants in this study gave a written response to this question. For the post-intervention survey (S2), there were 17 responses to this first question as two of the participants left this question blank on their survey form. The participant responses from both the surveys were examined for emergent themes relating to the four motivational areas of writing beliefs, interest and authenticity, supportive context, and environment of trust and choice.
n=19

Figure 1 – Graph of the First Open-Ended Question (What motivates you to write?) From Pre-Intervention Survey (S1) and Post-Intervention Survey (S2)

Note: Series 1 = pre-intervention survey (S1) Series 2 = post-intervention survey (S2)

The first open-ended question was “What motivates you to write?” Out of the responses from both the pre and post surveys (S1 and S2), responses such as “I am motivated to write if I find the topic interesting” were coded to the emergent theme of interest as a factor participants felt motivated them towards writing. Responses such as, “I am motivated to write if I feel I can connect to what I am writing about” were coded to the theme of connection. Responses of, “I feel motivated to write if it’s a topic of choice” corresponded to the theme of choice, and finally
responses such as, “I am motivated to write if it is useful to my future” were coded to the theme of value. One of the responses from the pre-survey (S1) that stated “nothing motivates me, I just do what I have to do to graduate, and one of the responses from the post-survey (S2) that stated, “being told to write” did not fit into any of the above themes and both were identified as other for a theme. Thus, the themes that emerged were the motivating factors of value, connection, interest, choice, and other.

Once these responses were categorized under themes, this researcher then totaled the responses and presented the totals as percentages in a graph (as shown in Figure 1) to better present any meaningful change that might exist in student responses from the pre-intervention survey (S1) to the post-intervention survey (S2). In the pre-intervention survey (S1), the most meaningful result was that 47% of the participants indicated interest as the factor that they felt most motivated them towards writing. Twenty-five percent felt choice was the most motivating factor, 12% indicated value, 10% noted connection, and 5% revealed nothing helped motivate them to write. In the post-intervention survey (S2), 42% of participants indicated interest was the most motivating factor for them to engage in writing, 23% felt it was connection that motivated them, 21% revealed it was choice, 9% chose value, and 5% felt nothing motivated them to write.

This researcher also noted the following from the responses to this open-ended question. From the pre-intervention survey (S1) to the post-intervention survey (S2), there was a slight decrease in the percentage of participant responses to the factors of interest, choice, and value. In the responses to the post-intervention survey (S2), the participants who chose the motivating factor of interest decreased by 5%, the participants that indicated choice decreased by 4%, and participant responses that noted value decreased by 3%. These decreases, however, were not
meaningful. What was meaningful in these results was the positive increase of 13% in the factor of connection between the pre and post surveys.

For the second open-ended question, “Does having choice or control over what you write about help you write better?” 17 participants out of the 19 gave a written response on the pre-intervention survey (S1), and 17 participants out of the 19 gave a written response on the post-intervention survey (S2). This researcher first examined the responses to note if participants responded positively towards choice or negatively. From the 17 responses to this question on the pre-intervention survey (S1), 16 participants indicated that it would help them write better. The 17th participant responded, “I’m mostly indifferent about it because if given enough time I can usually write about any topic”. From the participants who responded to this question on the post-intervention survey (S2), all 17 indicated that having choice or control helps them write better.

This researcher also examined these responses for the appearance of any emergent themes related to the four motivational areas of this study. In the pre-intervention survey (S1) it was revealed in 16 out of the 17 responses that having choice or control helps them to be more interested in what they are writing about and helps them connect to what they are writing about so that they can write better. Some examples of participant responses were, “If I have a choice on what I write about there is a better chance I will write more because there is a better chance I will like a topic”, or “It would help me because that way I can connect better to what I’m writing.” In the post-intervention survey (S2) all 17 participant responses reiterated the pre-survey (S1) responses citing interest and connection as important in almost every response.
Table 4 presents the pre-intervention essay scores based on a teacher selected topic (E1) and the post-intervention essay scores based on a student topic of choice (E2). The English Communications 12 Scoring Guide for Composition (Appendix E) was used to assess both sets of essays. As well, both sets of essays (E1 and E2) were double marked, first by this researcher and again by a second English teacher to minimize any bias. In the case of discrepancy between the two marks, this researcher chose to use the second teacher’s mark for this study. Table 4 displays both the numeric change between the first essay write on a teacher selected topic (E1) and the second essay write based on a student topic of choice (E2), and the group average mark for both. The final column in this table shows the numeric change from the pre-intervention essay scores (E1) to the post-intervention essay scores (E2). This numeric change reveals an overall average increase of 0.8 or 19.52%. Figure 2 shows the same pre-intervention essay scores (E1) and the post-intervention essay scores (E2) displayed in bar graph format.
Table 4 – *Pre-Intervention Essay Scores (E1) and Post-Intervention Essay Scores (E2)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Pre-Essay Scores Teacher Topic (E1)</th>
<th>Post-Essay Scores Topic Choice (E2)</th>
<th>Numeric Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Average</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>+.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=19

*Note.* Scored according to Communications 12 Scoring Guide for Composition (Appendix E)
Figure 2 – Essay Scores From Pre-Intervention (E1) and Essay Scores From Post-Intervention (E2)

Note. Scored based on Communications 12 Scoring Guide for Composition (Appendix E)
Research Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine if implementing the instructional strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry in English Communications 12 classes had an impact on increasing student motivation towards writing. This study was also conducted with the purpose to add to the existing research on motivation and instructional practices. This researcher hypothesized that English Communications 12 students would be more successful at writing if instruction was designed that addressed the specific motivational areas of writing beliefs, interest and authenticity, a supportive context, and an environment of trust and choice. These motivational areas were based on conditions proposed by Bruning and Horn (2000) as important for providing motivation towards writing. As well, according to Deci et al. (1991), these conditions promote students to be self-determined, and if students become self-determined they can become more motivated towards writing.

This researcher felt this study was justified from observation of general apathy and poor quality of written output from English Communications 12 students in the classroom. This researcher recognizes the importance of effective writing skills for today’s learners and the importance of examining current instructional practices in order to improve writing success for English Communications 12 students.

This current action research study used a mixed methods exploratory design. This researcher began the study by administering a pre-intervention Likert scale survey based on writing attitudes (Appendix D). After this survey, participants wrote a pre-intervention essay (E1) based on a teacher selected topic. These essays were marked using an English Communications 12 Scoring Guide for Composition (Appendix E). This researcher, as the
teacher, then implemented the three month instructional strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry. This was followed by a post-intervention essay (E2) based on a participant topic of choice that was again marked using the same scoring guide. Finally, this researcher administered the same Likert scale survey for a second time (Appendix D).

After this study was completed, this researcher examined the data. The responses from the pre-intervention survey and the post-intervention survey were examined, and the mean and percent change in mean was calculated for the 14 individual questions (Table 2). Responses that showed at least a 5% increase or decrease from pre-intervention to post-intervention were considered meaningful.

From the participant responses examined, nine out of the fourteen questions displayed meaningful positive change (Table 2). In the area of writing beliefs question 3 on self-efficacy showed an increase of 17% from pre-intervention to post-intervention. In the area of supportive context both question 11 on effective feedback (15%) and question 12 on support (13%) also showed positive meaningful change. Finally, question 14 which addressed the classroom environment also showed a positive increase (14%). Although there were two decreases noted from pre-intervention to post-intervention, these were not considered meaningful. Overall, meaningful increase was revealed in all four motivational areas; the most meaningful increase occurred in area three (supportive context) (Table 3). These increases reveal that participants felt these motivational areas were important in helping them feel motivated towards writing. The meaningful 12.2% increase occurring in the motivational area of a supportive context indicates they felt strongly that having a supportive context was important in helping them feel motivated towards writing (Table 3).
Results from the participant responses to the two open-ended questions of “What motivates you to write?” and “Does having choice or control over what you write about help you write better?”, highlighted that the factors of value, connection, interest, and choice were important motivational factors. Responses on the pre-intervention survey revealed that 47% of participants felt interest was the factor that most motivated them towards writing. The motivating factor of choice was indicated by 25% of participants, 12% felt it was value, 10% noted connection, and 5% indicated that nothing helped motivate them towards writing. After the instructional intervention, survey results revealed 42% of participants felt interest was the most motivating factor for writing, 23% felt it was connection, 21% revealed choice, 9% chose value, and 5% felt nothing motivated them to write.

These post-intervention responses revealed a slight decrease in percentages in the factors of interest, choice, and value, but these decreases were not meaningful. What was meaningful from these results was the meaningful positive increase of 13% in the factor of connection after the instructional intervention. Before the intervention, 16 out of the 17 participants responded positively to the second open-ended question that having choice or control would help them write better. After the intervention, all 17 participants responded positively to this question agreeing that having choice or control helps them write better. As well from this second question before the intervention 16 out of the 17 participants indicated that having choice or control helps them write better because they would feel more interested or connected with their writing. After the intervention, all 17 participants indicated that having choice or control helps them write better because they would feel more interested or connected with their writing.

The results from the pre-intervention essay write on a teacher-selected topic to the second post-intervention essay write on a student selected topics revealed a meaningful increase in
participant scores. Out of the 19 participants, 12 participants’ scores increased by at least one level from pre-intervention to post-intervention, and three of these participants raised their essay scores by two levels. No participant received a score lower than three on the second essay write on student selected topic of choice. The group average score from the first essay of a teacher selected topic was 3.3, and the group average on the second essay write of participant topic of choice was 4.1. This reveals a positive increase in scores post-intervention of 0.8 or 19.52%.

**Discussion**

This current study explored the relationship between motivation and writing by designing and incorporating an instructional strategy based on researched motivational factors in an attempt to answer the question of whether implementing this strategy would improve motivation towards writing for English Communications 12 students. This researcher believes that from what is known about motivation and from what is known about the difficulties and challenges of writing tasks for struggling students, it is clear that the focus needs to be on creating instructional designs that incorporate this knowledge. Designing instructional strategies that help to motivate lower achieving senior students to be successful writers is an area where more research is needed.

In 2008, Hawthorne studied motivation and writing tasks for a sample population of Grade 10 students in New Zealand, but focused on 50 minute classroom discussions. Lam and Law in 2007 studied motivation and writing strategies with secondary students in Hong Kong, but focused specifically on how to write an expository essay. The results of the above studies support the importance of addressing motivation when teaching writing, but this current study is unique in that it examines struggling senior English students and the impact of offering a
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semester long instructional intervention that meets all the learning outcomes for this level as well as addressing important motivational factors.

Bruning and Horn (2000) proposed that besides researching motivation and writing, “We also need to inquire of students themselves about those purposes of writing they consider to be most meaningful and motivating” (p.31). This current study used student self-reporting by implementing pre and post-intervention surveys (Appendix D) that asked students what factors they proposed would help motivate them towards writing. As well there was opportunity with two open-ended questions for participants to give their views as to how they felt about being offered choice and control with their writing.

Meaningful increases in participant responses to individual questions on the Likert scale surveys indicated that addressing the four motivational areas (see Table 2) when designing instructional strategies to help motivate struggling students towards writing can have an impact. Although three out of the individual 14 responses indicated some decrease and three revealed no change from pre-intervention to post-intervention, when the four motivational areas were viewed overall, increase was revealed in all areas. The decreases could also be attributed to the limitations of the self-reporting process itself. Clearly it is important for educators to address motivational factors when designing writing strategies.

Out of the four motivational areas, the meaningful increases in area three (supportive context) and area four (environment of trust and choice) deserve closer consideration (Table 3). After the intervention, participants deemed the areas of effective feedback, trust, support, choice and control to be more important in increasing their motivation to write than the areas of self-efficacy, writing value, interest, and authenticity. These results are supported by a wealth of
research. “Social context that support people’s being competent, related, and autonomous will promote intentional (i.e., motivated) action, and furthermore, that support for autonomy in particular will facilitate that motivated action’s being self-determined (rather than controlled)” (Deci et al, 1991, p.333). Offering students the opportunity of autonomy and control while at the same time ensuring they are effectively supported with guidance and feedback are integral components of the Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional strategy.

The importance of a supportive and positive environment in developing motivation towards writing is supported not only by Bruning and Horn (2000) who believed, “An obvious starting point [to motivate students towards writing] is removing conditions that make writing a negative experience” (p. 33), but also by Ganske, et al. (2003) who proposed that a safe writing environment is critical, especially for struggling writers as they need to know what they write will be valued and accepted. Often in school environments, these writers lack the confidence to take risks and try as they do not feel they can be successful.

Results that suggest the importance of a safe and positive environment on student motivation is also supported by research conducted by Hattie and Timperley (2007) on the importance of effective feedback. The instructional strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry incorporates Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) three important feedback questions of “Where am I going?”, “How am I going?” and “Where to next?” (p. 88). This strategy also offers different types of feedback, such as peer, self, task, and process. This researcher observed that during the intervention process, participants responded very positively to these different forms of feedback, notably peer feedback. The safe environment that was offered during this study encouraged students to work and share together which furthered the positive environment. The results from this current study support the importance of effective feedback and that “Feedback is effective
when it consists of information about progress, and/or about how to proceed” (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p.89).

Results from the two open-ended questions supported further observations made by this current researcher during this study. Students were clearly engaged in the process and enjoyed having control over their learning. After the Topic Choice/Inquiry intervention, 42% of participants responded on the post-survey that they felt having choice or control over what they wrote helped them write better because they were interested in what they were writing about. Many of the students that usually struggled with writing the minimum requirement reported that this was not a problem for them this time. Results from Hawthorne’s 2008 study on engagement in secondary school support this current researcher’s findings. His results indicated interest to be by far the most meaningful factor towards engagement. “Interest in a topic is thought to have positive influences on a student’s writing because it links what students know about a topic with what they value” (Hawthorne, 2008, p.40).

Closely linked to the motivating factor of interest is the motivating factor of connection. Participant responses to the importance of connection doubled following the instructional intervention clearly showing this factor is important in promoting motivation towards writing. Being immersed in a chosen area of interest that students can connect to is at the crux of the Topic Choice/Inquiry intervention. In order to engage these struggling students in an area as difficult as writing, students need to feel that what they are writing about is important to them and meaningful to their lives both inside and outside of the classroom. This is supported by research which attests to the fact that, “Having genuine reasons for writing almost certainly has motivational consequences” (Bruning & Horn, 2000, p. 30).
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Results from the pre-intervention and post-intervention essay writes revealed a positive increase that supports this current researcher’s belief that incorporating motivational strategies into instruction can improve both the writing quality and quantity for English Communications 12 students. Scores increased for the majority of participants after the instructional intervention when students were offered to write on a topic of choice that interested them. These results are supported by Lam and Law’s 2007 findings, “that when the teachers adopted more motivating teaching strategies, the students were more motivated. When the students were more motivated, they, in turn, had better performance in writing” (p. 145). Implementing the instructional strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry can provide students with the right motivational factors that can make a difference with their writing.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results from this current study and the implications for student success in writing. Firstly, research shows that motivation is very complex and made up of many constructs. This researcher designed the instructional strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry based on the four areas proposed by Bruning and Horn (2000) that they felt were important in helping motivate students towards writing. Due to the fact that motivation as a theory is so complex, there are certainly other possible factors that could be considered when addressing how to motivate students other than the ones used as a basis to design this strategy.

Another limitation to this current study is that most of the results were obtained through responses to two five point Likert scale surveys. Analyzing data based on self-reporting instruments, such as Likert surveys, can present some challenges. Although self-reporting in this
manner allows students to offer their views which are important to consider, responses may not always be reliable. First of all there is the accuracy of their responses to consider. There is a risk that participants might not have reported truthfully and to the best of their ability, as some participants may not have fully understood the questions proposed or even that they might not have put in sufficient effort as they responded to the various questions. Also, the self-reporting method may be too general to accurately address the concept of motivation. This potential limitation to the data must be considered.

The Hawthorne Effect (Adair, 1984), the idea that human subjects change their behaviour because they know they are being studied, could also be considered as a possible limitation to this study regarding bias. The strategy of Topic Choice/Inquiry was an instructional method that was new to the participants in this study. They were aware that something new was being implemented with this researcher’s hope of increasing motivation towards writing in this classroom. Though the participants were informed the survey results would be anonymous, the fact that these students were aware they were being studied could have had an impact of their survey response. Just the novelty of these participants being a part of this study could have impacted both their responses and motivation during this process.

A further limitation to this study is the relatively small sample size of the participants (n=19) and the ecological validity of this particular study. The extent to which the results from this current study can be generalized to all English Communications 12 students needs to be considered. Therefore, the impact of the motivational strategies implemented through this instructional intervention can really only be considered for this particular group of English Communications 12 students. Further studies with other sample groups of struggling senior
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students should be conducted in order to further validate the findings as population samples can vary greatly as well as classroom environments and teacher implementation.

Further research

The purpose of this study was to determine if the implementation of Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional strategy had an impact on student motivation towards writing as well as to add to the existing body of research surrounding effective instructional practices that could help motivate struggling senior students. The meaningful results from this study indicate that Topic Choice/Inquiry as a strategy did have a positive impact on these participants by promoting motivation and increasing their writing scores. These results reinforce the importance of what Wagner and Kegan (2006) referred to as rethinking and redesigning traditional instructional practices in order to offer students opportunities to be successful with writing tasks so that they can successfully navigate through the school system and graduate. Writing strategies should be designed that encompass the factors of writing beliefs, interest and authenticity, a supportive context, and an environment of trust and choice, in order to promote motivation. Further studies that focus on examining writing practices such as Topic Choice/Inquiry that address motivational factors may further success for more struggling students.

Further studies that employ other methods of data collection could also be considered. More qualitative data, such as data obtained from personal interviews and observations could further understanding of motivation and writing for these students. This type of qualitative data could add strength to the self-reporting results from this current study. As well, further studies could add additional evaluation of writing performance to strengthen results and add to the
understanding of what motivates struggling writers. As well as the pre and post-intervention essay writes that were used in this current study to examine writing improvement, multiple summative assessment tools could be used to increase validity to the findings.

As well there is definitely a place for further studies to be conducted with larger population samples and from more populations. As all learners are so diverse, research with more students across different learning environments could add richness to this current study’s findings in examining the impact of creating writing strategies that are designed to impact motivation for struggling writers. Writing tasks can also be challenging for other groups as well as students enrolled in English Communications 12 classes. Topic Choice/Inquiry strategy, as well as other writing strategies that promote motivation towards writing, could be studied in other classrooms with other levels of students in order to determine if results are as positive as they were with this study.

Conclusions

The goal of this study was to assist teachers in developing and implementing instructional strategies for English Communications 12 students that will positively motivate students to improve both the quantity and quality of their writing, as well as to enrich their learning. This current study sought to answer the question of whether implementing Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional strategy for English Communications 12 students would improve motivation towards writing. This researcher’s hypothesis was that it would successfully increase motivation for these students because this instructional strategy was designed based on research conducted by Bruning and Horn (2000). This researcher also hypothesized that if students were motivated they would be able to improve their writing performance.
Existing research into the factors that promote motivation in learners and the challenges of the writing process (Boscolo & Hidi, 2007; Bruning & Horn, 2000; Deci et al., 1991; Graham & Weiner, 1996; Hawthorne, 2008; Lam & Law, 2007; Magnifico, 2010; Margolis & McCabe, 2004; Pajares, 2003; Schunk, 1991; Weiner, 1990), as well as the findings from this current study support that there is a need for educators to incorporate motivational factors into their instructional strategies for writing in order to improve engagement and achievement for students. The results from this current study confirm that the four motivational areas of writing beliefs, interest and authenticity, supportive context, and an environment that offers trust and choice can encourage students to become more motivated and self-determined, and this can lead to higher achievement in writing. By incorporating these four areas into the instructional design of Topic Choice/Inquiry and implementing this strategy for three months, participants raised their overall scores by 0.8 (see Table 4).

Additionally, this researcher observed an increase in student engagement and positivity towards writing. Overall, the majority of the students who participated in this study exhibited more self-determination and self-confidence; five students were able to feel successful enough to register in English 12 for the next semester. They informed this researcher that they now felt they could do this.

All learners deserve opportunities that encourage their success, despite the challenges they might have or might have gone through. For students who have a history of failure with writing, offering flexible learning opportunities within safe and supportive environments can have a positive impact on their success. The mediocrity and lack of success of traditional instruction that is taught in classrooms today needs to be addressed. It is a situation that can only be remedied by dedicated effort on the part of educators to accept that society is rapidly
changing, and therefore instruction must change as well. Reflection on student achievement to help determine learners’ needs should be conducted continuously by all educators.

The B.C. Education plan states that, “The diversity of our teachers, school districts and individual classrooms provides tremendous opportunities to innovate and pilot new approaches” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 4). As well it also states that, “The best outcomes are achieved through learner-centered approaches that are sensitive to individual and group differences, that promote inclusive and collaborative learning, that harness students’ passions and interests, and that deliver tailored feedback and coaching” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 3). Topic Choice/Inquiry instructional strategy fulfills all of the above requirements and is an effective approach to use to teach today’s learners. All learners are unique and require different skills and tools to be successful. Struggling English students should not and cannot be overlooked.

Based on the above, this researcher suggests that if we want today’s learners to be successful and to be prepared for their future, we must be open to embracing new strategies. Strategies that allow students flexibility to work in areas that they are passionate about and that interest them can encourage reluctant learners to become more engaged which can enable them to be more successful. Strategies such as Topic Choice/Inquiry are versatile and would be beneficial for students in other grade levels as well. With student achievement foremost in mind, reflecting on and rethinking about how we teach students just makes sense. The obligation is there for educators to employ best practices, and implementing Topic Choice/Inquiry is one path that can be explored, because, “without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have no meaning” (Benjamin Franklin).
TOPIC CHOICE/INQUIRY FOR ENGLISH COMMUNICATIONS 12

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Appendix A: Student Recruitment Script


September 2014

Rachel Reynolds  
Masters of Education Student  
Vancouver Island University

Rachel Moll  
Faculty of Education  
Vancouver Island University  
250-753-3245 ext: 2161

As well as being your teacher, I am also a student at Vancouver Island University where I am currently working towards my Master’s degree in Education. Through this program I am required to design and conduct a research study to study motivation towards writing in English Communications 12.

As part of your regular classroom instruction, you will be asked to complete two surveys that contain 16 questions based on motivation towards writing. These surveys will take about 15 minutes each to complete. One will be given to you before you begin a writing instruction unit which is part of your regular classroom work, and one will be given to you a month later at the end of the writing unit. You will also be asked to complete two essay assignments which are also part of your regular instruction. I will evaluate these essays as part of your regular classroom work, and then I will give them to my research assistant to mark a second time. As a participant in this study I will then use your survey results and your essay results as part of my research. Your data will be anonymized under coded names, and I will not know who is participating in this study.

The purpose for gathering this information is to help teachers plan writing instruction. There are no known harms associated with your participation in this study. Your participation to have your results used as part of this study is completely voluntary.

I am handing out a parent/guardian consent form and a participant assent form. In order for me to use your results in this study, you will need to discuss this with your parents/guardians and return the consent form and the assent form signed to a drop box in the school office.
Appendix B: Parent/Guardian Consent Letter

Parent/Guardian Consent Letter for

September 2014

Rachel Reynolds  
Masters of Education Student  
Vancouver Island University

Rachel Moll  
Faculty of Education  
Vancouver Island University

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Rachel Reynolds, and I am a teacher at Alberni District Secondary School with eight years’ experience teaching senior English. I am also a student at Vancouver Island University where I am currently working towards my Master’s degree in Education. Through this program I am required to design and conduct a research study. The purpose of my research project is to study motivation towards writing in English Communications 12. The purpose of this letter is to ask for your permission to include your child in my research study.

Your child will be asked to complete two surveys as part of their regular classroom instruction. These two surveys contain 16 questions based on motivation towards writing. These surveys will take a total of 30 minutes each to complete. One survey will be given to the students before they begin a writing instruction unit that is part of their regular classroom instruction, and one will be given a month later at the end of the writing unit. Your child will also be asked to complete two essay assignments which are part of the students’ regular instruction. I will be evaluating this work as part of my regular classroom evaluation. I am asking permission to also use your child’s survey and essay results as part of this study.

For this study, I will be utilizing a research assistant who is also an English teacher at this school, although he is not your child’s teacher. In order to keep students’ results anonymous to me for the purposes of the study, he will collect the consent and assent forms and will create a coded list of student names. He will be coding the students’ names on the survey and the essay results. All records of your child’s participation will be kept confidential. Your child’s participation is this study is completely voluntary.
TOPIC CHOICE/INQUIRY FOR ENGLISH COMMUNICATIONS 12

Only myself and my research assistant will have access to this information, and it will be kept in a locked safe in the school’s administration office. It will be destroyed two years after the end of the project. This will be approximately in October of 2017. All electronic data connected with this research study will also be destroyed at this time.

The purpose for gathering this information is to help teachers plan writing instruction that can best motivate English Communications 12 students towards success in writing. There are no known harms associated with your child’s participation in this study.

If you have any questions concerning this research study and your child’s treatment as a research participant in this study, please feel free to contact the Vancouver Island University Research Ethics Officer by telephone at (250) 753-3245 (ext. 2665), or by email at reb@viu.ca. You may also contact myself, Ms. Rachel Reynolds.

Sincerely,

Ms. Rachel Reynolds

I have read and understand the above letter, and I understand that my child can ask questions at any time.

I consent to having my child ___________________________ participate in this research study.

_________________________________________
Parent/Guardian Signature

_________________________________________
Date

Please return signed letters to Alberni District Secondary School either by mail using the pre-addressed envelope, or by dropping it off into the drop box located in the front office. Thank you.
Appendix C: Participant Assent Letter


September 2014

Rachel Reynolds
Masters of Education Student
Vancouver Island University
250-753-3245 ext: 2161

Rachel Moll
Faculty of Education
Vancouver Island University

Principal Investigator: Rachel Reynolds, Masters of Education Student, Faculty of Education
Vancouver Island University

Contact for information about the study: If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Ms. Rachel Reynolds.

Purpose: You are being asked to participate in this research because you are an English Communications 12 student at Alberni District Secondary School. This project aims to conduct some preliminary research into motivation towards writing. This researcher is interested in what factors contribute towards helping students feel motivated to write. This preliminary research will be used to help plan writing instruction that can best motivate English Communications 12 students towards success in writing.

Study Procedures: In this study the population being studied is one English Communications 12 class from Alberni District Secondary School. The procedure for this study will be:

1. You will be asked to sign an assent form.
2. You will be asked to complete a survey as a part of your regular classroom work.
3. You will be asked to write an essay based on a teacher chosen topic. This is part your regular school work, and will be evaluated using an English Communications 12 Scoring Guide as part of your classroom assessment.
4. You will be taught an instructional unit on Topic Choice as part of your regular school instruction. After this four week unit, you will be asked to complete a second essay on a topic of your choice as part of your regular school work. This essay will also be evaluated as part of your classroom assessment.
5. You will be asked to complete a second survey as part of your regular classroom work.
6. As a participant in this study, your results from the survey and the essays will then be anonymized by my research assistant and this data will be analyzed as part of the research.

Potential Risks: No known potential risks.

Confidentiality: My research assistant will collect the consent and assent forms and will create a coded list of participants and will code all survey and essay results. Therefore I will not know who participated and will not be able to match survey or essay results with student names. Student participants will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study either. Study documents will be kept in a locked safe in the school’s administration office. Electronic data and results of this study will be stored on a secured computer with password access only.

Concerns about your treatment in the research: If you have any concerns about your treatment as a participant in this research, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Office at reb@viu.ca or by telephone at (250) 753-3245 (ext. 2665).

Consent: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this assent form for your records.

Your signature indicates that you agree to have your data used as part of this study.

__________________________________________________
Your name (please print)

__________________________________________________
Your signature Date

Please return signed letters to Alberni District Secondary School either by mail using the pre-addressed envelope, or by dropping it off into the drop box located in the front office. Thank you.
Appendix D: Student Survey

Student Survey for


Instructions: Please respond to the following statements by circling the number that you believe best reflects your opinion or believes. There are no right or wrong answers.

Example: Canadian hockey players are better than Russian hockey players.

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<th>3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Agree</td>
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1) Writing is an important skill to have.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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2) Being able to write well will help me after I graduate.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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3) I believe I am a good writer.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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4) Having to write makes me feel nervous or afraid.

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<td>Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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5) I am confident in my writing skills.

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6) I find writing in school to be a meaningful task.

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<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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</table>

7) I am interested in writing about teacher selected topics/prompts.

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<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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8) I like to have choice on what I write about in school.

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<td>Disagree</td>
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<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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9) I can write better if I am interested in or feel connected to the topic.

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<td>Strongly</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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</table>
10) **Teacher feedback helps me write better.**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1 Strongly</th>
<th>2 Disagree</th>
<th>3 Neutral</th>
<th>4 Agree</th>
<th>5 Strongly Agree</th>
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11) **Teacher feedback is only helpful when it is positive.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Strongly</th>
<th>2 Disagree</th>
<th>3 Neutral</th>
<th>4 Agree</th>
<th>5 Strongly Agree</th>
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12) **I like it when my teacher spends individual time with me to help me with my writing.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Strongly</th>
<th>2 Disagree</th>
<th>3 Neutral</th>
<th>4 Agree</th>
<th>5 Strongly Agree</th>
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13) **I prefer to write independently at my own pace.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Strongly</th>
<th>2 Disagree</th>
<th>3 Neutral</th>
<th>4 Agree</th>
<th>5 Strongly Agree</th>
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14) **I believe that the classroom environment impacts my ability to learn.**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1 Strongly</th>
<th>2 Disagree</th>
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<th>4 Agree</th>
<th>5 Strongly Agree</th>
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TOPIC CHOICE/INQUIRY FOR ENGLISH COMMUNICATIONS 12

The following two questions are open ended. Please respond as fully as you wish.

15) What motivates you to write? Please explain.

16) Explain how having choice or control over what you write might or might not help you write better.

Thank you for your participation in this survey.
COMMUNICATIONS 12 SCORING GUIDE FOR COMPOSITION

6  This superior response is developed with originality, energy, and flair. The writing is purposeful, focused and on topic. Details and examples are effectively used, and the writer takes risks with content and structure. An easy command of sentence structure includes appropriate subordination and effective use of parallel structure. Vocabulary is appropriate, precise and often sophisticated. There are few mechanical errors.

5  This effective response is generally well developed; however, it may contain one area of minor weakness. The writing is purposeful and the development logical. Supporting details are well chosen. The writer takes some risks, but the results may be uneven. Sentences are controlled and varied; subordination is generally effective. Vocabulary is appropriate, but expression may be awkward. Mechanical errors do not interfere with comprehension.

4  This competent response is on topic and the ideas are clearly expressed. It is generally articulate but unimaginative. Paragraph structure is defined but conventional. The subject-verb sentence pattern predominates. Although expression is simplistic, some attempt is made to use more complex vocabulary. There are few errors in usage and mechanics.

3  This adequate response attempts to address the topic, but development is weak. Ideas are repetitive and often simplistic. Although multi-paragraph structure may be attempted, paragraphs often consist of only one or two sentences. Awkwardness in sentence structure tends to interrupt the flow. Expression is simplistic, with little attempt to use complex vocabulary. Errors in usage and mechanics are evident, but they do not predominate.

2  This inadequate response could demonstrate a serious lack of proficiency with English idiom, yet make a genuine attempt at a full and structured development. Examples of unsatisfactory writing tend to be repetitive or circular, unfocused, and limited to one or two ideas. Vocabulary is basic and often informal. Sentences are usually simple in construction; fragments, run-ons and mechanical errors are evident. The paper fails to achieve the assigned purpose. Some papers are fairly well written and show rudiments of organization, but are deficient in length.

1  This unacceptable response has little or no sense of purpose or development. It is usually seriously deficient in length and often a single paragraph. Organization, if present, contributes little to sequence or logic. The writing tends to be error-ridden and often confused.

0  This is a special category reserved for papers which cannot be evaluated. Text has been produced, but the effort is characterized by one or more of the following: a) no discernible grasp of English idiom; b) too deficient in length to evaluate; c) errors that make the paper unintelligible; d) the paper deliberately addresses a topic not given. A zero can be assigned only by the marking chair or a designate.

NR No response is given.
Appendix F – Essay Mark Evaluation Sheet


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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