

# GLOBAL ACADEMIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

COLOMBO, SRI LANKA



## GARI International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN 2659-2193

**Volume: 06 | Issue: 06**

On 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020

<http://www.research.lk>

Author: R.A. Gunawardena, RMNP Rajapakse  
General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka

GARI Publisher | Language | Volume: 06 | Issue: 06

Article ID: IN/GARI/ICLLS/2020/105 | Pages: 27-41 (15)

ISSN 2659-2193 | Edit: GARI Editorial Team

Received: 07.10.2020 | Publish: 31.12.2020

# FACTORS AFFECTING THE PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS' WRITING IN ENGLISH

R.A. Gunawardena, RMNP Rajapakse

*Department of Languages, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University*

*Kandawala Road, Ratmalana, Sri Lanka*

## **ABSTRACT**

The struggle to learn the English language by the native Sinhalese and Tamil speaking people of Sri Lanka has continued although English has been taught as a subject in all schools on the recommendation of a Special Committee on Education in 1943. Despite the Reforms in Education introduced recurrently with emphasis on teaching of English, the issue of non-acquisition of English is a phenomenon ubiquitous amongst the students in Sri Lanka. The high rate of failures in English, at the G.C.E. (O.L.) examination during the past ten years reflects the dire issue at hand. In order to uncover the reasons for this enigma a case study on 'Factors affecting the performance of students' writing in English' of the Junior Secondary Stage students was conducted in a popular 1 AB government school in the Piliyandala Education Division, which has a high percentage of failures in English at the G.C.E. (O.L.) examination. The main objectives of the study were to uncover the factors affecting performance in writing in English of the Junior Secondary Stage students. Both the case study design and survey research design were incorporated as the sample exceeded 500. In order to obtain quantitative data, about student performance and other variables, a questionnaire and diagnostic test were administered. Qualitative data was obtained with focus group discussions and interviews. The outcome of the research

uncovered the main factors affecting the performance in writing of the student cohort and recommendations were made as derived from the research findings.

Key words: Writing in English, Secondary students, Second language Acquisition

## **INTRODUCTION**

The issue of non-acquisition or low mastery of the English language is a phenomenon that is ubiquitous amongst the students in Sri Lanka. In retrospect, English language has been part of Sri Lanka ever since the British colonized our country in 1796. English was the official language of our island (then known as Ceylon) from 1796 to 1956. English was taught in the school curriculum in English medium schools. After Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain in 1948, English remained an official language until former Prime Minister late Mr S.W.R.D. Bandaranayke's government passed the Official Languages Act in 1956 which decreed Sinhala as the only official language in Sri Lanka. However the English language remained as a symbol of superiority and the language of the elite. Gunesekera (2010, p 13) elaborates "In 21st century Sri Lanka, access to English is akin to being born with a silver spoon in one's mouth. It is the language of upward mobility" The struggle to learn English by the native Sinhalese and Tamil speaking

people of Sri Lanka has continued although English was taught as a subject in all schools on the recommendation of a Special Committee on Education in 1943. In November 1987 the 13th Amendment to the constitution decreed English language as a Link language and Sinhala and Tamil the official languages of Sri Lanka. The Education Reforms in 1997 stipulated that English should be introduced in Grade 1 in government schools. Oral English was introduced in Grade 1 and 2 for communication and formal English from Grade 3. Furthermore English medium instruction from Grade 6, was permitted for schools with the facilities to teach English. In addition to this in 1997, General English was introduced as a new subject for the General Certificate in Education (G.C.E) Advanced Level (A.L) class in government schools. However the National Education Commission Report (NEC, 2003) states that General English which was introduced as a core subject for G.C.E. A/L has not yielded the results anticipated when implemented in 1997. The NEC Report (2003, p180-181) reveals that “evaluation studies indicates that there were wide disparities in implementation, in the availability of qualified teachers, and the training of teachers, the distribution of course materials, the learning-teaching process and monitoring.”

According to Perera (2010, p 1) “After more than half a century of teaching English in Sri Lanka and assuming that all students have learnt English for at least eight years of learning, the results are not satisfactory”. Thus, students’ performance in English language is not satisfactory when compared with their performance in other subjects. The research on ‘Factors affecting the performance in students’ writing in English’ was conducted as a case study of a popular 1 AB government school in the suburbs of Colombo, which has a high percentage of failures in English

language (when compared with the other subjects) at the G.C.E. O.L (Ordinary Level) examination in 2015, 2016 and 2017

This problem is enigmatic especially due to the fact that these students have been studying English language as a subject from their tender years, i.e. from the Nursery class (age 4 years). English is taught formally in Government schools from Grade 1(Activity Based Oral English) and Grade 3 upwards. However when these students come to Year 9, 10 and Year 11, and face the G.C.E (O.L.) they do not perform well (in English) which has become grave issue in this school

In the school under research 33 students (19.76%) have failed the G.C.E. (O.L.) Examination in 2015. The results in the year 2016, for English in the school selected (total pass percentage) was 77.97%. Number of failures was 37 out of 168 students; percentage 22.02%. However in 2017 the number of W / failures in English remain at 35 less than in 2016 (37), yet as a percentage of failures in 2016 (22.02%), and 2017 it is (22.87%). Thus the rate of the students who passed in English in 2017, remains unsatisfactory.

The poor performance at the G.C.E. (O.L.) examination in English is not limited to this particular school in Sri Lanka. The results in the island for the subject of English has not been satisfactory for a considerable period of time. The statistics reveal that 54.92% of the school candidates failed in English language paper in 2014; in 2015 the percentage failed in English was 54.60%. In 2016 it was 52.10%; in 2017 it was 48.88% (G.C.E. O.L. Examination - Performance of candidates, 2014; 2015; 2016 and 2017- Research and Development Branch National Evaluation and Testing Service, Department of Examinations)

A similar dismal situation of the results for English island wide, prevailed in 1999

(63%), 2000 (70%), 2001 (67%), 2002 (76%) failed in English and thus failed the G.C.E. (O.L.) examination. (Wijesuriya, 2004, p.27).

The present study is focused on factors affecting performance in writing of English as mostly the skill of writing is tested at the G.C.E. (O.L.) examination and other public examinations in English in Sri Lanka, in addition the skill of reading is tested. Moreover the overall poor performance in English throughout Sri Lanka is an issue that requires urgent solutions. The National Education Commission Report in 2003 states “it is clear that the vicious circle of four decades of neglect of English teaching has resulted in an enormous lacuna in the availability of teachers proficient in English.” (p.49)

In the ‘Proposals for a National Policy on Education in Sri Lanka’ (2016), the National Education Commission states ‘unsatisfactory teaching of English Language’ is due to “teaching of English language is not done as teaching of a Second language. This is clearly why large numbers fail in public examinations. Even those who pass are unable to use English for practical purposes and in employment.” (p.128)

### **Rationale for the study**

The rationale behind this study is to uncover the factors affecting the performance in writing in English of the Junior Secondary Stage students’ in a selected IAB Government school (in the Piliyandala Education Zone). It was noticed that the students in the Junior Secondary Stage having studied English as a subject from Grade 1 and 3 formally, (.as all local national schools), they do not have a satisfactory competence in writing in English. This research was conducted with the presumption that if the factors affecting the performance in writing of the students in the Junior Secondary Stage (Grade 6. 7. 8 and 9) are addressed, a feasible solution could be arrived at, in order to improve the overall performance

in writing in English of the student cohort. The reasons and causes uncovered by this study would be used to suggest remedial steps to improve the secondary students’ proficiency in writing in English. Furthermore it is aspired that the knowledge and factors/reasons uncovered for the low performance can be applied to similar scenarios, in government schools in Sri Lanka and in general globally, in secondary schools with similar contexts.

### **Objectives of the study**

- To find out the perceptions of students in the Junior Secondary Stage, on English and writing in English.
- To find out the performance level in writing in English of the students in the Junior Secondary Stage (Year 6, 7, 8 and 9) in the selected school.
- To identify specific areas of weakness (grammar, vocabulary, spelling or creative writing) affecting performance in writing in English of the selected cohort of Junior Secondary Stage students.
- To identify the factors related to the areas of weakness in writing in English
- Suggest remedial measures to improve writing in English of the selected cohort of students.

### **According to Weigle (2002)**

“Writing differs from speech in a number of important ways, both in terms of textual qualities and in terms of factors that govern the uses of each modality. Written language is not merely spoken language put on paper, rather, it is a distinct mode of communication, involving among other things very different sociocultural norms and cognitive processes” (Weigle, 2002, p.19)

In line with the present study writing in English or second language is a skill that students need to master especially in the context of Sri Lankan public examinations

as the students are tested on their ability in writing and not speaking in English.

As elaborated in the Grade 6 Teachers' Guide, "the English syllabus, implemented in 2015, has 47 competency levels to be achieved by the students of grade 06" (p. vi). They are designed to achieve the eight National Goals of Education in Sri Lanka. Competencies in communication are based on four subsets: Literacy, Numeracy, Graphics and IT proficiency

The competencies on writing are "Uses mechanics of writing with understanding; Building up vocabulary using words appropriately and accurately to convey precise meaning; Finds synonyms and antonyms for given words; Uses affixes, plurals of nouns; Extracts necessary information from various types of texts; Transfers information into other forms; Reads and responds to simple poems, reads and understands simple folk stories and extract the general idea of a text." (Teachers' Guide Grade 6, 2015, pp.-xv-xxii.). The aforementioned competencies are repeated in grade 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 with increased complexity.

The present research is concerned with the types of writing, writing activities, writing competencies and competency levels in writing in English as depicted in the Teachers' Guides from Grade 6 to 9.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Literature Review**

English is considered as a Second Language in Sri Lanka, in fact 'English is the world's Second Language' (Krashen, 2003). The term Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and second language learning are taken as two separate entities by some writers (Krashen 1984).

According to Johnson and Roen (1989) a "broader, multidisciplinary base is important in examining issues on L2 writing" because "no single theory from a

single discipline can account for the complex and interacting social, cultural, cognitive, and linguistic processes involved" (Johnson & Roen, 1989, p.3)

According to Gass and Mackey, (2014) SLA is multi- faceted, interdisciplinary and a complex phenomenon and a single approach is not sufficient when we attempt to uncover why language learning/acquisition is successful or not. SLA approaches have been portrayed in different ways, Polio in her article 'The acquisition of second language writing' labels the approaches/theories as "Generative, emergentist/associative, processability and functionalist regarding their possible relevance to L2 writing." (Polio, 2014, p.320).

The SLA theories reviewed for the present study are:

The Generative Approach was initiated by Noam Chomsky, who believes in the innate LAD (Language Acquisition Device) and advocates that language is not 'learnt' instead the child is born with the cognitive knowledge of grammar (syntactic structures), thus enabling him/her to acquire language.

The emergentist/associative approach proponents believe that language is learned through usage and that learner makes links among words and structures.

Ellis (2005) considers several sources of data, including learner production data are relevant, but does not specifically mention written data. As Polio (2014) mentions "Ellis (2005) acknowledges the role explicit knowledge may play in acquisition. Thus written data, where the learner has time to consider explicit knowledge, maybe relevant to acquisition." (Polio, 2014, p. 320)

Interactionist Approach Gass and Mackey (2007) posits the interactional "work" that occurs when a learner and his/her interlocutor encounter some kind of communication breakdown is beneficial for L2 development. The Interactionist



approach points out the importance of meaningful interactions and feedback from the teacher in language teaching/learning process. The direct implication is when the students in the classroom use L2 with peers, more importantly the interactions with the English teacher are useful learning encounters which are essential for the development of L2. Socio-cultural Theory – Frawley and Lantolf (1985) believe that higher forms of thinking are symbolically mediated. As Lantolf explains

“when children master the language as a meaning-making system they also master their own cognitive activity. This mastery gives rise to the mind which for Vygotsky is not co-terminus with the brain, but extends to the body (e.g. gestures) even into artifacts such as computers, with which we form functional systems that enhance our capacity to think.” (Lantolf, 2014, p.57, 58).

Complexity Theory – Larsen-Freeman (1997) Cameron (2008) introduces the concept of dynamism and complexity and the cognitive aspect of language acquisition in addition to the idea of language processing in the brain. The theory asserts that linguistic structure emerges as a complex adaptive system from the verbal interaction of hominids attempting to communicate with each other. As Larsen-Freeman posits what the interaction does is to ensure that the forms that ultimately become part of the grammar are those that fit the cognitive and motor capacities of the brain.

The Reading Hypothesis – Krashen (1984)

A number of research studies show a relationship between reading and writing. It has been found that good writers, have done more reading for their own interest and pleasure than poor writers (Krashen, 1984). Those who participate in free reading programs in school make superior gains in reading, vocabulary, grammar and

writing (Krashen, 1984). Krashen (2013) pointed out that

“there is overwhelming evidence that those who read more, read better, write with a more acceptable writing style, have larger vocabularies, have better control of complex grammatical structures and spell better than those who read less.” (Krashen, 2013, p.21).

Theories on Motivation: Motivation of the learner towards learning L2 has been recognized as a factor which affects L2 acquisition. L2 motivation analysis moved beyond social-psychological point of view in the 1990's and Dörnyei's (1994) research expanded on L2 motivation on three levels i.e. the language level (integrative and instrumental subsystems), the learner level (individual motivational characteristics) and the learning situation level (situation specific motives relating to the course and social learning environment). The researchers focused on interaction between the learning situations (eg. Instructional techniques, classroom environment, interpersonal relations) and individual motivational cognitions and behaviours (eg. Goals, attitudes, beliefs, processing of experience, self-regulatory strategies) [Dörnyei, 2002; Dörnyei and Tseng 2009].

According to Ellis (2012) successful learners use more learning strategies than unsuccessful learners and different strategies are related to different skills of L2 learning. According to Ellis (2012) learning strategies can be differentiated as

“Cognitive strategies (those that are involved in the analysis, synthesis, or transformation of learning materials. Metacognitive strategies are involving planning, monitoring and evaluating learning. eg selective attention’ a learner makes a conscious decision to attend to particular aspects of the input.

Social/affective strategies are the ways in which the learner chooses to interact with other

speakers.eg ‘questioning for clarification’ (Ellis, 2012, p.77)

The above theoretical background has provided a theoretical framework for the present research.

### **Empirical Literature Review**

In the empirical literature review, research conducted on SLA focusing on factors affecting performance in writing were considered. The role of Feedback and written error correction on which a plethora of research has been conducted and the characteristics which influence the effectiveness of feedback including the contextual characteristics of feedback were examined. According to Loewen “not all studies have found feedback to be equally effective. Several studies have found metalinguistic feedback or explicit feedback to have significantly larger effect on post-test performance” (Loewen, 2014, p.34)

Chandler (2003) studied students writing over one semester and found out, underlining and direct correction reduced grammar and lexical errors in subsequent writing. (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Makulloluwa’s (2012) research on ‘Developing a Motivated learner through self-correction’ shows that using self-correction promotes the learners’ competence in L2 and motivates the learner. Her study involved a class of 18 intermediate level students of the Business English course conducted by the University of Colombo.

Studies on L2 development and L2 writing, studies on factors affecting performance in L2 of secondary students were examined including studies conducted in Sri Lanka and Nigeria. The study done by Sa’ad and Usman (2014) on ‘The Causes of Poor Performance in English Language among Senior Secondary School Students in Dutse Metropolis of Jigawa State, Nigeria’ is relevant to the present research. The sample was 300 students and 79 teachers

from five secondary schools in Dutse metropolis in Nigeria. The findings of the study are:

“The dominance of mother tongue, inadequate qualified teachers of English language, negative attitudes of students toward English language, improper use of method in teaching English language, inadequate instructional media and facilities, lack of language laboratory for teaching English language are the causes of poor performance in English language among secondary school students of Dutse metropolis of Jigawa state.” (Sa’ad, Usman, 2014, p 41)

In addition, empirical research which highlight student heterogeneity, the relationship between socio-economic status and motivation affecting the acquisition of English, the lack of interest amongst students, the home background, the inadequacy of English teaching methodology and the role played by the teachers of English in Sri Lanka were reviewed. It was evident that similar factors which affect the performance in writing in the studies cited are prevalent in the Junior Secondary Stage student cohort concerning the present study.

### **Research Design**

The present research was conducted using both the case study design and survey research design. Since the phenomenon under study was one selected government school, the present research adopted the case study design. As Stake (2000) defined the types of case study, the present study was deemed as an ‘Intrinsic case study’ –to gain better understanding of a particular case i.e. the students’ low performance in writing of English in the selected school. The survey design was incorporated to the present study as the student cohort exceeded 500. In order to obtain quantitative data, about student performance and other variables, a questionnaire, interviews and a diagnostic test were utilized. It was anticipated that a

combination of both the case study and survey research design would facilitate to achieve the objectives of the research.

#### The Population and Sample of the Study

This research is based on the Junior Secondary Stage students in a selected 1 AB Government school in the Piliyandala Zone. This school was selected because it had a high rate of failures in English at the G.C.E. (O.L.) Examination in (2016 and 2017) in the Piliyandala Education Zone. The Junior Secondary Stage has approximately 150 students per each grade 6, 7, 8 and 9. There are 4 parallel classes in each grade. Thus the initial sample size was 150 x 4, a total of 600 students. From this sample the low and high performers were identified according to their performance (marks for English) at the Year End examination (December 2016) and the First Term end test (April 2017).

The grade 10 and grade 11 students were not included in the sample since the Principal of the school did not wish to disturb the exam classes as the teachers have to complete their respective syllabi of 11 subjects.

The teachers who teach English in the Junior Secondary Stage, Sectional Head and the Principal were also considered as part of the sample. As such, the school used in this study was purposively selected and the consent of the principal, teachers and students was taken prior to the study.

#### Methods of Data Collection

The study applied multiple methods for data collection, namely observation of term-test mark sheets, questionnaire survey, interview, focus group discussions, a diagnostic test and observations.

#### The Development of the Instruments

A systematic procedure was followed for the development of the questionnaire. First the researchers developed the themes, then items of the questionnaire. The Junior Secondary Stage students of grade 6, 7, 8 and 9, were asked to answer

the questionnaire focusing on the following themes and divided into sections:

- A. Students; identity
- B. Current test marks
- C. Perceptions towards English, the interest evinced towards learning English and factors affection performance
- D. Home background
- E. Opinion about English teaching and learning process in school and learning strategies

As the second and third steps an expert's opinion and the opinion of colleagues were considered respectively. Several changes were introduced to the questionnaire in this process. As the last step, the questionnaire was piloted with three students from a different Government school in Colombo.

The diagnostic test was pre tested. The interview schedule for teachers was developed and piloted with a colleague (teacher) before conducting the interview with the teachers in the school under study. The focus group discussion was based on a semi structured discussion with pre-planned questions in addition to free/open discussion with the weak students and high achievers.

#### Administration of Data collection Instruments

The Questionnaire was administered to the Junior Secondary Stage students who scored less than 80% at the First term test (April 2017) in their respective classes. The English teachers in the school assisted to administer the questionnaire. The researchers supervised and visited all the classes from grade 6 to 9; a total of 16 classes. There were instances when the students could not understand the questions in the questionnaire which reflected that the students' level of comprehension of English was not at a high level. Since the researchers personally supervised the administration of the questionnaire the response was



good, a total of 381 questionnaires were collected.

#### The Diagnostic test

A diagnostic test was designed for each level (Grade 6, 7, 8 and 9), and conducted in the aforementioned grades with the purpose of measuring the cognizance of grammar and skill of writing of the sample of students. The researchers personally supervised the administration of the test with the assistance of the English teachers in the respective classes. A total of 163 answer scripts were collected from grades 6, 7, 8 and 9.

#### The interview with teachers

The interviews with the teachers of English were conducted on one on one basis with a structured interview schedule leaving room for free discussion with a total duration of 10 minutes per teacher. The time for interview for each interviewee was decided on the time they did not have teaching and other class duties and was held in the staff room. A total of 4 teachers were interviewed, the Sectional Head and Principal's opinion regarding the low performance in English of the Junior Secondary Stage student cohort were also sought.

#### Focus group discussions

The focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 15 low performing students from Grades 6,7,8 and 9. A total of 9 high performing students from Grade 6, 7, 8 and 9 who were interviewed separately. The interviews were conducted in an empty classroom and lasted for half an hour per group. The interviews were held on separate days during the interval time since all the students are free only during that time.

#### Analysis of data

A quantitative analysis and content analysis were done on the questionnaire; answers were categorized under themes, percentages were calculated in order to come to conclusions on the students'

perceptions on learning English and to uncover factors behind low level of performance. The SPSS software was used for this purpose.

The diagnostic test was marked according to a marking key. The diagnostic test was especially used to measure the students' knowledge of English grammar and their savoir faire in writing.

A content analysis on the responses and information obtained at the interviews held for teachers of English was done.

The Focus group (students who are low performers and the high achievers) discussion results were analyzed and categorized according to responses.

Data triangulation was done as the instruments were designed in a manner to verify the data gathered from the instruments.

## ***FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION***

The findings of the study will be discussed according to the research objectives.

The perceptions on English and interest evinced in writing in English by the students of the Junior Secondary Stage

The perceptions of the students on English and writing in English is rather mediocre and the entire student cohort does not have a particularly great liking towards learning English and writing in English. The majority said they like English the same as all other subjects.

In addition, the majority of the students in the sample neither speak in English at home, nor do they speak in English when they are in school and given an opportunity to speak. Most of the students do not read English books or newspapers regularly.

Furthermore the students do not watch English TV programmes nor do they listen to English radio programmes. Thus their

exposure to L2 is quite limited. Lantolf (2012) explaining the Socio-cultural theory says L2 “development does not depend solely on internal mechanisms but on the quality and quantity of external forms of social interaction that is attuned to a learner’s potential ability.” (Lantolf, 2012, p. 57) The performance level in writing in English of the students in the Junior Secondary Stage (Year 6, 7, 8 and 9) in the selected school.

Through the examination of the results of December 2016 Year-End examination of grade 6 to 9, it could be concluded that the overall performance of the Junior Secondary Stage student cohort was not satisfactory. Their performance does not assure excellent results at the G.C.E. (O/L) Examination these students have to face in the near future. Specific areas of weakness (grammar, vocabulary, spelling or creative writing) affecting performance in writing in English.

The diagnostic test results were quite dismal and revealed a very poor standard of the students’ knowledge in grammar and a more horrific state of their creative/essay writing skills.

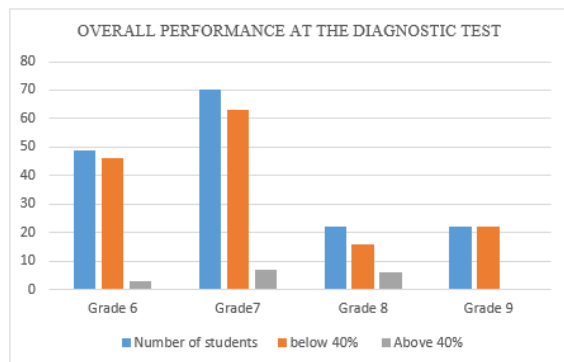


Figure 1 Overall performance at the diagnostic test in grades 6, 7, 8 and 9

The overall performance at the diagnostic test paints a very dismal and disturbing picture of the standard of writing, in grammar and especially essay/creative writing of the student cohort. The students who obtained above 40% (pass mark) in grade 6 are 3, grade 7, 7 students and grade 8, 6 students. In grade 9, none of the students who sat for the diagnostic test scored above 40%.

Considering the overall performance, 147 students across all grades scored below 40 marks, thus it can be deduced that the students are weak in grammar, spelling, vocabulary and especially essay/creative writing. The area they are weakest in, is essay/creative writing. The evaluation reports issued by the Department of Examination on G.C.E. (O.L.) performance in English island-wide has cited the fact that the students’ inability to construct grammatically accurate sentences has been one of the main causes of the high rate of failure of the students at the G.C.E. (O.L.) Examination. A similar scenario is evident in the student cohort of the present study.

However it should be noted that the students who faced the diagnostic test are students who scored below 60% at the First Term test held in April 2017, and they are not high performing students.

Table 1. Overall performance of grades 6 -9 students’ at the diagnostic test

Grade	Number of students	Below 40%	Above 40%
Grade 6	49	46	03
Grade 7	70	63	07
Grade 8	22	16	06
Grade 9	22	22	-

Factors related to the areas of weakness in writing in English. The triangulation of data obtained through the questionnaire, diagnostic test, interviews with the ELT staff and focus group discussion with low performers and high achievers, revealed salient points that affect the performance in writing in English of the student cohort in the Junior Secondary Stage of this school, which will be elaborated in the next section.

### **Limited use and exposure to L2**

It could be concluded that the majority of the students in the sample do not speak in English at home, nor do they speak in English when they are in school and when given an opportunity to speak. The non-usage and limited use of L2 is not helpful to SLA. According to the Interactionist Approach as explained by Gass and Mackey (2014) the interactional “work” that occurs when a learner and his/her interlocutor (whether a native speaker or a more proficient learner) encounter some kind of communication breakdown is beneficial for L2 development.

Lack of basic knowledge in English grammar and poor creative writing skills

The outcome of the diagnostic test given to the students of grade 6,7,8 and 9 showed a very low standard in writing. Their knowledge of grammar, spelling and especially essay writing skills are at a very unsatisfactory standard.

### **Poor reading habits**

Another finding that emerged is that the majority of the student cohort do not read English book/novels, magazines or newspapers. Those who read, are reading books of lower level readers (age 6) where as these students are 12 to 14 years of age. As elaborated in the literature review, reading has a direct link to SLA and improving L2 writing (Krashen, 1984, 2013). The students’ lack of interest in reading has affected their skill in writing.

Their poor knowledge in English vocabulary is a major cause for poor

performance in writing especially essay/creative writing. The majority of the student cohort had not written the essay in the diagnostic test, which reveals their inability.

### **Motivation**

The lack of intrinsic motivation to learn English in the student cohort, may have affected their performance. As Gardner (1985) and Dörnyei (2014) who have done extensive research pointed out, motivation plays a key role in L2 performance. Dörnyei’s (1994) research expanded on L2 motivation on three levels i.e. the language level (integrative and instrumental subsystems), the learner level (individual motivational characteristics) and the learning situation level (situation specific motives relating to the course and social learning environment). In the present research, it was found that motivation at all three levels were not high amongst the student cohort.

### **Pedagogy**

It could be concluded that although the teachers are aware that the students have issues with vocabulary and grammar, they have not taken effective remedial measures to resolve the matter. Furthermore teacher feedback to the students is not sufficient and should be improved. It was observed that the teaching done in the classrooms are mostly teacher-centered and not learner-centered. The pedagogy used could be improved to develop the students’ performance in writing.

### **Non usage of successful learning strategies**

According to the responses to the questionnaire and focus group discussions, only a minority of the student cohort use successful learning strategies. It could be concluded that the majority of the students do not use effective learning strategies. Research has revealed using good learning strategies helps L2 development (Ellis, 2012).

### **Social factors**

The students come from economically poor homes and non-English speaking parents which is a disadvantage as such students' performance was not good. The students who are high achievers had access to private tuition teachers and had extra scaffolding in learning English and especially their parents are conversant in English as opposed to the low performers. The interviews with the teachers, sectional Head and Principal revealed that the students' impoverished home background had a detrimental effect on their performance in English.

### **Lack of audio-visual facilities**

It could be concluded that as the school under study lacked audio-visual facilities, it is a deterrent to L2 development. Even a CD player was not available for the English teachers to utilize when they teach English. Using audio-visual methods in teaching English promotes effective teaching and L2 development in the students. It could be said that the lack of facilities has affected the student cohorts' performance in English.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Create an 'English environment'**

The strategy followed by the school to create a conducive environment for improving the standard of teaching and learning process of English must be carried out rigorously. Instructions must be given to the teachers and students to conduct the morning assembly in English. The classrooms should be decked up with charts, motivational quotes in English language and the notice boards can carry information in English and L1 if required. The students' creations (posters, poems, stories, essays etc.) in English language should be displayed in the main office area in order to encourage students.

It must be made mandatory to speak in English during the English period and if

possible during other times too. Perhaps the students can be told that on two days of the week they are required to speak in English during the entire day. Speaking in English as much as they can and code switching can be permitted until the students learn to speak L2 very well. It is pertinent to conduct the annual English Day, essay writing competitions, handwriting, dictation and other competitions connected to English language. A public speaking competition, debate competition, Drama day in English would be extremely helpful to encourage and develop skills in English. Introducing a special prize for students who have improved remarkably in English during the year to be awarded at the Annual Awards day would encourage weak students to perform better.

### **Encourage reading**

Book-corners are to be established in every class as proposed by the teachers for students to read English books when they are free. The Library period must be made compulsory for the students and they should borrow English books. It is suggested that the teachers should introduce activities to make the students record (reading logs, journals) and other interesting activities for the students to do after they read books. According to Jeremy Harmer "Extensive reading (reading longer texts, such as simplified readers, for pleasure) helps students to remember English spelling rules and their exceptions." (Harmer, 2006, p.47). Krashen's (2013) research emphasizes on the benefits of reading (free voluntary reading in low anxiety environment) as a means of achieving higher competence in L2 writing.

### **Improving pedagogy**

Instructions/training to be given to the ELT staff on teaching methodology and techniques in order to develop the quality of their teaching. A resource room for English is to be established which should have audio visual facilities so that the



student could be brought to this room during their English period and be exposed to L2 by means of listening to English songs or even watching a movie, YouTube clips to develop English.

The teachers can make visual aids, language games, and other activities and create a teaching resource bank that could be shared amongst them and used in their daily teaching of English.

Harmer (2006) elaborates

“among the tasks which teachers have to perform before, during and after student writing include the following: ‘Demonstrating’ about conventions of writing, genre constraints in specific types of writing; ‘Motivating and provoking’ teachers can help provoking students into having ideas, enthusing them with the value of the task, and persuading them what fun it can be.; ‘Supporting’- Teachers need to be extremely supportive when students are writing in class.; ‘Responding’ Teachers can respond with comments on content and construction of the students writing; ‘Evaluating’ Teachers should get their students to look at the errors and correct/rewrite.” (Harmer, 2006, p 41)

According to Harmer (2006) ‘the mechanics of writing i.e. handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and the construction of well-formed sentences, paragraphs and texts should be taught. In order to improve students’ spelling in English the teachers can teach the students about spelling rules in the English language, homophones, affixes and prefixes etc.’ (Harmer, 2006).

“Music can be a very effective way to stimulate a writing activity since it often provokes strong feelings and ideas. There is a universality about music which means much of it is easy for everyone to understand” (Harmer, 2006, p 65) Harmer recommends using instrumental music for writing purposes.

As Wijesekera (2012) suggests using cooperative/ collaborative learning and group work will enhance the performance in writing of the students, thereby making the teaching learning process more successful.

### **Giving feedback**

When giving feedback avoiding negative feedback is recommended. According to Harmer (2006),

“the teacher plays several roles i.e. the teacher will be seen by the student as an examiner (students expect an evaluation); audience (responding to the ideas and perceptions expressed by the student); assistant (help the student); a resource (being available for information and guidance); evaluator (saying how the student has progressed); and an editor (helps the student to select and rearrange his/her writing)”. (Harmer, 2006, p.42)

Developing students’ learning strategies

The students should be supported to learn English and develop their learning strategies. Encouraging them to have their own vocabulary book is a good strategy to improve vocabulary. Learning vocabulary in context enables the student to remember the vocabulary. Listening to English language programmes on the radio/ watching television programmes in English should be advocated. Re-writing the assignments following the teacher corrections /instructions is an important way of correcting one’s errors. Using mind maps, planning and structuring the essay will improve writing. As Ellis (2012) elaborates, successful learners of L2 use effective learning strategies.

### **CONCLUSION**

It was concluded that the factors affecting the performance in writing of the student cohort are: limited use and exposure to L2; lack of basic knowledge in

English grammar and poor creative writing skills; poor reading habits; lack of motivation; pedagogy; non usage of successful learning strategies; social factors and lack of audio-visual facilities in the school. Recommendations to improve the student cohort's skill in writing in English are: create an 'English environment'; encourage reading; improving pedagogy; giving feedback and developing students' learning strategies. The researchers' suggestions and recommendations were given to the teachers of English and to the Principal of the school.

The teachers of English have a major responsibility in making their lessons interesting and effective and giving feedback. Furthermore the teachers should motivate the students to learn English, make them passionate learners and instill confidence in their potential to master the great Bard's language. As Napoleon Hill (1883-1970) the renowned American self-help author said, "Whatever the mind can conceive and believe, the mind can achieve." (Hill, 1992)

## REFERENCES

- Aljaafreh, A. and Lantolf, J.P. 1994. *Negative feedback as regulation and second language learning in the zone of proximal development. The Modern Language Journal*, 78, pp 465-483.
- Cameron, L. and Larson-Freeman, D. 2008. *Complex systems and Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chandler, J. 2003. *The efficacy of various kinds of error feedback for improvement in the accuracy and fluency of L2 student writing. Journal of Second Language Writing*
- Chomsky, N. 2005. *Three Factors in Language Design. Linguistic Inquiry*, 36(1), 1-22. Available at [www.jstor.org/stable/4179307](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4179307) (Accessed 18 January 2020)
- Circular No. 2006/09 March, 2006. Ministry of Education, Isurupaya Sri Lanka
- Dörnyei, Z. 1994. *Understanding L2 Motivation. On with the challenge! The Modern Language Journal*, 78..Pp.515-523
- Dörnyei, Z. and Csizér, K. 2002. *Some dynamics of language attitudes and motivation: Results of a longitudinal nationwide survey. Applied Linguistics*
- Dörnyei, Z. and Tseng, W.T. 2009. *Motivational processing in interactional tasks. In A. Mackey and C. Polio eds., Multiple perspectives on interaction. Second Language Research in honour of Susan M. Gass Mahwah. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Pp. 117-134.*
- Ellis, N. 2005. *At the interface: Dynamic interaction of explicit and implicit language knowledge. Studies in Second Language Acquisition*
- Ellis, R. 2012. *Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.*
- Ellis, N.C. and Larsen-Freeman, D. 2009. *Constructing a second language: Analyses and computational simulation of the emergence of linguistic construction from usage. Language learning English Language Evaluation Report - G.C.E. (O.L.) Examination – 2015. 2016. The Research and Development Branch National Evaluation and Testing Service Department of Examinations, Sri Lanka. Available at: [http://www.moe.gov.lk/english/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=822:research-and-development-unit&catid=351&Itemid=803](http://www.moe.gov.lk/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=822:research-and-development-unit&catid=351&Itemid=803) (Accessed 6 April 2017)*
- Frawley, F and Lantolf, J.P. 1985. *Second language discourse, A Vygotskyan perspective. Applied Linguistics.*
- Gardner, R.C. 1985. *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning. London: Edward Arnold.*
- Gass, S. M. & Mackey, A. 2007. *Input, interaction and output in Second*

- Language Acquisition. In B. VanPatten and J. Williams eds., *Theories in Second Language Acquisition*. An introduction. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Pp.175-200.
- Gass, S. M. & Mackey, A. eds.. 2014. *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge
- Gunasekera, M. 2010. *The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lanka English*. Colombo. Vijitha Yapa Publications.
- Gunawardena R.P. and Jayaweera S. et al 2016 *Envisioning Education for Human Development, Proposals for a National Policy Framework on General Education in Sri Lanka*. Sri Lanka: National Education Commission.
- G.C.E. (O.L.) Examination 2014 Performance of Candidates. (2015). *The Research and Development Branch National Evaluation and Testing Service Department of Examinations, Sri Lanka*. Available at: [https://www.doenets.lk/exam/docs/comm/2014%20\(OL\).pdf](https://www.doenets.lk/exam/docs/comm/2014%20(OL).pdf)
- Harmer, J. 2006. *How to Teach Writing*. India: Dorling Kindersley (Pvt.) Ltd
- Hill, N. 1992 *Think and Grow Rich : A Black choice* *Quotable quotes*. Available at : <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/77253-whatever-the-mind-can-conceive-and-believe-it-can-achieve> (Accessed 9 June 2019)
- Hyland, K., & Hyland, F. Eds. 2006. *Feedback in Second Language Writing, contexts and issues*. USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, D., & Roen, D.H. eds. 1989. *Richness in writing: Empowering ESL writers*. New York: Longman
- Krashen, S.D. 1984. *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Longman.
- Krashen, S. Lee, S (2002). *Predictors of success in writing in English as a foreign language: Reading, revision, behavior, apprehension and writing*. Available at: [http://sdrashen.com/content/articles/2002\\_predictors\\_of\\_success\\_in\\_english\\_writing.pdf](http://sdrashen.com/content/articles/2002_predictors_of_success_in_english_writing.pdf). (Accessed 30 April 2017)
- Krashen, S.D. 2003. *Dealing with English fever, Paper printed at the 12th International symposium on English Teaching*. Taipei, Taiwan.
- Krashen, S. 2013. *Access to Books and Time to Read versus the Common Core State Standards and Tests*. *The English Journal*, 103(2), 21-29. Available at: [www.jstor.org/stable/24484187](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24484187) (Accessed January 19, 2020)
- Lantolf, J.P. 2014. *Sociocultural theory – A dialectical approach to L2 research*. In Gass, S. M. & Mackey, A. eds.. *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge. Pp. 57-68).
- Larsen-Freeman, D. 1997. *Chaos /complexity science and Second Language Acquisition*. *Applied Linguistics*
- Larsen-Freeman, D. 2014. *Complexity Theory*. In Gass, S. M. & Mackey, A. Eds.. *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge. Pp . 73-84.
- Loewen, S. 2014. *The role of feedback*. In Gass, S. M. & Mackey, A. eds.. *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge. Pp . 24-40.
- Mackey, A., Abuhji, R. and Gass, S.M. 2014. *Interactionist approach*. In Gass, S. M. & Mackey, A. eds.. *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge. Pp . 7-23.
- Mackey, A. and Goo, J. 2007. *Interaction Research in SLA: A meta-analysis and research synthesis*. In A. Mackey, ed.. *Conversational interaction in Second Language acquisition/Oxford : Oxford University Press*. Pp 433-464.

- Makulloluwa, K.E.A. 2012. *Developing a Motivated Learner through Self-Correction*. In Walisundara, D., & Jayasinghe, C., (Eds.). *Two Hundred Years of English Language Use in Sri Lanka: Trajectories of Language, Literature and Pedagogy*. Selected papers from the 6th Annual Conference of the Sri Lanka English Language Teachers' Association. Colombo, Sri Lanka: The Sri Lanka English Teachers' Association (SLELTA). Pp 115-124.
- National Education Commission. 2003 *New Education Act for General Education in Sri Lanka. Context, issues and Proposals, Final Report*. Nugegoda, Sri Lanka: National Education Commission
- National Education Commission. 2003. *Raising the Quality of Education. Proposals for a National Policy on General Education in Sri Lanka*. Nugegoda, Sri Lanka: National Education Commission.
- Perera, M. 2010. *Coping with student heterogeneity in the English language classroom: An action research*. Colombo: National Education Commission. Available at: <http://nec.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/plproblemsi-n-teachingenglish-full-report.pdf>. (Accessed 30 January 2018)
- Polio, C. 2014. *The acquisition of second language writing*. In Gass, S. M. & Mackey, A. eds.. *Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge. Pp . 319-329
- Sa'ad, T.U., and Usman, R., 2014. *The Causes of Poor Performance in English Language among Senior Secondary School Students in Dutse Metropolis of Jigawa State, Nigeria* Available at: <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jrme/papers/Vol-4%20Issue-5/Version-6/G04564147.pdf> (Accessed 25 December 2017)
- Stake, R.E. 2000. *Case Studies*. In Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. eds.. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, California: Stage Pub.Inc.. Pp 435-454.
- Teachers' Guide English -Grade 06. 2014. *National Institute of Education Department of English*. National Institute of Education Mahragama. Available at: [www.nie.lk](http://www.nie.lk) (Accessed 18 January 2020)
- Ushioda, E. and Dörnyei, Z. 2014. *Motivation*. In Gass, S. M. & Mackey, A. eds.. *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge. Pp .396-406.
- Weigle, S.C. 2002. *Assessing Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wijesekara, H. D. 2012. *Improving the Product through Process Using cooperative group tasks to improve accuracy in L2 writing of ESL students*. In Walisundara, D., & Jayasinghe, C., eds. *Two Hundred Years of English Language Use in Sri Lanka: Trajectories of Language, Literature and Pedagogy*. Selected papers from the 6th Annual Conference of the Sri Lanka English Language Teachers' Association. Colombo, Sri Lanka: The Sri Lanka English Teachers' Association (SLELTA). Pp 93-112.
- Wijesuriya, G.E. 2004. *Sectorial Review of General Education, the GCE Ordinary Level and GCE Advanced Level Examinations*. Study series No.15 Narahenpita: National Education Commission Sri Lanka. P 27