Chapter 1

The Multiple Meanings of Motivation to Write

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Although over the past three decades motivational research, on the one hand, and writing research, on the other, have greatly developed, studies on the motivational aspects of writing are relatively recent. This introductory chapter is aimed at highlighting the motivational variables that have been particularly investigated in their relations to writing: in particular, interest, self-efficacy, and self-regulation. The motivational implications of the socio-constructivist approach to writing are also underlined. At the end of the chapter, the organization of the volume is presented.

There are two questions that language skills teachers frequently pose to writing researchers. First, why are students so often not motivated to write? Second, how can their motivation to write be increased? This volume that, as far as we know, is the first book which exclusively deals with motivational aspects of academic writing, addresses these questions from different theoretical approaches and perspectives. The diversity of the chapters reflects the state of the art of a developing field that in the future may become more integrated.

The introductory chapter has three objectives. The first one is to clarify how motivation and writing are conceptualized and to examine their relationship. As both constructs have multiple meanings, we have focused on the aspects of motivation and the types and contexts of writing that are relevant for student’s positive or negative attitudes to writing. The second objective is to outline the main research areas in which the relationships of motivation and writing are currently investigated, and in which the chapters of the volume are framed. Finally, the organization of the book is presented.

1 Motivation and Writing: What Relations?

Motivation is so broad a research field that it is difficult to analyze its various aspects. A useful way of organizing the variety of motivational constructs is by referring to the three

main areas into which recent motivational research can be divided (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002b), and considering how each area may be related to writing. The first area regards the motives – e.g., goal orientation (mastery vs. performance vs. avoidance goals), needs, values, interests – which activate a student’s behavior. In relation to writing, it can be exemplified by a middle school student’s interest in exposing his/her ideas on a relevant topic in written form, or a novelist’s intention to narrate an involving story. In contrast, the novelist’s lack of motivation to write is probably different from a middle school student’s negative attitude toward the composition assigned by the teacher. However, in both cases the writers have an orientation to write, or not to write. A second area regards the writer’s perceptions of his/her ability to write in relation to the difficulty of the task and the resources of the context. Again, a novelist’s concern with critics’ comments and audience response to his/her work is probably different from a student’s concern with his/her teacher’s evaluation. Both writers, however, have positive or negative representations of themselves as writers. Such representations include self-efficacy, self-concept, and self-perceptions of competence. Finally, both professional and student writers, when dealing with a demanding task, try to manage it by using various, more or less productive strategies: from planning time, to adopting metacognitive tools, to resisting the temptation of giving up writing. That is, they regulate their cognition, affect and behavior to achieve the objective of a demanding writing task. As motivational researchers have often underlined (e.g., Hidi, Berndorff, & Ainley, 2002; Pajares, Britner, & Valiante, 2000; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1999), these areas are rarely, if ever, separate from one another. The “will” (or lack of will) to write is closely connected to a writer’s self-perception of ability, as well as to the ways and tools he or she can adopt for self-regulating. For instance, in a recent intervention study Hidi et al. (2002) found that 6th graders’ general interest in writing and liking and self-efficacy of writing several text types were closely related both before and after the intervention, thus suggesting that these variables develop in concert and may have reciprocal influences on each other.

Not only is motivation a construct with multiple meanings, but also the conceptualization of writing is complex. Psychological research on writing over the past three decades has developed by elaborating and integrating contributions from various theoretical approaches to literacy, from information processing to literary theory to social constructivism. This research did not produce a unitary conceptualization of writing. Cognitively oriented scholars view writing as interrelated processes of different levels of complexity (e.g., Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Collins & Gentner, 1980; Graham & Harris, 1989a; Harris & Graham, 1992, 1996; Hayes, 1996; Hayes & Flower, 1980), whereas the approach of social constructivism emphasizes the connections of writing activities – practices, not processes – with the social and cultural contexts in which people are “motivated” to write (e.g., Engler, 1992; Hiebert, 1994; Nelson & Calfee, 1998; Spivey, 1997). In general, these different perspectives on writing have not placed particular emphasis on the motivational aspects of the activity. However, through analyses of the processes and functions of writing, they have highlighted two main potentially de-motivating features of academic writing which help answer our first question: Why are students so often not motivated to write?

A major contribution towards understanding students’ lack of motivation to write comes from studies, mainly from a cognitive approach, that have shown the complexity of writing