

The Effect of General and Specific Topics on Writing Performance of EFL students

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study exploring the effect of topical knowledge on writing performance of EFL students. A total of 158 accounting students of Islamic Azad University of Hamadan Branch in two levels of proficiency, intermediate and advanced, participated in this study. They were voluntarily participated in an English Learning Program provided by Islamic Azad University. At the end of the program, each student was required to write two essays: one that requires general knowledge of students about their opinion on continuing their education in university and the other that requires them to use their specific knowledge and write about preparing of balance sheet in accounting. After the results were manifested, writing on the specific topic yielded lower scores on accuracy, poor organization, and weak idea development and concluding paragraph. In this research there was an interview with students to figure out about their opinion of these two prompts. 10 students participated in this interview who were all agree that the prompt that required them to use specific knowledge of their major was much more challenging than the general prompt. This research results show the importance of preparing and developing appropriate prompts for EFL writing tests.

Keywords: Topical knowledge, writing skill; general topic; specific knowledge

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing debate on the choosing of the effective writing topic on writing assessing. This method of topical knowledge causes this controversial subject to be wider. Carlson and Birdgen (1986) stated that "the content implied by the topic must be as fair as possible, not a purely specific set of personal or cultural experiences" (p. 139). This statement is to some extent straightforward with regard to the importance of topic as a variable that potentially influence writing. As He and Shi (2012) stated "topic assigned in an essay test demand particular attention because they initiate and direct the act of writing that produce sample for evaluation." In the context of the classroom, there is always students complaining about the subjects, topics, or prompts in the writing classrooms. These complaints baffled writing teachers on how to select a prompt in their writing classroom that students be able to write about it. In this case this quantitative- qualitative research is going to explore its investigation on the relationship between two different types of topics: general topic in which general knowledge is necessary and specific topic in which some specific aspects of knowledge in a

specific field is necessary. This study explores the writing performance of 158 accounting students; both have knowledge about accounting and general view of general topic.

1. 1. Review of Literature

According to Bachman and Palmer (1996) “only will the interaction of one’s prior knowledge can we make inference about the language ability of the test takers”. This statement is quite in the same pave with what Alexander and Schallert (1991) defined as topical knowledge “the interaction between ones prior knowledge and the content of specific passage”. The main point in the statements of these scholars is that it is to a great extent difficult to evaluate ones language proficiency based on the test that belongs to a specific culture, content or topical contents.

In 1982, Winfield and Barnes conducted a study on comparing the effect of culturally familiar and unfamiliar material on the writing of students from intermediate level in the ESL classes. In that study half of participants were Spanish speaking and others were from different language backgrounds. Before starting to write, two thematic passages were read by the participants; one all about Spanish language in which students had greater knowledge and one about Japanese language in which participants had very little knowledge. The provided materials, then, were taken away and students were required to write about what they learnt from the materials. In a comparison with the non-native speaker, native speaker of Spanish writings were much more fluent and with fewer grammatical errors. The findings of this research indicated that topic familiarity will increase the ability of performing on writing tests.

In another research, Tedick (1990) had an investigation on the effect of topical knowledge that focused on subject matter areas. He compared students written essays with writing on a general and a field – related topics. The participants of the study were graduate students enrolled in composition courses at different levels: beginning, intermediate, and advanced in a university ESL program. The investigation showed that all proficiency levels yielded significantly better performance on writing in field specific topics. According to Tedick, field specific topic better in discriminating among groups with different writing proficiencies.

In 2007, Lee and Anderson like Tedick did their investigation on a gradate group who possessed topical knowledge based on their major. They investigated topic generality of a writing placement tests by rotating three subject specific topics integrated with listening and reading sources. In this continual study, over six years the writing performance of the students was recorded in total contrast with that of Tedick, subject specific did not favour test takers with matching department affiliation. On this account, the probability of getting lower scores decreased as writers proficiency level increase, so it was suggested that general knowledge of language competence might have played a more significant role than topical knowledge in the integrated test involved reading and writing.

He and Shi (2003) who focused on test takers’ point of view, He and Shi (2008) compared ESL students’ perceptions and experiences of two standardized English writing tests: the Test of Written English (TWE) in TOEFL and the essay task in the LPI. In western Canada, the TWE is used as a university entrance test for international students who speak English as a second or foreign language, whereas the LPI is required, in many post-secondary institutions, for these students to register for the compulsory first-year English courses. As international students, all participants in the study had passed the TWE but many had taken the LPI repeatedly before passing it. All participants complained about the cultural bias of essay prompts or topics in the LPI such as ‘Road rage in Vancouver,’ ‘Pride of being a Canadian citizen’ and ‘Divorce rate in North America.’ These complaints raised questions about the validity of the test. The

researchers called for further investigations to address issues of fairness and equity in L2 writing assessment.

He and Shi (2012) conducted a research on the importance of topical or prior knowledge in ESL writing. Conducted in a Canadian college, the study involved 50 ESL students across three English proficiency levels. The students responded to two sample prompts of the LPI, a standardized English proficiency test with an impromptu essay task. One prompt required general knowledge about university studies, and the other required specific knowledge about federal politics. Since students' perceptions of task difficulty may help explain their task performances (Robinson, 2001), they conducted follow-up interviews to explore students' perceptions of their writing experiences with the two prompts.

This research aims to add to remove some of the previously conducted research and explore how topical knowledge can have effect on the writing performance of an EFL context. In this regard, we are investigating two levels of proficiency, intermediate and advanced. This study is going to investigate the following questions:

1. Do EFL students across different proficiency levels perform differently in term of overall and component scores when regarding the prompt requiring general and on the other side prompts that require specific knowledge?
2. What are the participants' ideas and perceptions toward the two different prompts?

2. METHOD

2. 1. Participant

A total of 158 EFL students of Azad University Branch of Hamedan, all male and ranging in age from 18 to 23 years participated in this experimental study. It should be stated that they are all originally Iranian and Persian as their first language. They were all accounting students and participated in an English Learning Program that was provided by the university for them. In their specific majors, they were in semester 4th, 5th, 6th, the participant were recruited to voluntary participate in a writing skill training program at Azad University. Prior to this program a test had been taken among 158 students and according to result 78 students ranked as low advanced EFL writers, 80 students ranked at intermediate levels and others ranked as in beginner level of proficiency. Due to the purpose of this research we decided to just investigate on advanced and intermediate students. These participants divided into 6 classes in each of them teachers work on both general topics and specific ones while they were working with students' writing. The program took two months, in which student participated in 16 sessions.

2. 2. Materials

2. 2. 1. Writing Prompts

Prior to the final test of writing in the program, a pilot study was conducted to define two types of prompts that require different type topical knowledge. A group of 20 students participated in the pilot study. They were given 30 topics. They were asked to select the easiest and the hardest topics. The results indicated that 94% of participants agreed that writing about continuing higher education in the university as an easy prompt to write about. On the other hand, 98 % of the participants selected writing about balance sheet as a tough to write about.

Prompt A: What's your consideration about continuing your higher education in the University

Prompt B: As a student of BA in Accounting, write about how is preparing a balance sheet.

This two prompts were administrated in the final exam. It should be stated that there were two sessions for exam, in one, students wrote about the general prompt and in the other one they wrote about the specific prompts. In order for encouraging students to write as much as they can there was no time limitation in the exam.

2. 2. 2. Scoring Procedure

This paper followed its scoring procedure of what He and Shi used. We extracted a table of six point rating scale which was analytic from their research. The components of the table as you can see in table 1 are content, organization, and language.

Table 1. Six-point analytic rating scale (Extracted from He and Shi 2012).

Components and scoring	Indicators	Definitions/foci	Rating ^a					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
Content (Average of the four indicator scores)	Idea quality	Relevance, originality and depth of ideas						
	Exposition	Thesis statement and position taken						
	Idea development	Topic sentence and supporting details						
	Idea wrap-up	Summary of main ideas						
Organization		Logical thinking (coherence) and transitions within and between sentences/ paragraphs (cohesion)						
Language (Average of Length the three indicator scores) Prior to the calculation of the component score, each raw indicator score was converted to 6-point scale.		Total number of words	Calculated by the first author					
	Accuracy	Percentage of error-free T-units of the total number of T-units in each essay	Errors underlined and T-units identified by the raters. Percentage of error-free T-units calculated by the first author					
	Academic words	Percentage of academic words of the total number of words in each essay	Frequency of academic words calculated by using anonline software program Percentage of academic words calculated by the first author					

Note: *0 = Cannot be evaluated; 1 = No proficiency; 2 = Minimal; 3 = Developing; 4 = Adequate; 5 = Effective; 6 = Advanced.

This rating scale had six levels from the lowest 0 to the highest 6. Four nonnative writing teacher were required to rate these essays. Pearson Correlation Coefficient of the four teachers were higher than .83 ($r > .83$) about .86.

2. 2. 3. Test

SPSS version 16 had been used in order to increase the analysis accuracy. Three main tests had been conducted in this investigation. First descriptive statistics were drawn, then a pair sample t-test was conducted to find out about the students over all writing scores on the two prompts across different proficiency levels, and finally a series of 3×2 ANOVA were conducted to identify the main effects and interactions of two proficiency levels and two prompts on the writing performance.

2. 2. 4. Interview

In order to verify the quantitative finding based on the writing scores, an interview had been held with 12 participants. They were asked to speak about 10 minutes about their writing experience in both the general prompts and the specific one. It was interesting that 10 participants confessed that writing about preparing Balance Sheet was tremendous hard although they had lots of study about that in their courses. On the other hand all 12 students agreed that writing about general topic was much easier even though they wrote about this prompt for the first time.

2. 3. Procedure

Azad university branch of Hamedan had an English Language Learning Program for the students of 4th, 5th, 6th, semester in all majors. In winter of 2013, the university had registered students to participate in this program. After the first phase had done, students went through proficiency test to be ranked as different levels of proficiency. In this case, the proficiency test was a moderated version of IELTS test. After the result made the students level of proficiency known, students were placed in the different classes. In this program students worked on the four different skills of language learning: Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing. The teachers who were responsible for teaching in this program were all nonnative yet experienced. In the writing classroom they taught different strategies of writing and involved students to write about specific and general prompts. Students were required to mail their essays to their teachers to do correction and to give comments on their writings. To some great extent, it was like portfolio writing in which students got not only corrective feedback from their teacher but also mark for what they wrote. In the final of the program, students had two tests one in which they were required to write about a general prompt:

Prompt A: What's your consideration about continuing your higher education in the university?

This requires students to use all their background knowledge and their general knowledge about the world. On the other hand students were asked to write about a specific prompt:

Prompt B: As a student of BA in Accounting, write about how is preparing a balance sheet. In which they had to stick to their specific knowledge about Accounting which was their major. Time limitation was removed to encourage students write as much as they could. A word processor had shown that the average of students writing in this study were about 350 words.

3. RESULT

Students across both groups of proficiency showed higher overall writing scores for the Prompt A in which they should write about a general topic than the other prompt in which they wrote about a specific topic which required them to use specific knowledge. The mean score

for Prompt A in intermediate and advanced participants was 1.24 and 3.95 respectively in comparison with Prompt B in those levels of proficiency which was 0.52 and 3.01 respectively. The comparison shows that students have a better performance in writings which required general knowledge of students. Table 2 illustrates Descriptive statistics.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Both Prompts in different Proficiency levels.

Proficiency Level	N	Prompt A		Prompt B	
		M	SD	M	SD
Intermediate	80	1.24	0.53	0.52	0.54
Advanced	78	3.95	0.34	3.01	1.02
All 2 Levels	158	2.59	0.43	1.76	0.53

The overall mean score is another proof for students' better performance on the first Prompt. For Prompt A it is 2.59 while the amount for Prompt B is 1.76. This shows that students in the both proficiency levels did better in their writing when the required knowledge is general.

On the other hand, the results of the 3×2 univariate ANOVA showed statistically significant main effects for proficiency level ($F(2, 45) = 124.24, p < .05$) and prompt type ($F(1, 45) = 124.24, p < .05$), as well as a significant interaction across different proficiency levels ($F(2, 47) = 5.47, p > .05$) (Table 4). A post hoc Tukey b analysis detected main effects of prompts on the overall writing score for all pairwise comparisons across proficiency levels ($p < .05$). These findings indicate an association between topical knowledge and L2 writing across all proficiency levels. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3. 3×2 Analysis of Variance for Overall Writing Scores.

Source	df	F	η^2	P
Between subjects				
Proficiency Levels	2	57.75	.68	.001
Error	45	.88		
Within Subjects				
Prompts	1	124.47	.74	.001
Proficiency \times Prompts	2	5.47	.22	.02
Error(Prompts)	45	.4		

Table 4 shows the summary of component scores across different level of proficiencies.

Table 4. Summary of Component Scores.

Types of scores	Proficiency Levels	No. of Participant	Prompt A		Prompt B	
			M	SD	M	SD
Content	Intermediate	80	3.01	0.62	2.23	1.11
	Advanced	78	4.38	0.31	2.99	1.42
	All 2 Levels	158	3.69	0.46	2.61	1.26
Organization	Intermediate	80	3.21	0.56	2.15	1.17
	Advanced	78	4.24	0.47	3.02	1.42
	All 2 Levels	158	3.72	0.51	2.58	1.29
Language	Intermediate	80	3.30	0.88	0.91	0.62
	Advanced	78	4.08	0.71	1.00	0.76
	All 2 Levels	158	3.69	0.79	0.95	0.69

The main components types of scores in this research study were Content, Organization, and Language. According to Table 5, in regard to Prompt A, in which students had to write about a general topic has recorded higher mean scores according to three types of scores: content, organization, and language. The overall mean score of the two levels of proficiency with Prompt A in content score is 3.69 in comparison with Prompt B 2.61. In the other side, organization types of score recorded 3.72 in the two levels of proficiency in comparison to Prompt B in which students recorded mean score of 2.58. Language as another types of score recorded mean score 3.69 in all two levels of proficiency with regard to Prompt A while on the other side of coin language type of scoring recorded 0.95 in the all two levels of proficiency with regard to Prompt B. In this point, it is clear that when writing about general Prompts students tend to perform better in different components of scoring.

These components as can be divided to some subcomponents can be discussed in their own place. Inspired by what Leal and Smith (2012) did, in this study we divided these components to some subcomponents. See the results of Table 5 more provable. In this regard, Content and Organization will be divided into Idea Quality, Position Taking, Idea Development, and Idea Wrap-up; and Language will be divided into Length, Accuracy, and Using Academic Words. Table 5 illustrates what scores students got with regard to this categorization.

Table 5. Summary of seven indicator scores in content and language.

Components	Indicators	Proficiency	No. of Participants	Prompt A		Prompt B	
				M	SD	M	SD
Content	Idea Quality	Intermediate	80	3.21	0.38	2.50	1.02
		Advanced	78	4.51	0.42	3.40	1.62
		All 2 Levels	158	3.86	0.4	2.95	1.32
	Position Taking	Intermediate	80	3.24	0.45	2.42	1.12
		Advanced	78	4.21	0.30	3.12	1.45
		All 2 Levels	158	3.725	0.375	2.77	1.285
	Idea Development	Intermediate	80	3.17	0.64	2.41	1.20
		Advanced	78	4.54	0.40	3.02	1.40

		All 2 Levels	158	3.855	0.52	2.715	1.3
	Idea Wrap-up	Intermediate	80	2.42	1.01	1.60	1.12
		Advanced	78	4.28	0.54	2.45	1.22
Language	Length	All 2 Levels	158	3.35	0.775	2.025	1.17
		Intermediate	80	2.62	1.10	1.40	0.86
		Advanced	78	3.14	0.84	1.25	0.95
	Accuracy	All 2 Levels	158	2.88	0.97	1.325	0.905
		Intermediate	80	3.86	0.80	0.25	0.75
		Advanced	78	4.59	0.65	0.52	0.15
	Academic Words	All 2 Levels	158	4.225	0.725	0.5	0.145
		Intermediate	80	3.44	0.75	1.10	0.85
		Advanced	78	4.52	0.5	1.25	1.20
		All 2 Levels	158	3.95	0.7	1.175	1.03

Table 5 is quite comprehensive with regard to categorization of different components. As the figures in the table illustrate, the All 2 Levels which is the sum of each subcomponent in a component, for the Prompt A is more than these components for the Prompt B. Now, one can consider that while writing in general topics, students has better performance in their writing based on Content, Organization, and Language.

The first question of this research was “Do EFL students across different proficiency levels perform differently in term of overall and component scores when regarding the prompts requiring general and on the other side prompts that require specific knowledge?” that based on the obtained results we can say that students of EFL context who are across different level of proficiency do better on the prompt that requires their general knowledge about the topic. This better performance exist both in regard to overall score and when it is considered with component scores.

3. 1. Students' Perception

The second research question was “What are the participants' ideas and perceptions toward the two different prompts?” for answering this research question after the final test, there was an interview on how students feel about the two prompts. They were asked to declare their attitudes about their feeling about their writing event. All 24 students said that Prompt A was quite easy for them when they wrote about it and at the moment of writing about this prompt they just thought about their neatness of their writing and not what is the topic. They stated that they thought they had good bunch of knowledge about Prompt A and they didn't have any sense of uneasiness in the test time. On the other hand they all had the feeling of confusion when they were asked how was the other prompt (Prompt B) for you. Again all 24 students declared that it was quite tough and they had the feeling of uneasiness toward the topic.

Among their takings it was concluded that at the moment of writing time they just thought about the topic and what is it all about and not about the writing components such as Content, Language, and Organization. One of them asserted that when the test was administered I thought that it is going with our courses in Accounting and for several minutes I just backed all those units I studied about preparing Balance Sheet, but unfortunately there

were no release in my mind. The other said that although we are the students of accounting it is not fair to write about the components of it because we are not the master of all part of it. The results of students' interview cleared this fact that the most important barrier for them in writing about the specific topic was their lack of knowledge in that matter.

Among their takings something else could be found. They said that they didn't have the needed vocabulary to use in their writing. Vocabulary as an important component of language learning in general and language writing in particular should be learnt in the first to help further improvement in language learning skills. It is logical that even if a person has some good ideas about a topic but does not have the necessary vocabularies to elaborate those good ideas the phenomena of writing will be due to nothing. It can be mention that EFL students in different majors just study the very beginning stage of their major in second language and it is not enough to formulate a writing text about it.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of the present study confirm that students perform better on the topics of writing in which they are required the general knowledge, thus supporting the findings of previously conducted research (He and Shi, 2012; Winnef and Bahar Felfeli, 1982; Fox, 2003; Fox, Graves, & Shohamy, 1999). According to the findings of this research students who were studying Accounting as a university major did better in the general prompt which was about their consideration of continuing higher education than the other Prompt in which students were asked to write about the preparing Balance Sheet.

As He and Shi stated(2012) when a prompt required students to challenge with specific knowledge "reflects construct-irrelevant variability" challenging L2 writers with a topical knowledge that they did not possess and, thereby, causing notably lower scores across all proficiency levels than on the general task which gave them greater opportunity to display their ability". In this regard, students were obliged to consider more about the topic and its aspects and not the writing itself, so the quality of their writing with regard to three main components: Content, Organization, and Language would drop.

It is important to note that the findings of this study are in accordance with EFL context in which students write for the purpose of foreign language and not second language. The other matter is in this study we conducted our test on two advanced and intermediate level so further research should be done to see the effect of topical knowledge on basic level of proficiency.

The pedagogical implication of the findings of this research for language test planners is that when they announce a topic to gauge students writing ability proficiency, they have to consider the essence of the topic in order not to leave students with the confusing of topic.

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