The Effect of Topic Selection on EFL Students’ Writing Performance

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Abstract
The present study aimed at measuring the effect of topic selection on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students’ writing performance. To this end, a quasi-experimental design was used in the study. Topic selection was considered as the independent variable and the students’ writing performance as the dependent variable. A total of 30 students were selected based on their performance on the placement test administered initially and then randomly assigned into two groups, self-selected topic group (SST) and teacher-assigned topic group (TAT). An independent-samples t test was conducted to compare the scores for the two groups. Findings of the study indicated a significant difference in the performance of the students who wrote on their self-selected topics ($M = 34.53, SD = 3.32$) and for those who wrote on a teacher-assigned topic, $M = 26.53, SD = 5.24$, $t(28) = 4.98$. The magnitude of the difference in the means was large ($\eta^2 = .46$).

Keywords
topic selection, self-selected topic, teacher-assigned topic, EFL writing

Introduction

Self-Selected Material
Drawing on the theory of reasoned action, developed and put forward by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), actions can be determined by intentions that are influenced by attitudes and social norms. In other words, attitudes are influential in shaping peoples’ behavior. Applied to the field of language education, it can be postulated that identifying students’ perceptions and attitudes toward material selection and even any other pedagogical issues would have beneficial outcomes for enhancing language education.

Considering the fact that the goal of writing instruction is to encourage learners to communicate effectively, through writing, it is of importance to find out why some learners are reluctant to get involved in writing activities in the classrooms. Such reluctance, which might be attributed to their perceptions and attitudes, usually makes learners lose their interest in writing. Gradually, they would come to the conclusion that they are not able to make any progress in their writing classes. The problem is serious in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting where there is little exposure to the target language outside the classroom. Generally, in line with the theory of reasoned action, research in education suggests that student perceptions and attitudes toward a subject lead to academic success (Popham, 2005; Royster, Kimharris, & Schoeps, 1999). Thus, due attention should be paid to the effect of students’ perceptions and attitudes toward their classroom writing.

The issue of self-selected materials has always been associated with the concept of choice making. Earlier studies on behavioral psychology have indicated that providing a choice of academic task usually affects students’ classroom engagement (Cosden, Gannon, & Haring, 1995; Flowerday & Schraw, 2000). Reviewing the history of research on interest and summarizing recent empirical work, Schraw, Flowerday, and Lehman (2001) described three ways to increase interest based on offering meaningful choices to students, selecting well-organized texts that promote interest, and providing background knowledge needed to fully understand a topic. They further concluded that less-knowledgeable or less-self-regulated students should be helped to make choices.

Self-selection in language teaching has been traditionally discussed mostly from the perspective of teaching language skills, namely, reading, speaking, and writing. Elaborating on the importance of self-selection, Sewell (2003) argued that “allowing students to self-select their books results in more involvement and thus more motivation to read” (p. 5).

In the same vein, Kragler (2000) postulated that “self-selection allows students more latitude to be deeply involved with the learning process, thus fostering an interest in, as well as developing an ownership of the reading process” (p. 4). Furthermore, referring to the role of self-selection in promoting critical thinking, Carroll (1997) claimed that through a balanced literacy program that emphasizes self-selection, readers are encouraged to develop more critical

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thinking skills. For her “self-selection prompts students to reach for more challenging books, and further, they reread them out of interest” (p. 6).

**Self-selection and reading skill.** Based on the above-mentioned postulations, scholars conducted some researches addressing the issue of self-selection in teaching reading skill. Edmunds and Bauserman (2006), for instance, interviewed 16 fourth-grade students to find what motivated them to read. The authors came to the conclusion that “one way to increase children’s desire to read is to let them choose their own books” (p. 420).

Through a qualitative study, Threadkell (2010) investigated the differences between students’ perceptions of teacher-assigned and self-selected literature. His findings indicated that the students were more motivated to read when permitted to select their own texts. Students also seemed to gain a greater understanding of content when reading self-selected material. However, the study participants also spoke positively about certain teacher-assigned books, indicating that quality reading materials with high-interest content may take priority over choice.

On the whole, the reviewed research on the issue of self-selection and reading skill indicated the importance of self-selection in enhancing EFL students’ reading skill.

**Self-selection and speaking skill.** The interface between self-selection and students’ speaking skill has been the other perspective investigated by scholars. Focusing on developing discussion skills in EFL classes, Green, Christopher, and Lam (1997) argued that the use of a learner-centered and cognitive approach, which allowed students to choose and organize their own topics, was likely to produce more positive results for both learner and teacher. In the same vein, Ellis (1990), referring to the importance of topic selection in students’ oral production, offered some evidence to support the notion that acquisition is enhanced when teachers allow students relatively free choice of topic.

Addressing the issue of discussion topic selection, Wolf (2013) explored and contrasted students’ perceptions of a body of discussion topics assigned in Japanese EFL textbooks with their perceptions of their own self-selected discussion topics. The researcher also aimed at exploring whether students’ confidence in discussion varies in relation to textbook-assigned and self-selected topics. Eliciting students’ self-selected topics through an argumentative essay assignment and administering a 5-point Likert-type scale for collecting and students’ perceptions and confidence, the researcher found that the students had significantly greater perceptions of knowledge about and interest in discussing their own topics. Furthermore, the study indicated that the students reported more confidence for discussing their own topics. The study concluded that it was more sensible to have students select their own topics.

Generally, the studies on the interface between self-selection and oral production of students indicated the importance of self-selection in improving students’ oral performance.

**Self-selection and writing skill.** Although the issue of self-selection has been discussed in teaching reading skills, in rare cases, however, some studies focused on the issue of topic selection in writing skill. Although some teachers might raise questions that indicate a deep rooted concern as to whether a steady diet of self-selection will result in competence that transfers to other writing tasks, many teachers firmly committed to the idea that students’ writings should be based on self-selected topics as suggested by Graves (1981) and others. Atwell (1998), for instance, included self-selection of topics and a sense of ownership as important elements of student writing. In the same vein, Read (2005) claimed that “given appropriate instruction in the skills of writing and a topic that they have chosen and find interesting, young students are fully capable of dealing with the complex problems that occur when reading and writing informational texts” (p. 44).

Gradwohl and Scumacher (1989) compared the level of children’s knowledge on topics they wanted to write about (want topics), on topics they did not want to write about (don’t-want topics), and on topics the teacher chose (teacher topics). The results of their study indicated that students had significantly more knowledge on the want topics than on the teacher topics. They claimed that their findings demonstrated the significant role of content knowledge on the writing process and topic choice adding support to students’ self-selection of writing topics.

In an experimental study, Bonzo (2008) investigated the effect of topic selection (teacher-selected topics vs. student-selected topics) on participants’ fluency in writing. ANOVA results of the study indicated that topic selection did influence the overall fluency (as measured with a general fluency index) of students’ writing when they selected their own topics. Participants also produced a higher ratio of different words to total words when they chose their own topics than when the topics were assigned to them. The findings of the study, furthermore, indicated a strong significant correlation between fluency and grammatical complexity.

Later on, Leblanc and Fujieda (2012) in an effort to examine the effect of topic selection on the writings of university-level Japanese EFL learners conducted a quasi-experimental research measuring the lexical variation of the students’ writing through a type-token formula. Results from the statistical analysis indicated that topics selected by the readers had a positive effect by increasing lexical variation in the text samples collected in a 10-min-writing task. The researcher concluded that topic autonomy can therefore help learners explore the range of their vocabulary size in producing language, which may otherwise not be utilized in teacher-selected writing tasks.
Implementing a qualitative approach, Bonyadi, Zeinalpur, and Reimany (2013) explored EFL students’ perceptions toward self-selected and teacher-assigned topics in their writing classes. This study used a certain form of data collection, self-written reports, written by EFL adult students (N = 30), reflecting their own perceptions on the issue. The findings of the study revealed that students, generally, perceived to be more motivated and encouraged to write when they are granted the right to choose their own selected topic in their EFL writing classes. However, a small number of participated students expressed their positive perceptions toward teacher-assigned topics. As implication of their study, the authors concluded that an understanding of the differences among students’ perceptions toward topic selection in writing would assist the EFL teachers in creating flexible instructional strategies. In other words, they argued, the writing instructors should try to tailor topic selection to the perceptions of the students by giving them the chance either to take their own favorite topic or the one suggested by their writing teachers.

It has been also argued that self-selected topics usually make fewer demands on students’ processing capacity because students are likely to select familiar topics. In fact, the best way for improving students’ writing has been to involve students in expressive writing activities such as journal writing or personal narratives, or to allow them to choose their own writing topics (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982).

On the whole, studies on self-selection and writing skill suggest that there are some good arguments for students selecting their own topics and teachers avoiding the use of prompts. Teachers at times might advocate for students to write about what they deem important in their own lives and they believe that this will direct the writing curriculum in classrooms.

This review of literature has indicated that the issue of topic selection has been addressed from different perspectives. It has been studied in field of educational psychology under the guise of choice making. Based on these studies, less-knowledgeable or less-self-regulated learners should be helped to make choices. The other trend in research on topic selection focused on the role of topic selection in teaching reading, speaking, and writing skill. These studies concluded that self-selection of reading/writing materials and speaking topics by students made them get deeply involved in the learning reading/speaking processes developing critical thinking skills.

Furthermore, approaching the issue of topic selection through qualitative studies was the other trend as indicated in this review of literature. These studies explored both teachers’ and students’ beliefs and perceptions on topic selection. The researchers in these studies also generally reported that students had more confidence for discussing their self-selected topics. As for writing skill, the researchers reported that students generally perceived to be more motivated and encouraged to write when they are granted the right to choose their own topics in their EFL writing.

Apart from the limited number of studies on topic selection, to the best knowledge of the writer, no serious experimental study has been conducted in Iranian context on the effect of the topic selection on students’ writing performance at university level. Thus, the present study aims at finding the effect of topic selection on Iranian EFL writing performance.

Method

Design of the Study

The present study aimed at measuring the effect of self-selected and teacher-assigned topic on EFL students’ writing performance. To this end, a quasi-experimental design was used in the study. Thus, topic selection was considered the independent variable and the students’ writing performance as the dependent variable. The independent variable, topic selection, was operationally defined as either choosing a self-selected or teacher-assigned topic. The dependent variable, students’ writing performance, was defined as students’ performance on writing a five-paragraph essay based on the topics presented in the appendices.

Participants

A number of 30 students, both male and female, studying for the MA degree in teaching EFL in one of the higher education institutions were selected based on their performance on the placement test administered initially and then randomly assigned into two groups of 15 students. The test, AVATalk Placement Test, consisted of three sections, namely, grammar, vocabulary, and reading.

Scoring Method

The study selected two types of indices of writing quality that included (a) analytic ratings (topic introduction, topic development, sentence construction, sentence mechanics) and (b) productivity. A total of five different scores were obtained from these two types of indices as summarized in Appendices A and B.

The analytic ratings (Appendix B) were based on a writing textbook (The practical writer with readings by Bailey & Powell, 2007). Furthermore, the productivity index (Appendix A) as suggested by Gomez, Parker, Lara-Alecio, and Gomez (1996) was simply the total number of words (correct and incorrect) written within the allotted time.

As the scoring of students’ performance on writing was somehow subjective, an inter-rater scoring procedure was used. Two raters scored the students’ writings based on the four categories. The first and the second categories were topic introduction and topic development. The third and the fourth categories were sentence construction and the mechanics. For scoring procedures, the two raters followed the four criteria assigning each one a mark out of 10. The full score
for each participant was 40. To determine the reliability between the scorings of the two raters, Pearson correlation was run. Meanwhile, as for the productivity of the students’ performance, a descriptive statistics presenting the mean number of the words in each group was used.

**Procedure and Data Analysis**

The students taking their writing course in the first semester of 2012 were involved in the present study. During the initial sessions of the class, all the students were taught the basics of writing as suggested in their textbook titled *The Practical Writer with Readings* by Bailey and Powell (2007). The aim of the book was to provide the students with the basics of writing a five-paragraph essay. After going through these basics, the students were randomly assigned into 2 groups (A and B) of 15 students. In the classroom, then, the students in Groups A and B were asked to write a five-paragraph essay on a teacher-assigned topic—namely, “The advantages of digital cameras”—and a self-selected topic, respectively. The essays were then collected and assessed based on different categories (see Appendices A and B). The aim of the study was to find out the effect of topic selection on students’ writing performance.

**Results**

An independent *t* test was conducted to find out the possible difference between the performances of the two groups of the students. All the assumptions for conducting the test, as discussed below, were met. Furthermore, an acceptable inter-rater agreement was of necessity in assessing students’ writing performance. To this end, all ratings were completed by the researcher and his colleague. Reliability then was assessed based on the scores given to the papers written by two groups of the students who wrote on either self-selected topic or the teacher-assigned topic. Based on the four categories, Pearson production moment correlation was run to determine the relationship between the two sets of scores.

**Homogenizing the Participants**

Two groups of students (*N* = 30), studying for the MA degree in one of the higher education institutions, were selected as the participants of the present study based on their performance on the placement test and then were randomly assigned in two groups, namely, student-self-selected-topic group and teacher-assigned-topic group. The main reason for focusing on the MA students was their relative command of the English writing skill evidenced by their admission to get enrolled in post-graduate studies. The obtained mean score of 45 students was 62.73 with the standard deviation of 8.67 suggesting that half of the students who took the placement test got scores below 65 and the next half scored above 67. Thus, for homogenizing the participants, the students who obtained above 68 (percentiles 66.66) were selected as the participants of the present study and were assigned randomly into two groups.

**Inter-Rater Reliability of Students’ Obtained Scores on Writing Task**

Two raters, the researcher and his colleague, evaluated the students’ essays based on the categories illustrated in Appendices A and B of the present study. Thus, it was of importance to check the reliability of the assigned scores by the two raters. To this end, Cronbach’s coefficient alpha reliability test was used. Initially, the inter-rater reliability of the scores assigned to the essays of the students in self-selected-topic group (SST) was calculated.

The obtained alpha for SST was .97. The mean scores of the first and the second raters for the SST were 35.66 and 33.40, respectively, with the standard deviation of 3.10 and 3.62. The correlation value of .95 presented a close correlation between the assigned scores of the two raters.

Then, the reliability of the scores assigned to the essays of the students in teacher-assigned group (TAT) was calculated. The obtained alpha for TAT was .98. The mean score of the first and the second raters for the TAT were 26.66 and 26.40 respectively with the standard deviation of 4.96 and 5.61. The correlation value of .96 presented a close correlation between the assigned scores of the two raters.

**Testing Normality of the Distribution and Homogeneity of Variances**

For parametric techniques, the assumption of the normal distribution of the scores should be met. For this purpose, Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistic was run to test that the data came from a normally distributed population. The obtained significance values, namely, .65, .43, .96, and .40 were all greater than .05 indicating that samples came from a normally distributed population.

Parametric technique also makes the assumption that samples are obtained from population of equal variances meaning that the variability of scores for each of the groups is similar. To meet this assumption, Levene’s test for equality of variances was run. The obtained significance value (.608) was greater than .05 meaning that the assumption of equal variances had not been violated (*F* = .269, *p* = .608 > .05).

**Testing the hypothesis of the study.** Table 1 presents the mean differences between the two groups.

As Table 1 indicates, the students who wrote on their self-selected topics did manage to get higher scores (*M* = 34.53) compared with the scores of the students who wrote on a teacher-assigned topic (*M* = 26.53). Even their standard deviations were lower than TAT.

To test the hypothesis of the study, that is, topic selection does not have any significant effects on EFL students’
writing performance, an independent-samples t test was run testing whether there was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for the two groups. That is, whether students who wrote on self-selected topics and those who took teacher-assigned topics differed significantly in their writing performance. Table 2 presents the results.

Considering the obtained results ($t = 4.98$, $df = 28$, $p = .000 < \alpha = .05$), it can be claimed that providing EFL students with self-selected topics did have statistically significant effect on their writing performance. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Calculating the Effect Size

Effect size statistics provides an indication of the magnitude of the difference between the groups. For this purpose, $\eta^2$ statistics has been used presenting the proportion of the variance that is explained by the independent variable. Considering the formula for $\eta^2$, the obtained $\eta^2$ was .46.

Expressed in percentage, it can be concluded that .46 of the variance in the students’ writing scores can be explained by the effect of topic selection, which can be considered an indication of a good effect size.

Number of the Words

As for the number of the words used in the writings of the two groups, a similar analysis was conducted. First, Levene’s test of variances was run to meet the homogeneity of variances in using the words. Table 3 presents the results of testing the homogeneity of variances in using the words.

As the table indicates, the significance value (.969) is greater than .05 meaning that the assumption of equal variances has not been violated ($F = .002, p = .969 > .05$).

To test whether there is a significant difference between the number of the words used in the writings of the two groups, TAT and SST, a one-sample students’ t test was conducted. Table 4 presents the results of the mean differences.

Considering the obtained results ($t = 1.159, df = 28, p = .256 > \alpha = .05$), it can be claimed that there was not any significant differences between the writings of the two groups in terms of the number of the used words. In other words, topic selection does not have any significant effect on the number of the words.

Note that Table 5 presents a slight difference between the two groups in terms of the number of the used words. However, the mean difference between the groups ($M = 376.33$ vs. $M = 332.33$) is not statistically significant.

Summary of the Findings

The present study indicated that providing EFL students with self-selected topics did have statistically significant effect on their writing performances. Moreover, to test whether there was a significant difference between the number of the words used in the writings of the two groups, TAT and SST, the obtained results ($t = 1.159, df = 28, p = .256 > \alpha = .05$) indicated that there was not any significant differences between the writings of the two groups in terms of the number of the used words. In other words, topic selection did not have any significant effect on the number of the words.

Discussion

The present study was originally motivated by the author’s reflection on whether to continue his practice of assigning topics for writing or allowing the students to select their own topics in their EFL writing course. In particular, the study was conducted to investigate the effect of topic selection on EFL students’ writing performances. Based on the findings of the study ($t = 4.98, df = 28, p = .000 < \alpha = .05$), it was found that providing EFL students with self-selected topics did have statistically significant effect on their writing performance, thereby, rejecting the null hypothesis of the study that topic selection does not have any effect on EFL students’ writing performances.

Meanwhile, the results of testing whether there was a significant difference between the number of the words used in
Table 4. Independent-Samples Test (Equality of Means of the Two Groups).

|                | t    | df | Significance (two-tailed) | M difference | SE difference | 95% confidence interval of the difference |
|----------------|------|----|---------------------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Word count     | 1.159| 28 | .256                      | 43.667       | 37.692        | -33.541 - 120.875                        |

Note. SST = self-selected topic; TAT = teacher-assigned topic.

Table 5. Group Statistics (Word Count).

| Group | n  | M      | SD   | SE M |
|-------|----|--------|------|------|
| SST   | 15 | 376.33 | 101.655 | 26.247 |
| TAT   | 15 | 332.67 | 104.768 | 27.051 |

Note. SST = self-selected topic; TAT = teacher-assigned topic.

the writings of the two groups, TAT and SST (t = 1.159, df = 28, p = .256 > α = .05), indicated that there was not any significant differences between the writings of the two groups in terms of the number of the used words. In other words, topic selection did not have any significant effect on the number of the words.

The results of the present study are consistent with the results of some of the studies reported in the review of literature. However, some of the findings seem not to be in line with the findings of other scholars.

As for the consistency of the results of the present study with those of the other studies, we can refer to the findings of the qualitative study conducted by Bonyadi et al. (2013), Wolf (2013), and Threadkell (2010). In particular, the results of these qualitative studies are in line with the findings of the present study. This supports the results of the present quantitative study that indicated that self-selected topics did have statistically significant effect on EFL students' writing performances. In general, the reported qualitative studies which explored both teachers' and students' beliefs and perceptions on topic selection reported that students had more confidence in discussing their self-selected topics.

Referring to the findings of the reported quantitative studies such as Gradwohl and Scumacher (1989), Bonzo (2008) and Leblanc and Fujieda (2012), we can claim that there is a strong consistency toward significant effect of topic selection on students’ writing performance. The results of studies such as Gradwohl and Scumacher indicated that students had significantly more knowledge on the want topics than on the teacher topics. They claimed that their findings demonstrated the significant role of content knowledge on the writing process and topic choice adding support to students’ self-selection of writing topics.

Furthermore, the experimental study of Bonzo (2008) on the effect of topic selection (teacher-selected topics vs. student-selected topics) on the participants’ fluency in writing indicated a strong significant correlation between fluency and grammatical complexity.

A somewhat surprising finding of the present study was that there was not any significant difference between the writings of the two groups (SST and TAT) in terms of the number of the used words. In other words, the findings indicated that topic selection did not have any significant effect on the number of the words, as shown in Table 4. One might have expected to find a significant effect of topic selection on the number of the words used in the writings of students who wrote on self-selected topics. Perhaps EFL writers, faced with teacher-assigned topics, have a tendency to surf on the Internet looking for material to be incorporated in their writing compensating, in this way, for the lack of knowledge on the assigned topics. However, this area still requires further investigation.

From this perspective then, the results of the present study in one case seem to be inconsistent with those of the other scholars. That topic selection did not have any significant effect on the number of the words partially contradicts the findings of Bonzo (2008) who reported that participants produced a higher ratio of different words to total words when they chose their own topics than when the topics were assigned to them. Of course, although the mean number of the words used in the writings of the students who wrote on a self-selected topic was slightly higher than the mean number of the words of the students who took a teacher-assigned topic (M = 376.33 vs. M = 332.33), the difference was not statistically significant.

The findings of the present study are in line with previous qualitative and quantitative studies indicating that providing the EFL students with academic choices would assist them in their struggle for EFL learning. In particular, the findings supported the idea that providing EFL learners even at advanced levels with self-selected topics would result in a satisfactory performance on EFL writing.

Pedagogical Implications

These findings have implications for current EFL writing practitioners. The results of this study suggest that they are likely to see significant effects on EFL students’ writing
performance when they provide the students with choice of selecting their own preferred topic for their writing.

For many years, EFL students have written on topics assigned by their teachers. Based on the more recent instructional approaches, students have been granted the right to choose their own topics for writing. The present study along with the other reported studies experimentally confirmed the positive effect of students’ self-selected topics on their writing performances. Thus, the present study, pedagogically, suggests that allowing EFL students to have a say in what they are writing would help them in achieving a greater level of engagement. In fact, providing EFL students with their self-selected topics is a practical way for increasing students’ interest and motivation in their writing classes. It also develops a greater sense of self-determination as it satisfies students’ need for autonomy (Deci, Vallerand, & Ryan, 1991).

Yet, a word of caution is needed here. As discussed in review of the literature, topic selection has been treated as one of the most controversial issues originally arising from the fires of the process/product orientation debate. One of the implications of taking a process approach toward teaching writing was the idea of providing the students with their self-selected topics. However, as Lee (1987) has already warned, “the natural process approach did not prove to be as effective as those methods which emphasized teacher directed activities” (p. 181).

Thus, taking into account both the positive effects of students’ self-selected topics on their writing performances as reported in this study and the warning of Lee quoted above, EFL writing instructors should realize the idea that in some cases, a healthy dose of teacher-assigned topics would be needed. In other words, teachers should try to establish a balance between assigning their topics and providing the students with the opportunity to self-select the topics. One advocated realization of establishing such a balance is helping less-knowledgeable or less-self-regulated students to make choices in their writings (Schraw et al., 2001).

In an effort to address the question of how one can achieve such a balance, Lee presented the chart shown in Figure 1.

The horizontal line depicts students’ grade level and the vertical line represents the approximate percentage of time devoted to write on self-selected topics. Based on this chart, students are suggested to begin their writing by using their self-selected topics gradually heading toward writing on teacher-assigned topics.

Acknowledging the fact that allowing students to self-select their own preferred topics would enable them to make use of their own rich knowledge, thereby producing more complex and sophisticated piece of writing, the researcher, in line with the above-mentioned suggestion, advocates that EFL writing instructors should not always allow students to choose their self-selected topics. Nevertheless, to further directing and stretching EFL students’ understanding in new directions, writing instructors might decide occasionally to assign certain topics. In a nutshell, echoing Bonzo’s (2008) assertion, both teacher and student alike should be aware of the role each play in the EFL writing process.

**Conclusion**

The present study was conducted to address the research question of whether topic selection has any effect on EFL students’ writing performance. To test the hypothesis of the study, an independent-samples $t$ test was run testing whether there was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the two groups (those who were presented with a self-selected topic, SST, vs. those who were assigned a teacher-selected topic, TAT).
The findings of the study \((t = 4.98, df = 28, p = .000 < \alpha = .05)\) indicated that providing EFL students with self-selected topics did have statistically significant effect on their writing performance rejecting the null hypothesis of the study. The study also indicated that there was not any significant difference between the writings of the two groups in terms of the number of the used words. In other words, topic selection did not have any significant effect on the number of the words.

In line with this suggestion, EFL language curricula should afford the language learners increasing the amount of choice in what they are writing fostering, thereby, students’ classroom engagement and sense of self-determination in the process of their EFL writing.

However, taking into account the experimentally confirmed positive effects of students’ self-selected topics on their writing performances as reported in this, the study also suggests EFL writing instructors to realize the idea that in some cases, a healthy dose of teacher-assigned topics would be needed if students are to learn to write effectively. That is, after students generate writings based on their self-selected topics in the early sessions of their writing classes, the teachers can gradually shift to introducing their assigned topics.

### Appendix A

#### Types of Indices of Writing Quality and Productivity

| Index          | Indicators                                      |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Analytic ratings | 1. Topic introduction |
|                | 2. Topic development                             |
|                | 3. Sentence construction                         |
|                | 4. Mechanics                                     |
| Productivity   | 5. Simple frequency count of words written (total words) |

### Appendix B

#### Analytic Rating Scale

| Level | Topic introduction | Topic development | Sentence construction | Mechanics |
|-------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------|
| 10    | There is an excellent motivator, a well-written thesis statement, and a clear blue print. | There are three supporting paragraphs with clear sub-topics developed through examples and quotations. | There are almost no grammatical errors. | Mastery of conventions; very few errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and paragraphing. |
| 8     | There is a well-written thesis statement and a clear blue print. | There are three supporting paragraphs with clear sub-topics without examples and quotations. | There are few minor grammatical errors. | Some errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing. |
| 6     | There is a weak thesis statement with a weak blue print. | There are three supporting paragraphs without clear topic sentences. | There are some grammatical errors. | Numerous errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing. |
| 4     | There is only a weak thesis statement. | There are less than three supporting paragraphs that are loosely related to the topic. | There are many grammatical errors. | Most phrases are difficult to understand; often times incoherent. |

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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