
The Impact of Topic Choice on Descriptive Writing Ability Among Iranian Advanced EFL Learners

Mehdi Nasri¹ & Ehsan Namaziandost*²

^{1,2}*Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Shahrekord Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahrekord,*

Corresponding Author: Ehsan Namaziandost, E-mail: e.namazi75@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to investigate the effect of topic choice on Iranian advanced EFL learners' descriptive writing ability. A quasi-experimental design was used for data collection. A total of 60 students were selected based on their performance on the placement test and then randomly assigned into two groups, Student-Selected Topic Group (SSTG) and Teacher-Selected Topic Group (TSTG). Then, both groups were given a descriptive writing test. The students in TSTG were asked to write a five-paragraph descriptive text on a teacher-assigned topic while the students in SSTG should write a five-paragraph descriptive text on a self-selected topic. After analyzing the data, through an independent samples t-test, it was revealed SSTG performed better on the writing test than TSTG. The results generally indicated that Student-Selected Topics had positive impacts on Iranian advanced EFL learners' descriptive writing. The study has offered some pedagogical suggestions to be employed in EFL writing classes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a significant piece of a reasonable language adapting course. In any case, numerous students have come to see the writings they are approached to deliver, not as types of important communication, however as "tests" of whether they have taken in the syntax and jargon they have been instructed (Homstad & Thorson, 2000; Namaziandost & Nasri, 2019a). As an outcome, numerous students adopt a moderate strategy to writing so as to create as few errors as would be prudent (Hyland, 2009; Namaziandost & Nasri, 2019b; Sandler, 1987). This careful methodology brings about writing that isn't just significantly less linguistically and lexically perplexing, but on the other hand is decreased in amount (Bonzo, 2008). This is dangerous in light of the fact that not exclusively is familiarity a fundamental part of composing capacity and advancement (Abdel Latif, 2013), students are underutilizing their current semantic assets and are not adequately captivating in the hazard taking and theory testing that is essential for language learning (Hyland, 2009; Shakibaei, Shahamat, & Namaziandost, 2019). This investigation centers around a writing action that tends to these issues by urging students to create progressively familiar and important writings. The action expects students to compose however much as could reasonably be expected inside a set time on a point picked either by the instructor or by the individual students. The present investigation plans to check whether the discoveries of certain examinations (Bonzo, 2008; Nasri, Namaziandost, & Akbari, 2019), which found that writings composed by middle of the road students of German as an unknown dialect on students chose points during a progression of coordinated writing exercises showed fundamentally higher familiarity than those on instructor chose themes, can be reproduced in an alternate setting with a group of English language students at an Iranian private English language foundation. It additionally looks at the impact of the writing movement on the students' self-adequacy and frame of mind to L2 composing, as these factors can likewise influence a student's way to deal with composing (Keshmirshakan, Namaziandost, & Pournorouz, 2019).

A few specialists have drawn in with the above issues with L2 student composing. Hyland (2009) claims that, regardless, an elite spotlight on formal highlights of writings is lost as there is little proof that syntactic multifaceted nature or linguistic exactness are the best proportions of good writing. He contends that numerous students can frame grammatically exact sentences, yet can't deliver proper composed writings (Namaziandost & Ahmadi, 2019; Nasri, Biria, & Karimi, 2018). In addition, Hyland states that while less mistakes could be viewed as a sign of progress, this may similarly flag the student's abhorrence for going out on a limb and coming to past a present degree of ability.

It has likewise been contended that substance concentrated instead of structure centered writing produces more noteworthy student intrigue and increasingly complex writings (Nasri & Biria, 2017; Smith, 1994). Homstad and Thorson (2000) consider significant writing fundamental for creating increasingly mind boggling and expressive writing from students. Then again, Sternglass (1980) takes note of that when students were given writing assignments

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they saw as aimless they utilized lower-level intellectual handling for language arranging and generation than they accomplished for composing exercises apparent to have animating objectives. Bonzo (2008), referring to Paris and Turner (1994), contends that a lot sounder practice is get some information about things that are most huge to them, empowering them to investigate the language with less danger of remedy. Be that as it may, as Heilenman (1991) points out, such substance engaged, which means making composing has been observably missing from language learning classroom.

Including learners during the time spent basic leadership is known to decidedly effect on their eagerness to learn and improve their learning procedure (Azadi, Biria, & Nasri, 2018; Moss & Hendershot, 2002). One type of understanding this contribution is to give learners the chance to choose their own learning materials or what is known as self-chose materials. In language training self-choice of instructing material has been considered as a significant issue, in reality it has been contended that chosen language exercises can apply a positive effect on explicit parts of language aptitudes (Graham, 1982; Hosseini, Nasri, & Afghari, 2017; Abedi, Namaziandost, & Akbari, 2019). Studies recommend that enabling learners to self-select material builds their inspiration and thus improves language abilities. Self-determination enables learners to build up their advantage and is one approach to decidedly influence their inspiration. Rasinski (1988) states that learners' advantage and decision ought to be an indispensable piece of an understanding system if learners will progress toward becoming amped up for perusing and become deep rooted readers. A survey of writing, in any case, has shown that the issue of self-choice has been generally examined for the most part from the point of view of showing understanding aptitudes (Abedi, Keshmirshekan, & Namaziandost, 2019). For Sewell (2003) "enabling learners to self-select their books brings about greater contribution and consequently more inspiration to peruse" (p. 5). In a similar vein, Kragler (2000) contends that "self-determination enables learners more scope to be profoundly engaged with the learning procedure, along these lines cultivating an enthusiasm for, just as building up a responsibility for understanding procedure" (p. 4). Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) directed an examination on self-choice and understanding execution. They talked with sixteen fourth grade learners to discover what propelled them to peruse. The writers arrived at the resolution that "single direction to expand youngsters' craving to peruse is to give them a chance to pick their own books" (Edmunds & Bauserman, p. 420; Namaziandost, Ahmadi, & Keshmirshekan, 2019, p. 8).

Carroll (1997) noticed that through a decent education program that stresses self-choice, readers are urged to all the more entirely create basic reasoning aptitudes. For her "self-choice prompts learners to go after all the more testing books, and further, they rehash them out of intrigue" (p.6). Fresch (2005) directed a contextual analysis on the point of self-determination. She inferred that her subject was "dynamic in self guiding her decisions to peruse and compose. Her capacity to choose when, what, and with whom to peruse all urged her to look for writings she could easily peruse" (p. 148). In spite of the fact that the issue of self-choice has been talked about in showing understanding abilities, in uncommon cases, a couple of researchers have managed the issue of point determination recorded as a hard copy among learners and instructors. A few educators remain immovably dedicated to the possibility that understudy works ought to be founded on self-chose themes (Namaziandost, Hashemifardnia, & Shafiee, 2019). Peruse (2005), for example, asserts that "given suitable guidance in the aptitudes of composing and a theme that they've picked and find fascinating, youthful learners are completely fit for managing the mind-boggling issues that happen when perusing and composing instructive writings" (p.44). It has been likewise contended that self-chose points for the most part make less requests on learners' preparing limit since learners are probably going to choose well-known subjects. Truth be told, the most ideal route for improving learners' composing has been to include learners in expressive writing exercises, for example, diary composing or individual stories, or to enable them to pick their very own writing points (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982; Namaziandost, Abedi, & Nasri, 2019). Threadkell (2010), in a subjective report, analyzed the contrasts between learners' view of instructor doled out and self-chose writing. His discoveries demonstrated that the learners were progressively propelled to peruse when allowed to choose their own writings. Learners additionally appeared to increase a more prominent comprehension of substance when perusing self-chose material. In any case, the examination members additionally talked emphatically about certain educator doled out books, showing that quality perusing materials with high-intrigue substance may take need over decision. Wolf (2013) led an investigation to inspect whether students' trust in discourse varied in connection to course reading allocated and self-chose themes. The examination inspired students' self-chose themes through a factious article task and directed another 5-point Likert scale survey to gather observations and reports of certainty with respect to these subjects. The examination found that the students had factually altogether more noteworthy impression of information about and enthusiasm for talking about their very own points. The examination inferred that it is progressively reasonable to have students select their very own points (Ziafar & Namaziandost, 2019).

Considering the way that the objective of composing guidance is to urge students to convey viably, through writing, it is of significance to discover why a few students are hesitant to engage recorded as a hard copy exercises in the study halls. Such hesitance, which may be credited to their discernments and demeanors, for the most part causes students to lose their enthusiasm for composing. Step by step they would arrive at the resolution that they are not ready

to gain any ground in their writing classes. The issue is not kidding in an EFL setting where there is little presentation to the objective language outside the homeroom. For the most part, in accordance with the hypothesis of contemplated activity, look into in instruction proposes that understudy recognitions and mentalities towards a subject lead to scholarly achievement (Mirshekaran, Namaziandost, & Nazari, 2018; Popham, 2005). In this way, due consideration ought to be paid to learners chosen observations and instructor chose themes recorded as a hard copy. Furthermore, Dillon and Cheney's (2009) investigation of self-chose versus instructor doled out character-based group uncovered that in spite of the fact that the last strategy prompts better items, it experiences high degrees of intra-bunch individual clashes which further diminishes in general fulfillment with the course.

Later on, Leblanc and Fujieda (2012) with an end goal to inspect the impact of theme determination on the works of college level Japanese EFL students led a semi test research estimating the lexical variety of the learners' writing through a kind token equation. Results from the factual examination demonstrated that subjects chose by the readers had a constructive outcome by expanding lexical variety in the content examples gathered in a 10-min-composing task. The analyst inferred that theme self-sufficiency can in this manner help students investigate the scope of their jargon size in delivering language, which may somehow or another not be used in instructor chose composing undertakings.

Actualizing a subjective methodology, Bonyadi, Zeinalpur, and Reimany (2013) investigated EFL learners' recognitions toward self-chose and instructor appointed themes in their writing classes. This examination utilized a specific type of information accumulation, self-composed reports, composed by EFL grown-up learners (N = 30), mirroring their very own recognitions on the issue. The discoveries of the examination uncovered that learners, for the most part, saw to be increasingly propelled and urged to compose when they are conceded the privilege to pick their own chosen theme in their EFL composing classes. In any case, few took an interest learner communicated their positive observations toward instructor allocated points. As ramifications of their investigation, the writers inferred that a comprehension of the distinctions among learners' discernments toward subject choice recorded as a hard copy would help the EFL educators in making adaptable instructional techniques. At the end of the day, they contended, the writing educators should attempt to tailor subject choice to the impression of the learners by giving them the possibility either to take their own preferred point or the one recommended by their writing instructors.

All in all, thinks about on self-choice and composing expertise recommend that there are some great contentions for learners choosing their own points and educators maintaining a strategic distance from the utilization of prompts. Educators now and again may advocate for learners to expound on what they consider significant in their own lives and they accept that this will coordinate the writing educational plan in classroom (Hashemifardnia, Namaziandost, & Sepehri, 2018).

Aside from the set number of concentrates on subject determination, to the best information of the author, no genuine trial study has been directed in Iranian setting on the impact of theme decision on learners' spellbinding writing at cutting edge level. Thus, the present study aims at finding the effect of topic choice on Iranian EFL descriptive writing performance.

The following research question was proposed:

RQ 1. Does topic choice have any significant effect on Iranian advanced EFL learners' descriptive writing?

The null hypothesis of the study is:

H0 1. Topic choice does not have any significant effect on Iranian advanced EFL learners' descriptive writing.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 60 advanced EFL language learners who were selected among 108 students studying at a private English language institute in Iran. The participants' age range was from 17 to 19. They were selected based on non-random sampling. Moreover, they have been studying English as a foreign language for at least five years. Their level of English language proficiency was determined on the basis of their scores on the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). The learners were non-randomly divided into two equal groups, Group A (Student-Selected Topic Group (SSTG)) and Group B (Teacher-Selected Topic Group (TSTG)). Only males participated in the current study.

2.2 Instruments

The first instrument which was used in the present study to homogenize the participants is the OQPT. It helped the researcher to have a greater understanding of what level (i.e., elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate) her participants were at. According to this test, the learners whose scores were between 47 and 60 (out of 60) were considered as the advanced learners.

The second and the most important instrument for group the needed data to answer the research question was a descriptive writing test. In the classroom, then, the students in Groups A and B were asked to write a five-paragraph

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descriptive writing on a teacher-assigned topic—namely, “Describe your last trip”—and a self-selected topic, respectively. After writing about the topic, all the writings were collected and graded by two English teachers according to the same criteria. The raters considered the students’ grammatical correctness, the meaningfulness of the sentences and the length of each writing while measuring the students’ writing skill. The validity of the descriptive writing test was confirmed by four English experts and its reliability was computed through using inter-rater reliability by means of Pearson correlation analysis ($r=0.985$).

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

To conduct the present study, the researcher gave the OQPT to 90 Iranian EFL students to determine their level of English proficiency. The researcher selected 60 advanced students and divided them randomly into two equal groups; Student-Selected Topic Group (SSTG) ($n=30$) and (Teacher-Selected Topic Group (TSTG) ($n=30$). Then, both groups were given a descriptive writing test. The students in Groups A were asked to write a five-paragraph descriptive writing on a teacher-assigned topic, namely, “describe your last trip”; while the students in Groups B should write a five-paragraph descriptive writing on a self-selected topic. The descriptive writing texts were then collected and assessed based on different categories (Table 1).

Table 1. *Scoring system*

No	Item	Score
1	Every correct grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and capitalization.	5
2	Every correct grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation, but incorrect capitalization.	4
3	Every correct grammar, vocabulary, but incorrect punctuation and capitalization.	3
4	Every correct grammar, but incorrect vocabulary, punctuation, and capitalization.	2
5	Every incorrect grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and capitalization.	1
6	Every unanswered item	0

2.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Firstly, Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test was used to check the normality of the gathered data. Then, the descriptive statistics were calculated through using SPSS software, version 25. Finally, an independent samples t-test were run to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for the two groups.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before conducting any analyses on the writing test, it was necessary to check the normality of the distributions. Thus, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality was run on the data obtained from the above-mentioned tests. The results are shown in Table 2:

Table 2. *Kolmogorov-Smirnov Results for the Descriptive Writing Test*

		SSTG	TSTG
	N	30	30
Normal Parameters ^{a,b}	Mean	36.1333	24.6167
	Std. Deviation	2.19299	3.59761
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.135	.235
	Positive	.135	.235
	Negative	-.103	-.179
	Test Statistic	.135	.235
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.174 ^c	.096 ^c

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

c. Lilliefors Significance Correction.

The *Sig.* value under the Kolmogorov-Smirnov part of the table (i.e., .174 and .096) represented a value higher than .05, which indicates that the distribution of scores for the writing test was normal. It is thus safe to proceed with parametric test (i.e. Independent Samples t-test in this case) and make further comparisons between the participating groups.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for the Descriptive Writing Test

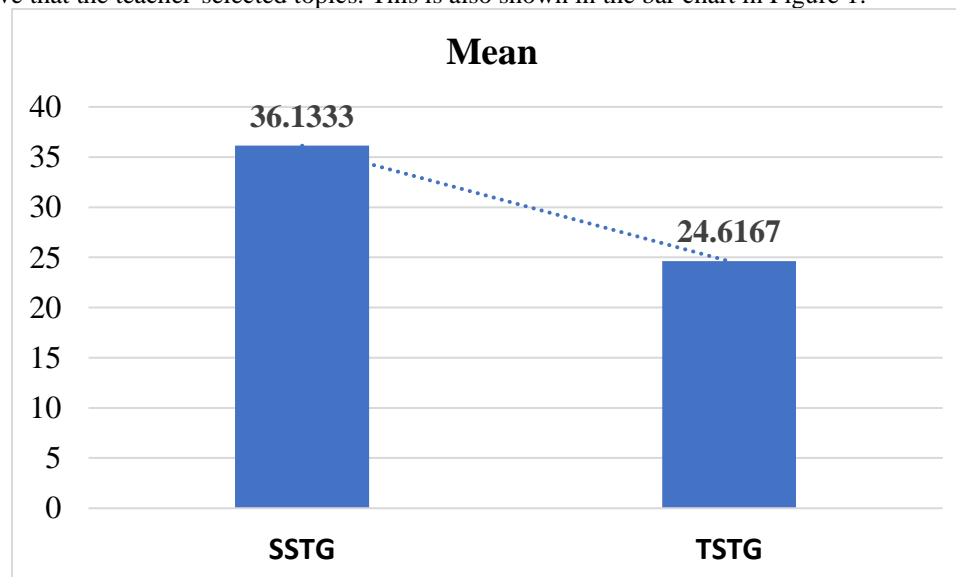
	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Writing Test	SSTG	30	36.1333	2.19299	.40038
	TSTG	30	24.6167	3.59761	.65683

Table 3 shows that the SSTG learners' mean score on the descriptive writing test equaled 36.1333 and the TSTG learners' mean score was 24.6167. To see whether the difference between these two mean scores, and thus the two groups on the writing test, was statistically significant or not, the researcher had to examine the p value under the Sig. (2-tailed) column in the t test table. In this table, a p value less than .05 would indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups, while a p value larger than .05 indicates a difference which failed to reach statistical significance.

Table 4. Results of Independent-Samples t Test Comparing the Descriptive Writing Test Scores of SSTG and TSTG

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Writing Test	Equal variances assumed	7.469	.008	14.971	58	.000	11.51667	.76924
	Equal variances not assumed			14.971	47.937	.000	11.51667	.76924

Table 4 revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the SSTG ($M = 36.1333$, $SD = 2.19299$) and TSTG ($M = 24.6167$, $SD = 3.59761$) scores of the descriptive writing test since the p value under the Sig. (2-tailed) column was smaller than the significance level (i.e. $.00 < .05$). This indicates that the student-selected topics was more effective than the teacher-selected topics. This is also shown in the bar chart in Figure 1:

**Figure 1:** Mean Scores of the SSTG and TSTG in Descriptive Writing Test

The present study indicated that providing EFL students with self-selected topics did have statistically significant effect on their descriptive writing performance. According to the obtained results of the current study, the SSTG had higher descriptive writing scores than the TSTG on the descriptive writing test. Therefore, the null hypothesis of this study, "Topic choice does not have any significant effect on Iranian advanced EFL learners' descriptive writing", is rejected. Generally, the findings confirmed the positive effects of student-selected topics on Iranian EFL learners' descriptive writing.

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This investigation found that group composed on self-chose points showed altogether higher enlightening writing capacity than those composed on educator allotted themes. This was not startling as it agrees with past applicable research (Bonzo, 2008; Paris & Turner, 1994). That comparative outcomes were found, in spite of the distinctions in sociocultural setting and target language (Iranian EFL students in the present investigation rather than American students of German in Bonzo's examination) firmly proposes that the impacts of point determination control on composing aptitude are not setting or language-explicit. At the point when students are given command over subject decision, they can expound on something both progressively commonplace and significant to them. This may prompt expanded writing skill as students can maybe more effectively get to the lexis, they have to convey what needs be when expounding on things they have recently spoken or considered (Namaziandost, Sabzevari, & Rasooyar, 2018; Hashemifardnia, Namaziandost, & Shafiee, 2018). Aitchison (2012) talks about examinations which have upheld "the idea that words are effectively stimulated in connection to subjects one is contemplating" (p. 241) and how generally utilized words are simpler to discover in the psychological dictionary. Another conceivable clarification for progressively extraordinary writing on self-chose points originates from Hoey's (2005) hypothesis of lexical preparing, particularly the property of settling, and its job in collocation: We can represent collocation on the off chance that we accept that each word is rationally prepared for collocational use. As a word is procured through experiences with it in discourse and composing, it turns out to be aggregately stacked with the specific situations and co-messages in which it is experienced, and our insight into it incorporates the way that it cooccurs with certain different words in particular sorts of setting. The equivalent applies toward successions worked out of these words; these too turned out to be stacked with the specific circumstances and co-messages in which they happen. I allude to this property as settling, where the result of a preparing moves toward becoming itself prepared in manners that don't have any significant bearing to the individual words making up the blend. Settling improves the memory's assignment. (Hoey, 2005, p. 8).

Discoveries of the present examination place accentuation on the significance of enthusiasm for unmistakable writing. This is in accordance with past examinations that guarantee training strategies are not given in understanding the necessities of learners at the colleges so these techniques don't open up principal open door for learners to upgrade their writing expertise. In this manner, it is essential to grow additionally intriguing points to help students with their writing skill.

4. CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of topic choice on Iranian advanced EFL learners' descriptive writing. 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 presented a teacher-selected topic, TST). The findings of the study indicated that providing EFL students with self-selected topics did have statistically significant effect on their descriptive writing performance rejecting the null hypothesis of the study. 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-selected 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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mehdi Nasri was born in Isfahan (Iran). He holds a master's degree in TEFL from Islamic Azad University of Isfahan (Khorasgan). He is currently studying PhD in TEFL at Islamic Azad University of Shahrekord, Iran. He published some articles in different international journals and presented some ones in national conferences in Iran. His areas of interest are second language vocabulary learning and teaching, pragmatics, and reading comprehension.

Ehsan Namaziandost was born in Shiraz Province of Iran in 1985. He holds an MA degree in TEFL from Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz. Now, he is Ph.D. candidate of TEFL at Islamic Azad University, Shahrekord, Iran. His main interests of research are second language acquisition, EFL teaching and testing, teaching language skills, and language learning strategies. His research papers and articles have been published by different international journals.

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