



Exploring the topic selection tendencies of university students in L2 writing

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the topic selection tendencies of university students among a given topic list and to reveal what reasons students had in deciding on the topic to write about. The study was designed as a case study. 37 students studying at a state university in Konya Province, Turkey were determined as a study group. The findings obtained from the interviews were analyzed by content analysis method. The students were given six different essay topics each week, three of which were about their field while the rest was related to general writing topics. The obtained findings showed that some of the students preferred writing about general topics while some others preferred to write about a topic that was related to their field. Students stated that prior knowledge, difficulty of the topic, lack of sufficient knowledge on the topic were among the reasons affecting topic selection process. Students stated that writing about self-selected topics were effective in terms of improving English vocabulary knowledge, grammar knowledge, developing English thinking skill, affective development, and field knowledge development. Furthermore, they indicated that this writing process enabled them to learn English essay types better, improved their organization skill in writing, helped them write in English in a shorter time, helped them produce more comprehensive English sentences, express their opinions better by writing, writing thesis statement and writing different introduction sentences.

Keywords: Foreign language; English writing skill; tendency; topic selection; university students

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1. Introduction

English writing is an essential tool in life for different purposes, such as communication, self-expression, and learning. Accordingly, it has been fundamental aim in education to develop writing skill. English writing skill enables students to increase their academic success level, find a better job after graduation (Moses & Mohamad, 2019), to go abroad (Melikhova & Skorobogatova, 2020) and to write academic articles

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such as projects, scientific reports, lecture notes, thesis studies (Linuwih & Winardi, 2020).

The goal of writing is to encourage learners to communicate effectively through writing. However, it is seen that some learners are more reluctant to get involved in writing activities (Bonyadi, 2014). This reluctance can be attributed to the perceptions and attitudes of the students, which can make them less interested in writing (Popham, 2005). Therefore, in the studies conducted in the last century, affective factors such as anxiety, motivation, self-esteem, self-efficacy, etc. affecting writing skill have been examined (Henter, 2014; Khaleghi, 2016). Ni (2012) stated that affective factors help teachers to improve their teaching quality and students to cultivate an all-round development (Wu & Wu, 2008). As a result, due attention should be paid to the effects of affective factors in writing classes.

Among the affective factors, giving students the right to choose their academic duties has important place since it increases their engagement in the classes (Cosden et al., 1995; Flowerday & Schraw, 2000). Read (2005) stated that if the necessary explanations are given to the students during the writing process and the students select the topic they will write, they can cope with complex problems better. Gallagher (2006) argues that when students are given choice in their writing assignments, they try to generate interest in the assignment. He further stated that choice fosters a feeling of ownership in the writer. When students develop ownership, they are more likely to make more effort in the drafting and revising processes.

As outlined, topic-selection is considered to be a factor that can promote English writing proficiency of students. Therefore, it is thought that if students are given opportunities to select the topics to write, better outcomes can be achieved in increasing their motivation and interest in writing, and therefore improved English writing proficiency. Based on this, this study was conducted with the aim of examining the tendencies of the students in terms of the topics that they select among a given topic list. Additionally, it was aimed to reveal what reasons students had in deciding on the topic to write about. When the literature is examined, it is seen that there are various studies examining the effect of self-selected or teacher-assigned topics on the writing skill of the students. However, to the best of the knowledge of the researchers, the studies in which students were given a topic list and selected the writing topic to write are quite limited. Additionally, this study aims at a deeper understanding about the reasons lying behind the students' choices by the interviews conducted with the students. Therefore, this study follows two crucial aims. First of all, it aims to reveal the topic selection tendencies of the students while writing English essay. The second one is to investigate the reasons of the students for topic selection. The findings of this study can provide some implications for language educators in English writing process.

2. Literature

2.1. English writing skill

With the intense developments in science and technology in the 21st century, relations between the countries have intensified, and the communication demands beyond the borders have increased. These developments that take place in all areas of life have led people to communicate intensively with other nations, and therefore knowing a foreign language has become a necessity. As a result, written communication skills in English, which is the most widely used language in international relations, has gained importance (Karaca & Uysal, 2021).

Writing skill allows individuals to communicate with each other in a variety of ways (Huy, 2015). This skill helps students develop various skills such as analyzing, discussing, and critical thinking in learning English. In addition, English writing skill encourages students to use the structures they have learned such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation (Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2019). Therefore, it supports listening and reading skills and improves speaking skill (McNiff, 2014). Additionally, development of English writing skill leads to higher achievement in both academic and professional levels (Durga & Rao, 2018). Moreover, in competitive world conditions, students with improved English writing skill can have high level of achievement.

Although writing skill is one of the skills that must be acquired in the process of learning English, it has always been seen as the most troublesome and challenging area of language learning since it covers different aspects (Jabali, 2018). In writing process, learners need thinking strategies that enable them to express their thoughts correctly, as well as gaining competence in various aspects such as grammar and writing rules about the target language (Yavuz-Erkan & İflazoğlu-Saban, 2011; Defazio et al., 2012), and they use various sub-skills such as composing, developing, and analyzing ideas, managing the writing decision and behavior (self-regulation) (Bruning et al., 2013). In addition, they are expected to choose and use the correct vocabulary to form meaningful sentences (Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001). Students' native language writing proficiency levels and writing experiences also affect their writing success (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008). In the process of writing in a foreign language, students need to acquire cognitive strategies and necessary preliminary information about the target language in terms of writing type, cultural elements and values related to the target language (Polio & Williams, 2009). Moreover, to be able to write effective writing products, the factors of having knowledge about the subject of writing, having the ability to compose a text, being willing to write on a certain subject and developing strategies to achieve certain goals are important (De La Paz & Graham, 1997; Graham & Perin, 2007). As seen, English writing is a cognitive activity that requires students to have control over various sub-skills and involves a complex process.

2.2. Self-selection and writing skill

In teaching writing, assigning students a particular topic to write cannot develop their ideas appropriately. On the contrary, when students are given choices, they have high confidence since they are more familiar with the topics (Sujannah & Cahyono, 2017). Giving students the right to choose their academic duties increases their participation in the course (Cosden et al., 1995; Flowerday & Schraw, 2000). Read (2005) stated that if the necessary explanations are made to the students during the writing process and the students choose the topic they will write, they can cope with complex problems better. Additionally, self-selecting increases the self-regulation skill of the students (Li, 2012); students are more engaged in the learning process, they foster an interest (Kragler, 2000); they can produce better writing products (Bonzo, 2008). It has also been argued that self-selected topics make fewer demands on students' processing capacity since they generally select the topics that they are familiar with (Bonyadi, 2014). Therefore, it can be argued that allowing students to have a say on the topics that are assigned to them can enable them to write better.

In various studies in the literature, self-selection was found to be effective in terms of writing skill. Gradwohl and Scumacher (1989) found in their study that students were more successful when they wrote on the topics they chose. Read (2005) stated that when students selected the topics that they find interesting, they can deal with complex problems that may arise while reading and writing informational texts. Bonzo (2008) obtained the finding that topic selection increased the overall fluency of students' writing when they selected their topics on their own. Leblanc and Fujieda (2012) concluded that topics selected by learners had a positive effect by increasing lexical variation in the text samples collected in 10 min writing task. In an experimental study conducted by Bonyadi (2014) to investigate the effect of topic selection on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' writing performance, a significant difference was obtained in the writing performance of the students who wrote on self-selected topics. In their experimental study, Bonyadi and Zeinalpur (2014) concluded that students were more motivated and encouraged to write when they were allowed to choose their own topics in their EFL writing classes, but a few of students showed positive perception toward teacher assigned topics. The authors have concluded that the differences in students' perceptions towards topic selection assist EFL teachers to create flexible instructional strategies. Dickinson (2014) found that giving learners control over topic choice enabled them to write about something both more familiar and meaningful to them. Lubold et al. (2016) examined the effect of teacher-selected versus student-selected writing topics on students' writing fluency. The findings showed that a higher fluency score was obtained when students were offered choice in writing topic.

3. The Present Study

Building on prior research, the present study aims to explore topic selection tendencies of university students in English essay writing process and the factors affecting this selection. In this direction, the problem sentence of the study was determined as; “*Which topics do university students select for English essay writing and what are the factors affecting these selections?*” Based on this, the following primary questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are the topic selection tendencies of the university students while writing English essays?
2. What are the factors affecting topic selection of university students while writing English essays?
3. What are the factors affecting the process of avoiding selecting some topics while writing English essays?
4. What are the students’ opinions on self-topic selection process in terms of English proficiency?
5. What are the students’ opinions on the effect of self-topic selection on L2 writing proficiency?

4. Method

4.1. Research model

In this part, the methodology adapted for the study is discussed. This study, which aims to explore the topic selection tendencies of university students while writing English essays and the reasons for this selection, is designed as a case study. Case study is a qualitative research method that is used to explore an individual, group or phenomenon (Stake, 1995). Case study enables the researchers to closely examine the people, topics, issues, or programs (Zainal, 2007). Accordingly, topic selection tendencies of university students in English essay writing were determined as the case of the study.

According to Yin (2003) there are three types of case studies namely exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive case studies. Among them, descriptive case studies are used with the purpose of presenting answers to a series of questions that are based on a phenomenon (Yin, 2003). Within this context, in this study descriptive case study was

chosen since it was aimed to develop an understanding of the topic selection tendencies of students in English essay writings.

4.2. Study group

In this study, 37 students studying at a state university in Konya Province, Turkey were determined as a study group. Of them, 21 were female and 16 were male. In most cases, a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals are selected as the subject of the study (Zainal, 2007). Yin (2003) also points out that when a researcher attempts to cover everything, he/she will eventually find that it is no more than trying to accomplish the impossible. Therefore, in the study students studying in the same class and taking the Diplomatic Foreign Language course were selected. By doing so, it was aimed to closely examine the case in detail. Additionally, limiting the collection of data to one classroom helped to make the amount of the collected data more manageable.

The students were 2nd grade students and were studying at the Department of English International Relations. In this department, all the courses were taught in English. The students in the study group had prep class education for one year and they graduated from prep class with B1 level.

4.3. Data collection tool

In the study, data were collected through open-ended question form. The researchers intended to use open-ended question form to gather data on the factors affecting the topic selection tendencies in writing English essays. The main reason that the researchers used this instrument was to gather relevant data to identify factors affecting students' topic selection tendencies in writing English essays, to collect valuable information that reflects the students' opinions. For this purpose, 5 questions were prepared in a way that reveals the students' opinions.

4.4. Procedure

The study was conducted during five weeks in the fall semester of 2021-2022 academic year. In the first week, students were informed about the purpose and the content of the study. Three different essay types were determined for the study as opinion essay, compare essay and contrast essay. In the second week, students were taught opinion essay type. Some essay samples were presented to the students and the samples were analyzed with the students in detail. Accordingly, introduction paragraph, thesis statement, body paragraphs and concluding paragraph structures were examined and discussed. This process was conducted for three class hours. In the fourth lesson hour, six different essay topics were presented to the students. Among these topics, some of them were about general topics (topic which are not related to a specific field, e.g. *Should*

students wear uniform at school?) and some of them were directly related to the courses they had in their department. Students selected one of the topics given to them and wrote their essays on the selected topic. In this process, students could use their printed dictionaries. The same process was followed for the third and the fourth week for compare and contrast essay types. In the fifth week, open-ended question form was given to the students and students were asked to respond to the questions in detail.

4.5. Data analysis

The topics selected by the students were presented in frequency and percentage. In the analysis of the data obtained from the interview forms, content analysis was used. Content analysis is a method used to make valid inferences from the data obtained in accordance with the content. Content analysis aims to obtain a comprehensive and broad definition of the phenomenon under consideration (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In the study, the data obtained were carefully read and examined. According to the emerging opinions, meaningful codes were created. The coded data were analyzed according to their similarities and differences, and the codes that were related to each other were brought together. In this way, the codes were placed in the determined themes. The appropriateness of the themes and the categories were presented to an expert in the field of curriculum and instruction for their opinion and a consensus was reached. The obtained codes and themes were tabulated and presented in the findings section. In addition, direct student opinions are included in this section. In the Findings section of this study, students' names are not given explicitly to ensure the participants' anonymity, and therefore coded as S1, S2, through to ... S37.

4.6. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Konya Selcuk University School of Foreign Languages Scientific Research and Publication Committee (Reference number: 2021/02, date: 04.11.2021). In addition, the study group was informed about the purpose and scope of the research, the basis of volunteering was taken, and the identities of the participants were kept confidential. In the direct quotations, students' names are not given implicitly.

5. Results

In this section, the findings obtained are presented according to the sub-problems of the study.

5.1. *Topic selection tendencies of the university students*

The first sub-problem of the study aimed to reveal which topics were selected by the students while writing English essays. In each week, six different topics were presented to the students. Some of the topics were the topics related to their department while some of them were general topics. The topics given each week and the frequencies of them are given in Table 1, 2 and 3 below:

Table 1. First Week Writing Topics and Student Selection Frequencies

Opinion Essay Topics	f
1) Should smartphones be forbidden at colleges?	6
2) What do you think about NATO’s continued existence after the Cold War?	4
3) Should social media be allowed to gather private information?	10
4) Why is the Eastern Mediterranean becoming more important, especially for the region?	2
5) We live in a world of technology these days. While the internet brings clear advantages, the problems in terms of control and security of information outweighs the advantages. To what extend do you agree?	5
6) Is Turkey's attitude towards immigration different from the rest of the world?	10
TOTAL	37

Within the first week, six topics on opinion essay type were given to the students. As seen in the Table, three of the topics were about general issues while three of them were related to their field. The topics selected by the students with the highest frequencies were determined to be “Should social media be allowed to gather private information” (f=10) and “Is Turkey’s attitude towards immigration different from the rest of the world?” (f=10)”.

In the second week, comparison essay type was taught. Students were given six different topics. The frequencies of the topics selected by the students are presented below:

Table 2. Second Week Writing Topics and Student Selection Frequencies

Comparison Essay Topics	f
1) Compare living with your family and living with your friends.	10
2) Compare USA and Russia	5
3) Compare desktop computers to laptop computers.	7
4) Compare First World War and Second World War	10
5) Compare cooking at home and eating outside	3
6) Compare Germany’s Industry and Japan’s Industry	2
TOTAL	37

As seen in the Table, the topics selected by the students with the highest frequencies were as “Compare living with your family and living with your friends.” (f=10), and “Compare First World War and Second World War” (f=10). On the other hand, it is seen

that the topic; “Compare Germany’s Industry and Japan’s Industry” was the least selected topic ($f=2$).

In the third week, contrast essay type was taught. Students were given six different topics. The frequencies of the topics selected by the students are presented below.

Table 3. Third Week Writing Topics and Student Selection Frequencies

Contrast Essay Topics	f
1) Contrast working at home and working in an office.	11
2) Contrast South Korea and North Korea	12
3) Contrast watching movie with subtitles and watching movie in your language.	6
4) Contrast European Union and African Union	0
5) Contrast getting married and staying single	8
6) Contrast NATO and Warsaw Treaty Organization	0
TOTAL	37

Table 3 shows that the topic “Contrast South Korea and North Korea” was mostly selected by the students ($f=12$). However, it is seen that none of the students selected the topics “Contrast European Union and African Union” and “Contrast European Union and African Union”.

5.2. Students’ opinions on the factors affecting topic selection for writing

Within the third sub-problem of the study, it was aimed to determine the factors affecting topic selection process for writing. For this, students’ opinions were asked, and the obtained findings are given in Table 4.

Table 4. Factors Affecting Topic Selection for Writing

Theme	Codes	f
Topic-Related Factors	Relevance of the topic to current life	11
	Relevance of the topic to the field of International Relations	6
	Simplicity of the topic	4
	Appropriateness of the topic to write within a limited time	3
	Being appropriate for giving more examples	1
Individual Factors	Prior knowledge and experience on the topic	12
	Providing academic development	3
	Enabling doing research	2

It is seen that students’ opinions on the factors affecting their topic selection are grouped under two themes as topic-related factors and individual factor. Students ($f=11$) stated that relevance of the topic to current life was an important factor in topic selection process. Some opinions on this issue are as follows: “*The events of the last days led me to*

select this topic” (T17). “I chose this topic because it is currently being talked about.” (S24). “I chose the current ones because I have heard about it much.” (S35).

Some students (f=6) stated that they selected the topics related to the field of international relations. Students’ opinions on this issue are as follows: “The subjects of my field. We just covered those topics. My knowledge was fresh”. (S27). “I had a lot of knowledge on these topics. They were relevant to my department.” (S32). “I like to force myself and try to choose important topics relevant to my department.” (S34).

Under the second theme, students mentioned about individual factors affecting topic selection process. Students stated that the factors such as their prior knowledge and the experience (f=12) was effective in topic selection process. Some opinions on this issue are as follows: “The knowledge I gained in the past on the topic was the main reason that affected my choice.” (T18). “I chose it because I have more knowledge and experience on the topic.” (S14). “When choosing a topic, I check whether I have enough and required knowledge about the topic.” (T12). Students also stated that opportunity to develop academically (f=3) and doing research (2) were individual factors affected their topic selection process.

5.3. Students’ opinions on the factors affecting topic selection avoidance for writing

In the fourth sub problem of the study, it was aimed to reveal the factors affecting students’ avoidance for selecting other topics given in the topic list. The findings obtained are given in Table 5.

Table 5: Factors affecting avoidance for selecting writing topics

Theme	Codes	f
Topic-Related Factors	Difficulty of the topic	8
	Being uninteresting	5
	Preliminary research requirement	4
	Being unrelated to the department of International Relations	3
	Being less important than others	3
	Including detailed information	2
	Being scientific	1
Individual Factors	Lack of sufficient knowledge on the topic	18
	Being inappropriate for giving enough examples	2

When students’ opinions were examined, it is seen that students mentioned about topic-related factors and individual factors affecting avoidance for selecting other writing topics presented to them. Under first theme, students stated their opinions on topic related factors. Students (f=9) emphasized that they avoided selecting topics that were

difficult for them. Students' opinions on this issue are as follows: *"I have less knowledge and therefore other topics are more difficult."* (S23). *"I didn't select other topics because they were difficult for me"* (S26).

Students also mentioned about some factors that were related to their thoughts leading them to avoid selecting other topics. Students (f=14) stated that they did not select the topics that they did not have enough knowledge about. Some of the opinions of the students are as follows: *"I did not have enough knowledge about the field."* (S35). *"Of course, first of all, I don't have enough knowledge."* (S10). *"I didn't select the ones I thought I didn't have enough information about."* (S9).

The students (f=4) avoided selecting the topics that they thought could not give sufficient examples. The students' opinions on this issue are as follows: *"While expressing my comments and opinions, I started from the topics that I could give more examples and did not choose other topics."* (S22). *"While I was writing, I didn't select others because I thought that it was difficult for me to give enough examples related to the topic."* (S19).

5.4. Students' opinions on self-topic selection process in terms of English proficiency

It was aimed to explore the students' opinions on self topic-selection process in terms of English proficiency. The obtained findings are given in Table 6.

Table 6: Students' Opinions on Self Topic-Selection Process in terms of English Proficiency

Theme	Codes	f
Improving English Vocabulary Knowledge	Improving vocabulary knowledge on the International Relations Field	9
	Improving English vocabulary knowledge in general	8
Improving English Grammar Knowledge	Long-term learning of English words	4
	Learning the synonyms and antonyms of English words	2
	Making English conjunctions use more effectively	6
Developing English Thinking Skill	Using grammatical structure more easily	5
	Thinking in English while writing	4
	Expressing the ideas as a whole	3
	Establishing cause and results connections	2
	Thinking quickly in limited time	2
Affective Development	Developing new perspectives on writing	1
	Reduced exam anxiety	5
	Reduced English writing anxiety	3
Field Knowledge Development	Reduced avoidance in using dictionary	2
	Increased field knowledge	3
	Increased field-related research skills	3

When Table 6 is examined, it is seen that students had positive opinions on the self-topic selection process. It was obtained that students' opinions were grouped under five themes as "Improving English vocabulary knowledge, improving English grammar knowledge, developing English thinking skill, affective development, and field knowledge development".

The codes for the theme of "improving English vocabulary knowledge" were determined as "*Improving general English vocabulary knowledge, improving English vocabulary knowledge in the field of international relations, long-term learning of English words, learning the synonyms and antonyms of English words better*". Students (f=9) stated that their vocabulary in the field of international relations has improved. Students' opinions on this subject are as follows: "...so this writing activity was very useful for me to learn words that I did not know about my field." (S22). "I feel that I learned more easily and permanently because I used the words related to my department while writing." (S32). "I think that the topic I chose contributed to my writing skills because I used international relations terms a lot in my writing, and I just learned the meanings of some of the words I used." (S8). "I think that it contributed to me and my vocabulary, as it contained words related to the diplomatic and international relations department. I think that this process improved my writing skill." (S17).

Some students (f=8) indicated that this writing process improved their general English vocabulary knowledge. Examples of student statements on this issue are as follows: "Self-topic selection enabled me to use more words in many parts." (S23). "While writing about the topic, I learned new words. In addition, by using the words I learned before, I could memorize the words in the long term." (S15).

The codes related to the theme of "improving English grammar knowledge" were determined as "*Using English conjunctions more effectively*". Students (f=5) stated that their English grammar knowledge improved. For example, S33 stated his opinions as follows: "As I pay attention to sentence structures and meaning while writing, this process helped me improve English grammar knowledge." (S33). Students also (f=6) stated that they started to use English conjunctions more effectively. Some of the student opinions are as follows: "This was an exercise that encouraged me to use of conjunctions. I used conjunctions a lot when listing ideas and I was able to write more easily." (S12). "It was effective in terms of English development; it improved the ability to form sentences and use conjunctions." (S11).

The codes for the theme of "developing English thinking skills" were determined as thinking in English while writing (f=4), expressing the ideas as a whole (f=3), establishing cause and effect connections (f=2), thinking quickly in a limited time (f=2), and developing new perspectives on writing (f=1). Students' opinions on the effect of the writing process on their English thinking skill are as follows: "While writing a paragraph

in English, I was thinking in Turkish, and this made it very difficult for me to write. While doing writing activities in this class, I felt that I started to think in English.” (S21). *“I think it was very effective. I believe that my ability to write my thoughts in a certain order, especially by establishing a cause-effect relationship, has improved.”* (S3). *“The relatively limited time frame compared to homework allowed us to think fast and improved our ability to put those thoughts down in writing.”* (S8).

The codes related to the theme of “affective development” were determined as “reduced writing anxiety, reduced English writing anxiety, and avoidance of using dictionary.” Five students stated that their exam anxiety decreased. Student opinions are as follows: *“When I concentrated on writing activity in class, I felt like I was in the exam, I got used to the exam and this helped me to reduce my exam stress.”* (S34). Students (f=3) stated that their English writing anxiety also decreased. Students stated their opinions as follow: *“Although we took English courses before university education, there was a fear or anxiety about not being able to write at first, since we hardly did any writing activity, but as I constantly wrote and improved in this course, I started to feel that I did not have such worries anymore.”* (S19). Students (f=2) also stated that their avoidance behaviors of using dictionaries decreased. On this issue, S4 made the following statement: *“There are words that I do not know while making sentences about the writing topic I have selected. I learned these by looking up the dictionary. I used to be lazy to use a dictionary before. Now I realize that it is very useful.”* (T4)

The codes related to the theme of “development of field knowledge” were determined as “increased field knowledge” and “increased field-related research skills” Students (f=3) emphasized that their research skills in the field improved. The students stated their opinions as follows: *“I found self-selection process very effective. Writing by doing preliminary research, especially on subjects related to the field, improved my research skills.”* (S28).

5.5. Students’ opinions on the effect of self-topic selection in terms of L2 writing proficiency

Within the fifth sub-problem of the study, it was aimed to determine the students’ opinions on the effect of self-topic selection on L2 writing proficiency. The obtained findings are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Students’ Opinions on the Effect of Self Topic-Selection in terms of L2 Writing Proficiency

Theme	Codes	f
Improving English Writing Proficiency	To learn different essay types better	10
	Improved organization in writing	6
	Writing in English in a shorter time	3
	Writing more comprehensive sentences	3
	Expressing the ideas in writing better	2
	Writing thesis statement better	2
	Writing different introduction sentences better	1

It was obtained that students’ opinions were grouped under the theme of “improving English writing proficiency”. Students stated that this writing process enabled them to learn English essay types better (f=10), improved their organization skill in writing (f=6), helped them write in English in a shorter time (f=3), helped them produce more comprehensive English sentences (f=3), express their opinions better by writing (f=2), writing thesis statement (f=2) and writing different introduction sentences (f=1). Students’ opinions on this issue are as follows: “*I learned English essay types. I didn’t know beforehand.*” (S35). “*Learning essay types is very important for the future and especially academically. Now, I know these types*” (S5). “*It made me know more about how to write an article and what the types of writing are.*” (S16). “*I can produce English sentences in a short time. Before this activity I used to think a lot while writing in English*” (S12). “*When I learned the meanings of new words, I could write more comprehensive sentences while writing.*” (S25). “*It is easy for me to write more comprehensive English sentences now*” (S9). “*I have not only learned different words but also learned to construct more sentences more quickly* (Ö1). “*I understand now that I couldn’t write proper essays because I didn’t know how to write a thesis statement before. I understood better that the thesis statement guides the essay.*” (S14).

6. Discussion

Within the first sub-problem of the study, it was aimed to reveal which topics were selected by the students while writing English essay. When the topics selected by the students were examined, it was seen that some of the students preferred writing about general topics. It was obtained that there were students who selected the topic related to their field. Therefore, it is concluded that while some students preferred to write about a general topic, the others preferred to write about a topic that was related to their field. In the study conducted by He and Shi (2012) it was obtained that when students were given general topics to write, they produced better results compared to writing on the specific topic. However, in this study students did not show a general tendency to select general topics or field related topic. It can be argued that students’ interests, prior knowledge,

topical knowledge and whether they find the topic easy or difficult may be effective in topic selection.

The second sub-problem of the study aimed to reveal the factors affecting topic selection while writing English essays. The opinions of the students were grouped under two themes. Students stated that topic-related factors affected this process. On this issue, most of the students ($f=11$) stated that relevance of the topic to the current life was very effective for them in selecting the writing topic. To get a deep understanding about the factors affecting topic selection, students were also asked about the reasons for avoiding selecting writing topics. 8 students stated that difficulty of the writing topic was a determinant for them. Similarly, 14 students stated that lack of sufficient knowledge on the topic was effective in topic selection. When these findings were evaluated together, it can be argued that topical knowledge has a key role in determining on the topic to write. In the literature, the importance of the topical knowledge was also emphasized. Bachman and Palmer (1996) support the idea that prior knowledge can be used to make inference about the language ability of the test takers. Students' knowledge of the topic they will write enables them to write more effective articles (Ahmadi & Meihami, 2017). Consequently, it can be said that when the students selected their own topics, they were more motivated to write and could produce a more fluent writing output.

Within the third sub-problem of the study, it was aimed to explore the students' opinions on the self-topic selection process in terms of English proficiency. The findings showed that students had positive opinions on self-topic selection, and they found this process effective in terms of improving their English language skill. First, students stated that they improved their vocabulary knowledge in general and in relation to their department. Students' success in language skills depends on their vocabulary knowledge. Students learning English as a second or foreign language must have sufficient vocabulary to be able to use the English language effectively in any academic environment (Beiki et al., 2020). Even if students acquire grammar and sentence structure, they will have difficulties in conveying their ideas if they do not have sufficient vocabulary knowledge (Viera, 2017). Vocabulary is an essential component of writing skill and is the most important aspect of writing. In order for students to develop their English writing skills, their grammar and vocabulary knowledge levels should be high. Students with low vocabulary knowledge have difficulties in the writing process (Misbah et al., 2017). On the other hand, having sufficient vocabulary knowledge can help students write to convey their thoughts (Fareed et al., 2016). In this sense, vocabulary is one of the linguistic components that affect the development of communicative competence and language skills of students (Viera, 2017). In some studies, researchers also investigated the relationship between the use of vocabulary and quality of writing. Daller and Phelan (2007) detected significant correlations between the scores for measures of lexical sophistication and teachers' holistic judgments of composition quality. Karakoç and Köse (2017) also concluded in their study that students' vocabulary

knowledge has a positive and significant effect on their English writing skills. Firdaus (2019) stated that vocabulary knowledge positively affects writing skills. More recently, Kılıç (2019) obtained that vocabulary knowledge accounted for 26% of variance in writing performance. In line with these findings in the literature, it can be concluded that vocabulary knowledge affects the writing performance. This study shows that students' beliefs in their increased vocabulary knowledge can enable them write better. Therefore, teachers can help students produce better writing products by providing them opportunities in selection the topics to write.

Students also stated that self-topic selection process improved their grammar knowledge. Language is related to correct use of grammar rules. Writing skill is not just writing words on a piece of paper. Without grammar, students just have individual words or sounds. When students have sufficient grammar knowledge, they can produce effective writings (Lin, 2008). In order for students to develop their English writing skills, other language skills must be developed at a certain level. For example, students should use grammatically correct structures for the act of writing and regularly convert these structures into paragraphs or compositions (Yulianti, 2014). It can be argued that self-topic selection has become effective in improving their grammar knowledge and as a result they could produce better writings.

Students also stated that their thinking skills improved. Writing skill helps learners develop their thinking skills, express their values and ideas (Klimova, 2013). Purnawarman et al. (2016) stated that the act of writing is a thinking process. The act of writing is the result of thoughts. Individuals write down the thoughts in their minds. Therefore, students with more advanced thinking skills can write more effectively. White (1995) emphasized the importance of critical thinking in writing process. He further stated that in the writing process, learners develop their critical thinking skills involved in generating ideas by using problem-solving process employing a range of cognitive and linguistic skills. Similarly, Indah (2017) stated that a successful writing class should end with the development of critical thinking. Based on this, it can be said that thinking skill is an indispensable part of writing process.

One of the benefits of self-topic selection was found as decreasing exam and writing anxiety. Affective factors are very effective in the development of English writing skills. Affective factors include the learners' emotions and emotional reactions such as attitudes, anxiety, self-esteem, and self-efficacy in the language learning process (Khaleghi, 2016). Writing anxiety can influence learners' attitude towards writing tasks (Rahim et al., 2016). Students with higher writing anxiety can have poor writing performance (Challob et al., 2016; Quvanch & Si Na, 2022). While students with relevant and sufficient topic knowledge are generally expected to give positive emotional reactions to writing tasks, students without subject knowledge may feel anxious about writing (Zhang, 2011). When students lack grammar awareness in their writings and have

insufficient vocabulary knowledge, they may feel anxious for writing (Rohmah & Muslim, 2021). In addition, insufficient writing practice can also lead to writing anxiety (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). In this study, students had the opportunity to write about different topic each week. As a result, they may have decreased writing anxiety level. Moreover, this process may be effective in terms of increasing their awareness in writing, and students may have higher self-efficacy belief for writing, which may in turn reduce their writing anxiety.

Within the fifth sub-problem of the study, it was aimed to determine the students' opinions on the effect of self-topic selection on L2 writing proficiency. Students stated that self-topic selection improved their writing skill. They learned about different essay types, their writings improved in terms of organization. Therefore, it can be argued that self-topic selection has become effective in enhancing their grammar and vocabulary knowledge and as a result they could produce better writings. When the literature is examined, it is seen that in various studies self-topic selection was found to be effective in terms of writing skill (Gradwohl & Scumacher, 1989; Bonzo, 2008; Bonyadi, 2014; Meihami & Meihami, 2014; Meihami & Saadat, 2019). Zidane (2012) stated that the nature of the topic can affect EFL learners' examination results for two main reasons. The first one is related to the learners' degree of appreciation of the topic, their knowledge of the topic and the level of their writing performance. Similarly, the results of the study indicated that although, topic selection is not the only factor affecting students' writing performance, it can be considered one of the factors increasing writing performance. The fact that students have knowledge about the topic they will write enables them to write more effective articles (Ahmadi & Meihami, 2017).

7. Pedagogical Implications

The current study was an attempt to explore the topic selection tendencies of university students while writing English essay. The results of this study make us be careful regarding the writing topics. First of all, this study suggests that when students are provided with choice of selecting the topics for their writing, their writing performance increases. Therefore, the positive effect of students' self-selected topics on their writing performances becomes clear. Based on this, the current study pedagogically suggests that giving more responsibilities to the students and allowing them to have a say in what they are writing can help them in producing better writings.

Self-topic selection makes it possible to involve the students in the learning process by putting the learning responsibility on their shoulders. As a result, they can have higher motivation level to write and show high level of interest for writing. Therefore, in the writing courses, teachers should give opportunities to write about the topics they are more interested in, and they are familiar with, which will in turn improve their L2 writing proficiency.

8. Limitations

Despite promising findings of this study, it has some limitations. This study is limited to 37 university students studying at a state university in Konya province, Turkey. Therefore, generalization of the results to other provinces in Turkey is hardly possible. However, it is assumed that students studying at different provinces in Turkey have similar experiences and problems in writing process. In the future studies, similar studies can be conducted with more comprehensive study groups with university students in different regions, and the results can be compared. This study was conducted with university students. In future studies, similar studies can be carried out with students at different levels. Students studying at other school levels can be included to support the generalization of the results of the current study. This study adopted quantitative research approach and the data of the study were mainly obtained through the open-ended questions prepared by the researchers. In the following studies, experimental studies can be applied. Additionally, classroom observation data can be used to shed further light on the role of self-topic selection on English writing proficiency.

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