

## ***Topic Effects on Writing Performance: What Do Students and Their Writings Tell Us?***

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Although writing is considered to be an indispensable language skill and is being tested in almost all important English proficiency tests, it is notoriously difficult to design a good writing task. Over the past decades, a number of studies have been done concerning the relationship between writing tasks and writing performance, with the former usually classified in terms of rhetorical mode, topic effect, features of prompts, etc. Researches so far have concluded that students' writings are more or less affected by the writing task. However, as there are still variables left unexplained, more studies are called for.

The present study examines students' perception of two writing topics and how the writing topics actually affect writing performance. The first task (Education Essay) features a broad topic, while the second (Golf Course Essay) a more focused topic. The two sets of essays are compared in fluency, syntactic complexity, linguistic accuracy and lexical complexity as well as writing quality. It is found the majority of the students prefer the Golf Course topic, because they have more to say about it and the topic is more thought-provoking. The Golf Course topic is also found to generate better essays in terms of fluency, syntactic complexity, and lexical sophistication, a pattern consistent with students' perceptions. The analytic rating also indicates that the participants perform significantly better in the Golf Course task. The findings of the study therefore highlight the importance of designing a writing task that can motivate students and encourage more critical thinking.

**Key words: topic effects, writing performance, students' perceptions**

## INTRODUCTION

Although writing is considered to be an indispensable language skill and is being tested in almost all important English proficiency tests, it is notoriously difficult to design a good writing task. Many studies in this field are done in the American context (L1 context) where researchers are interested in designing appropriate writing tasks in state level tests. As early as 1982, Hoetker pointed out that topic variables were “complex and important” and therefore “must be investigated” (Hoetker, 1982, p. 389). Hoetker and Brossell (1986) suggested that there were “no commonsensical rules of thumb” that address “the content” or “the subject” of the writing task, as there was no way to ensure “a subject about which all of the examinees equally have something to say” (p. 328).

Over the past decades, there has been a growing interest in the effects of writing tasks in the ESL or EFL context. Weigle (2002) listed 8 issues that need to be taken into consideration when designing a writing task: subject matter, stimulus material, genre (also known as discourse mode), time allotment, instructions, choice of tasks, transcription mode as well as use of dictionaries and other reference materials. So far a lot of studies have been done concerning the discourse mode (Hamp-Lyons & Mathias 1994; Koda, 1993; Reid, 1990; Way, Joiner, & Seaman, 2000; Xu, 2006) and rhetorical specification (Brossell, 1983; Cheng, 2003; Hoetker & Brossell, 1989; Park, 1988; Xu, 2006), but surprisingly little concerns the writing topic, or the subject matter. The several published studies have conflicting results. Besides, only several variables like topic familiarity, topic abstractness have been identified and examined, with a lot still left unexplained.

The present study examines how the topic scope of a writing task might affect students’ writings. Two writing tasks, both related to education, but one of a broad and abstract topic and the other of a focused and concrete topic, were assigned to a group of students. The students’ opinions on the two pieces of writing and/or the two writing tasks are reviewed. At the same time, their writings are compared objectively and subjectively.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Weigle (2002), in discussing the subject matter, points out that the most important consideration is to make it accessible to all the test takers; in other words, everyone must have something to write about. Meanwhile, there have also been a number of empirical studies examining the effects of topics.

Brossell (1983) looked at the effects of differences in topic and rhetorical specification. Six topics<sup>1</sup> of three different levels of information were assigned to participants, and the study concluded that topics “did not themselves affect the quality of student writing on a timed examination” (p. 172).

Carlman (1984) made a distinction between transactional and expressive topics, the former requiring test takers to state and support their positions, and the latter exploring how students feel. The study, conducted among Grade 12 students in the States, however, found no significant difference in students’ scores between these two different topics.

How the differences between personal and impersonal topics might affect writing has also been a concern. The writing tasks in Hoetker and Brossell’s 1989 research varied in both topics (personal vs. impersonal) and rhetorical information (brief vs. full), but they found that neither of these two differences affected the holistic scores.

In recent years a couple of studies have been carried out in the ESL or EFL context regarding topic familiarity. Cheng’s (2003) research was concerned with rhetorical specification, but she also did an interview with some participants concerning a number of factors affecting their writing, one of which being topic familiarity. The students reported that familiarity with a topic was of a greater importance to their writing than the amount of topic information. Hinkel (2002), based on her study of L2 text, concluded that texts tended to be simple if the topic was familiar to the writer and was easy to write about.

Xu (2006) concluded on the basis of the results of a questionnaire

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<sup>1</sup> The six topics are the basics of education, teaching as a career, classroom discipline, the 4-day work week, American wastefulness and violence in the schools.

administered to college students that five factors affected writing task difficulty, and they were, in the order of descending importance, topic familiarity, topic abstractness, topic relevance, topic scope and affective reaction. In other words, these five topics-related variables might all impact the writing quality, but Xu (2006) did not do any empirical study to verify the effects.

So far whereas the impact of writing task on writing performance is generally recognized, the effects of topic remain a neglected area, and the results of the several empirical studies are far from conclusive. More studies are called for to examine the actual effects of the topic of a writing task. The present study concerns the students' perception of writing topics as well as the possible effects topic scope might exert on the actual writing performance. To be more specific, I try to answer the following two research questions:

1. What do students have to say about their writings and the writing topics?
2. How does topic scope affect students' writings in overall quality and various linguistic measures?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Procedure**

During one writing class period in November 2006, the 3 natural classes of sophomore English majors at a university in Shanghai were asked to finish two essays.

The two writing tasks were both about education. One required students to write an essay to argue for or against the notion of education as a lifelong process<sup>2</sup> (hereafter the Education essay). This was an abstract topic with a broad scope, for a writer must look at education beyond the perspective of a

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<sup>2</sup> This is the writing task for TEM8 (Test for English Majors Band 8) in 2000, a large-scale national English test for senior English majors in China.

student. The other writing task concerned a more concrete and focused issue; the students needed to express their attitude toward a policy by a university in China to offer golf as a compulsory course to majors of economics, law, software and finance, a policy argued by the president of the university to embody the concept of elite education (hereafter the Golf essay). The prompts of the two writing tasks are presented in the Appendix. The Chinese translations for possible new words in the prompts were given to ensure understanding of the writing tasks.

The writing class lasted 80 minutes, and students had 40 minutes to finish the first essay and another 40 minutes to finish the second one. To control the order effects, the researcher had half of the students work on the Education Essay first and the other half work on the Golf Essay first. To make sure the students took the two writing tasks seriously, they were told that the scores of the two essays would be part of their daily performance score for the semester.

At the end of the class, before the students turned in their second piece of writing, they were asked to comment (in either Chinese or English) on the two essays: *Which one of the two essays do you think better reflects your writing proficiency and why?*

## **Participants**

Altogether 102 students participated in the study, and among them 10 participants were randomly selected from each class (5 wrote Education Essay first, and the other 5 wrote the Golf Essay first), with a total number of 30. Their essays (60 altogether) were used for this study. Of the 102 students, 87 commented on their own writings or the topic as required; their observations were collected and analyzed.

## **Analyses of Written Samples**

The 60 compositions were digitalized by the researcher, and presented as

printed copies for coding and rating. The two sets of compositions were compared both objectively and subjectively. For the former, they were coded and compared in terms of fluency, syntactic complexity, lexical complexity and linguistic accuracy, using paired-sample T test. These four measures have been used in many studies, especially those on second language development (Inagaski & Kim, 1998; Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Wolfe-Quintero *et al.*, 1998, among others).

The fluency measure, which concerns “how comfortable the second language writer is with producing language” (Wolf-Quintero *et al.*, 1998, p. 13) is operationalized as *T-unit length*, or the number of words per T-unit. Syntactic complexity, a measure of “grammatical variation and sophistication” (Wolf-Quintero *et al.*, 1998, p. 69) is operationalized as *T-unit complexity ratio*, measured by the number of clauses per T-unit. The linguistic accuracy measure is operationalized as *error-free T-units per T-unit*, i.e., the percentage of well-formed T-units. Finally the measure of lexical complexity, drawing heavily upon Laufer and Nation (1995), is calculated with the help of the online program *Vocabprofile*. For each piece of writing, the program generates information including word type, word token and divides the words into four categories by frequency: 0-1000 (the most frequent 1000 words of English), 1001-2000 (the second most frequent 1000 words), academic words and off-list words<sup>3</sup>. The measure examined here is the index 2000+; namely academic word types and off-list word types, an index of lexical sophistication.

Subjectively, two raters<sup>4</sup> read the 60 essays and each gave a score on them, and the average of the two scores was used as the final score. The rating of the essays followed Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Hartfiel and Hughey (1981)’s ESL Composition Profile, where each piece of writing is scored from the five dimensions of content (30 points), organization (20 points), vocabulary (20 points), language use (25 points), and mechanics (5 points), with a full mark

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<sup>3</sup> Off-list words refer to the words other than the first and second 1000 words and the academic words.

<sup>4</sup> The researcher was one of the raters, and the other was an associate professor of English at a university in Shanghai.

of 100, and the lowest score of 34. The overall scores as well as the dimension scores of the two sets of essays were compared using paired-sample t-test.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Students' Perception of the Two Essays

Of the 87 students who made comments on their own writings, 49 of them (56.2%) thought that the Golf Essay was better written, 19 (21.9%) believed that they did better in the Education Essay, and the rest 19 students (21.9%) were less certain, saying that they didn't know which was better, or that the two essays were both poorly written, or that it depended. If we look into only those who are certain which essay was better written, those who believed the Golf Essay was the better one accounted for 72%, suggesting that in general the students had greater confidence in the Golf Essay.

Some of the students also elaborated on the reasons why they thought a particular essay was better written. For those who believed that the Education Essay was better, the reasons include:

- ▷ *I have a clear thesis for the Education Essay.*
- ▷ *The Education Essay is more easily organized.*
- ▷ *For the Golf Essay topic, I have a lot of ideas but I can't express them (2).*
- ▷ *The Golf Essay is poorly organized.*
- ▷ *The Golf Essay lacks supporting examples.*

And for those who believe that the Golf Essay was better, they mentioned the following reasons:

- ▷ *I can't come up with clear topic sentences and supporting details for the Education Essay.*
- ▷ *The thesis of the Education Essay is not well supported.*
- ▷ *The Education Essay lacks content, and it's shallow and without*

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*substance.*

- ▷ *I wrote a lot of crap in the Education Essay.*
- ▷ *The Golf Essay is easier because the ideas are better and clearly organized. (2)*
- ▷ *The Golf Essay involves my own thoughts and ideas.*

The comments above were made concerning the students' writings *per se*; with particular attention paid to content and organization. For the other students, their explanations were directly related to the two topics given. For those who believed that the Education Essay was better written, the reason had something to do with topic familiarity.

- ▷ *I know little about the Golf Essay topic—golf. (2)*

And for those who believed that the Golf Essay was better, they had the following reasons.

- ▷ *The Education topic is too broad and it is difficult to pinpoint the key issue. (3)*
- ▷ *I do not have a lot to say about The Education Essay topic. (2)*
- ▷ *The Education topic is clichéd; I can't think of any original ideas. (2)*
- ▷ *The Education topic is too abstract, and I can't express my idea clearly.*
- ▷ *I have more to say about the Golf Course Essay topic (4).*
- ▷ *The Golf topic is more thought-provoking/calls for critical thinking. (3)*
- ▷ *The Golf topic is more related to our life and what is going on around us. (2)*
- ▷ *The Golf topic calls for a definite opinion, like or dislike, which is easier. (2)*
- ▷ *The Golf topic is more original, and allows me to better express my own thoughts.*

Except two students who believed their writings were negatively affected by the topic of the Golf Essay for a lack of knowledge of golf, most students had positive comments on the Golf topic and negative ones for the Education topic. For the topic of the Education Essay, some students thought it was “broad”, “abstract”, or “clichéd”. And for the topic of the Golf Essay, the students found it was “more concrete”, “more thought-provoking”, “related to

their life”, and “called for critical thinking” and that they had a lot to say about it.

### Raters' Rating of the Two Sets of Essays

Two raters read the 60 essays by the 30 participants and each gave a score. Table 1 presents the inter-rater reliability.

**TABLE 1**  
**Interrater-Reliability**

		No.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Pearson Correlation	Sig.
Education Essay	Rater 1	30	65.5	10.21071	0.852	0.000
	Rater 2	30	68	6.72617		
Golf Essay	Rater 1	30	73.3667	8.70388	0.865	0.000
	Rater 2	30	73.7333	7.64710		

As we can see from the table, of the 30 pairs of essays, the interrater reliability of the two essays reached 0.852 and 0.865 respectively and both are statistically significant.

To examine how the topics affected the writings, paired-sample T tests were run for the total score and the five dimensions, and the results are shown in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
**Scores of the Two Essays**

	Education Essay (Std. Deviation)	Golf Essay (Std. Deviation)	t-statistics	Sig.
Total Score (100)	66.75 (8.16189)	73.55 (7.89626)	-3.919	0.000
Content (30)	19.5333 (2.88854)	22.25 (3.04209)	-4.402	0.000
Organization (20)	13.3167 (1.78829)	14.55 (1.80206)	-3.223	0.003
Vocabulary (20)	13.55 (1.42847)	14.5833 (1.35241)	-3.465	0.002

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Language Use (25)	16.8333 (2.6503)	18.45 (1.67821)	-3.72	0.001
Mechanics (5)	3.5167 (0.40436)	3.7 (0.38507)	-1.884	0.070

As is clear from Table 2, the participants on average score 66.75 on the Education Essay and 73.55 on the Golf Essay, the difference being statistically significant. If we examine the five dimensions, we could also see that the differences between the two essays in terms of content, organization, vocabulary and language use were all significant at the 0.05 level, and the differences in mechanics significant at 0.1 level. It can be safely concluded that the Golf Essay consistently outscored the Education Essay in each aspect.

If we look at the individual performance, we get a similar picture. Two thirds of the 30 participants received a higher score in the Golf Essay than in the Education Essay.

### Linguistic Features

The 60 essays by the 30 participants were compared in four linguistic features, namely, fluency, syntactic complexity, linguistic accuracy and lexical sophistication. Paired-sample T-test was run using SPSS 15.0. Table 3 presents the objective linguistic features of the two essays.

**TABLE 3**  
**Linguistic Features of the Two Essays**

		The Education Essay Mean	The Golf Essay Mean	t-test	Sig.
Fluency	T-unit length	13.1387	13.8780	-2.043	.050
Syntactic complexity	T-unit complexity ratio	1.4327	1.5270	-2.527	.017
Linguistic accuracy	Error-free T-unit ratio	51.96%	48.59%	1.537	.135
Lexical sophistication	2000+ words	10.34%	13.14%	-4.053	.000

For fluency, the participants produced significantly longer T-units in the Golf Essay (13.88 words) than in the Education Essay (13.14 words). Since fluency measures indicate the comfort with which a L2 (or FL) writer produces language (Wolfe-Quintero *et al.*, 1998), it can therefore be concluded that the participants, in composing the second essay, felt more comfortable with retrieving the language items they needed, which was also corroborated by the students' comments that they had more to say about the Golf Essay.

Syntactic complexity, concerned with syntactic variation and sophistication, is operationalized as the number of clauses per T-unit. Each T-unit had 1.43 clauses in the Education essay and 1.53 clauses in the Golf Essay. The increase proves to be statistically significant, suggesting that the participants used a greater variety of both simple and complex sentence structures in writing the Golf Essay than in the Education Essay. This finding echoes Hinkel's (2002) conclusion that writers would use more simple sentences when writing an essay of a familiar topic. A lot of students in this study found the general topic of the importance of education more familiar, and one of them went so far as to say that the topic was a bit of a cliché.

In terms of linguistic accuracy, the results are less conclusive. The participants were found to do better in the Education Essay than in the Golf Essay, as the former featured a higher percentage of error-free T-units (51.96%) than the latter (48.59%), but the results are not supported by statistical tests. As is clear from Section 4.1, some students observed that they had a lot to say about the Golf topic or that they had more original ideas about the topic, and this helps explain why they did worse in accuracy in the Golf Essay. As they were trying their best to put their ideas across, they probably had difficulty monitoring their writing. A similar conclusion was drawn by Lo and Hyland (2007) on a new writing program. They found while students were more engaged and motivated in writing as a result of the program, they did not improve in accuracy and organization, especially for those able students.

In terms of the vocabulary used, the words used by the students in the Golf Essay are more sophisticated than the Education Essay, demonstrated by a

greater percentage of academic word types and off-list word types (13.14% vs. 10.34%). The results are consistent with the writers' perceptions of their writings. Believed by many students to be a topic that encourages critical thinking and original ideas, the Golf Essay very likely prompted students to use a greater variety of words in their lexical storage to express their ideas, even though the correct use of the words may be a problem<sup>5</sup>. Laufer and Nation (1995) did a validation study of their program of *Vocabprofile*, concluding that it demonstrated writers' lexical complexity feature irrespective of the writing topic. However, the findings here seem to suggest that the topic does make a difference in that writers may produce a piece of writing with greater lexical sophistication when they have more to say about a topic.

In summary, the participants in the present study did significantly better on a narrow and focused topic both in overall quality and objective linguistic measures, which is also consistent with their own perceptions. As a learner's writing ability is not going to change a lot within one day, the results presented here are therefore particularly interesting. These four measures are seen in second language acquisition as "good candidate(s)" of developmental index which progresses "linearly in a manner that is consistently identifiable with independently-determined proficiency levels across a variety of studies, and is also significantly related to program or school or test levels" (Wolfe-Quintero *at al.* 1998, p. 9). However, the very fact that these two essays were written on the same day lends strong support for the effects that writing topics may exert on the writing performance.

## CONCLUSION

There have been studies on how writing topics may affect writing, and both the variables of writing topics examined and the results of empirical

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<sup>5</sup> The *VocabProfile* only reports the percentage of words in different frequency categories. Whether the words are used correctly and appropriately is not judged.

studies are far from conclusive. The present study targets the writing topic, examining students' perceptions of the writing topics and how their writings are actually affected by them. Two writing tasks about education, the Education topic, a broad and abstract one, and the Golf topic, a narrow and concrete one, were finished by sophomore English majors in one writing class.

Most of the participants believed that they wrote better on the more narrow and focused topic than the broad and abstract one, because they had more to say about it and were more motivated to express their ideas. The analytic rating of the two sets of papers echoes their perceptions; the Golf Essay outscores the Education Essay not only in the overall quality, but also in the five dimensions in question – content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics, a finding which is again consistent with students' own evaluation. Finally, the results of the linguistic measures of the two sets of papers also render support for the effects of topic scope. It is found that the writing task with a narrow and more focused topic elicits better writing in that the writers produce significantly longer T-units, significantly more clauses per T-unit, significantly greater lexical sophistication, but less (not statistically significant) accurate sentences.

It can be concluded from the present study that a narrow and concrete topic can elicit better writings, and more importantly, it can motivate the writers. This is an important message for designers of writing tasks: although a general topic may eliminate the possibility of unfamiliarity with the topic, it may not motivate the writers nor generate good writings.

The study has conclusively shown the effects writing topics might have on the writing quality. However, the study is not without its weaknesses; the two writing tasks under examination probably differ not just in topic scope. It is therefore important that future studies on topic effects develop a more clear-cut classification and definition of all the topic-related variables.

## THE AUTHOR

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## APPENDIX

### The Education essay

Some people see education simply as going to schools or colleges, or as a means to secure good jobs; most people view education as a lifelong process. In your opinion, how important is education to a modern adult person? Write a composition of about 300 words on the following topic: Education as a lifelong process.

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### **The Golf essay**

Recently Xiamen University has made a decision to offer golf as a compulsory course for students majoring in management, law, economics and software. Students only need to pay for the transportation between the university campus and the golf practice course. The president of the university explains this as part of the elite education. The issue has aroused great controversy. What is your opinion of this? Write an essay of about 300 words in 40 minutes.