

Chinese Students' Choice of Writing Topics: A Comparison between Their Self-Selected Topics and Writing Prompts in Large-Scale Tests

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Inspired by Glasser's (1998) choice theory, the author set out to explore the differences between Chinese students' self-selected topics and large-scale test prompts. She asked sixty-two English major sophomores to rate a corpus of seventy topics and prompts and to write reflective comments on them with regard to topic authenticity, difficulty, involvement and impact. The results show significant differences in topic orientation, accessibility and impact between students' self-selected topics and test prompts. Factors causing such differences include students' failure to adopt more effective strategies in the topic selection process, their lack of topic choice training in early writing instruction and their inability to learn topic generation from reading prompts. To narrow the above differences, we should give students learner strategy training, add a section of topic choice to course books on basic writing and engage students in reflective writing.

Key words: choice, self-selected topics, test prompts, EFL writing instruction

INTRODUCTION

American psychiatrist William Glasser developed internal control psychology during the 1970s. According to him, almost all behavior was

chosen and in any situation there existed at least one alternative choice. Later the theoretical structure evolved and was renamed "Choice Theory" (1998). In applying his theory to education, Glasser pointed out the flaws of traditional external-control approach, i.e., trying to force students to do what teachers want them to do and claimed that students would work harder because they would be performing based on their own free will if coercive teaching methods were abandoned. Other educational and psychological researchers shared this point of view and claimed that choice increases learning, performance, positive affect and self-regulation (Buss, 2000; Kamii, 1991; Myers, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). When given choices, students learned more or performed more efficiently (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Reynolds & Symons, 2001) and enjoyed themselves more in learning (Parker & Lepper, 1992; Sweet, Guthrie, & Ng, 1998). Therefore, teachers also supported the use of choice in the classroom and contended that it improved motivation, effort, and learning (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000).

In the field of writing, the use of choice was also gaining ground. Early proponents of topic choice like Graves (1981, 1983) and Calkins (1983) believed that when students were allowed to choose their own topics, they wrote on the things that they know best. Zamel (1983) argued that teachers must overcome the strong temptation to overcontrol the writing of students who were not competent in the target language. By dictating the form and content of their writing, teachers were likely to limit the students' cognitive and linguistic growth. Gradwohl and Schumacher (1989) also concluded that

In essence, a good writing task is one that permits students to draw on their ideas and interpretations. By allowing students frequently to choose their own topics, we enable them to use a richer knowledge base that may increase the likelihood of their producing more sophisticated writing. (p.193)

In practice, writing instructors began to "allow students' personal interests and topic choices to become part¹ of what [they] had [students] compose in their classes since the mid-1960s" (Simmons, 2007, p. 4). The theorists'

contentions were supported by further experimental evidence which pointed out that topic choice led to better quality text production (Gordon, 1986; Gradwohl & Schumacher, 1989; McCutchen, 1986) such as better voice, richer vocabulary, greater independence by young authors (Graves, 1981, 1983).

Although some other studies detected no statistically significant difference in scores between topic elicited essays and prompt elicited essays¹, they still attached strategic importance to topic choice since it encouraged fairness, engagement, positive attitudes and a sense of self- and personal identity. (Barry, Nielsen, Glasnapp, Poggio, & Sundbye, 1997; Juliebo & Edwards, 1988; Lee, 2008; Lo & Hyland, 2007; Sullivan, 2007). For example, when “students write on topics for which they have some prior knowledge, no one is disadvantaged” (Barry et al., 1997, p. 25). In fact, students overwhelmingly preferred to choose their own writing topics since “it gives them greater ownership, satisfaction, pride and motivation” (Juliebo & Edwards, 1988, p. 439). The enthusiasm students showed for topic choice suggested that the latter “can have a liberating and confidence-building effect on them that more than compensates for any short-term declines in accuracy” (Lo & Hyland, 2007, p. 232). Given more autonomy in what they wrote about, high-achievers in writing were threatened to reexamine certain writing strategies that were more conducive to test-taking than communicative writing, while lower scorers were better motivated to produce longer pieces of writing that expressed their real thoughts and feelings (Lo & Hyland, 2007). In the process of writing, students demonstrated a stronger sense of purpose and

¹ In this study, a topic is what the participants have chosen to write about, while a prompt is what they are required to write about in tests. Therefore, topic elicited essays are those written on topics picked by the students themselves and prompt elicited essays are those written in response to assigned topics, i.e., prompts. The different degree of freedom that students enjoy in topic choice may affect the difficulty of a writing task and hence the quality of writing products. For example, essay-writing can be made easier if a student chooses a topic of his own interest, and as a result he writes better (Gordon, 1986; Gradwohl & Schumacher, 1989; McCutchen, 1986).

were more engaged in writing on the topics they chose than on the prompts the teacher assigned (Sullivan, 2007). Even with prompts, students' affirmative perceptions toward "a multiple-prompt set with the freedom of prompt choice" produced advantageous psychological and affective points of view (Lee, 2008, p. 103).

In view of the above literature, topic choice is an important aspect of writing and therefore merits attention in the study of writing instruction. Yet we know of no study that has attempted to examine carefully EFL students' topic choices in Mainland China. This literature gap is not altogether surprising considering that students seldom have opportunities to choose topics for themselves. Perhaps they do so in extracurricular writing activities like free writing journals or blogs. But for serious writing tasks, Chinese EFL students are accustomed to writing on given topics ranging from open-ended writing prompts to test prompts. Such practice does give the teacher more or less control over the assignments and satisfies students' needs for test preparation and more language support. However, in light of writing as a lifelong business, students will have to learn to find topics for themselves. It is the first and most crucial step of writing, since the quality of their self-selected topics largely determines their writing performance². And this step becomes vital to students who want to be teachers after graduation because they will soon take on the responsibility to determine the feasibility of their students' self-selected topics, and to write prompts for their students' classroom assignments as well as large-scale tests.

One way to explore students' self-selected topics is to compare them with teacher-assigned ones. But the latter is highly-contextualized and class-specific, so this study uses large-scale test prompts instead. The prompts are

² According to Ellis (2009), Skehan (2009) and Robinson et al. (2009), task design directly affects the complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) of second language performance, therefore, the quality of students' self-selected topics largely determines their writing performance. The standard for the quality of the topics is detailed in the Appendix.

standard and designed to reflect the syllabus³ content. They also meet the present and future needs of students in that the prompts mostly address issues concerning real life on campus and that they focus attention on expository and argumentative essays, since writing in an autobiographic mode such as narration and description is regarded as only a foundation for the development of writing in more formal modes. Therefore, the purposes of this study are to explore the differences between students' self-selected topics and test prompts and to investigate the causes. Based on the findings of the study, I also hope to draw implications for encouraging sustainable development in Chinese EFL students' writing skills and bettering English teacher education programs in China.

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

The present study addressed the general question "What are the differences between students' self-selected topics and large-scale test prompts in writing?" through two specific questions:

1. What do students really want to write about?
2. What are the differences between these self-selected topics and large-scale test prompts?

Participants

Sixty-two students from a normal university in Shanghai took part in the study. They were English major sophomores at about twenty years of age. Though they started learning the rhetorical modes of English writing only a

³ The syllabuses involved here are the revised Syllabus for English Majors of Institutions of Higher Learning (2000) and College English Syllabus (Revised Edition 1999).

short time ago, they were intermediate or upper-intermediate learners of English.

Data Collection

A mixed-method triangulation design was employed in this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and they were used to supplement each other in the interpretation of the findings. Every participant was asked to write down at least one or more possible topics⁴ they can think of and feel like working on.⁵ Then all these initial topic choices were collected, screened and made into a list. Another list of 32 essay writing prompts was provided alongside it. They were from the Test for English Majors Band 4 and 8 (TEM4 and TEM8) from 2001 to 2008 and from College English Test Band 4 and 6 (CET4 and CET6) from 2005 to 2008. The participants were asked to make a comparison between the lists with reference to a cover sheet (see Appendix) by rating and by writing reflective comments to show their preference for whichever list and then indicate what topics really appeal to them on both lists. In determining their final topic choices, no limit was set on how many topics students should pick. They were allowed to choose either “none” or “all”. Finally, follow-up interviews were conducted with a random selection of a dozen participants.

Qualitative data included the participants' tentative and final choices of topics, the comments they made after studying their choices and test prompts comparatively as well as the interview answers. Quantitative data included the votes each final topic gets and the ratings of the items on the cover sheet. The cover sheet included four test qualities. They were determined by

⁴ Although topics or prompts occur in different formats such as a bare one, a framed one and a text-based one, this study will concentrate only on the first type so as to make it easier to generate topics for the participants.

⁵ Considering the word “choice” can mean anything from “the choice made without knowledge of what was being chosen” to “the choice of a topic from three or more offered by the instructor” and to “anything the writer wishes to write about”, the present study adheres to the last sense.

adopting both the top-down and bottom-up approaches. In the top-down approach, I made reference to Bachman and Palmer's (1996) general model of test usefulness as well as other research papers elaborating on the qualities of oral and written tasks. The final selection was as follows: *authenticity* (Slagle, 1997), *difficulty* (Elder, Iwashita, & McNamara, 2002; Hamp-Lyons & Mathias, 1994; Kuiken & Vedder, 2008), *involvement* (Juliebo & Edwards, 1988; Lo & Hyland, 2007), and *impact* (Gordon, 1986; Gradwohl & Schumacher, 1989; Graves, 1981, 1983; Lee, 2008; McCutchen, 1986; Sullivan, 2007). In the bottom-up approach, I drew inspiration from students' free discussions to flesh out the subcategories. Authenticity examined the topic content, i.e., whether a topic was relevant to actual happenings in life and whether students had any opportunity to talk or write about it. Difficulty investigated the topic from four angles: topic orientation⁶, genre, participants' topic familiarity and their language proficiency, among which topic orientation indicated whether a topic elicited writing for the self or for the public and genre referred to the type and amount of genre-related knowledge as required by a topic. Involvement dealt with participants' interest, attentiveness and personal values such as emotional and pragmatic concerns, that is to say the potential of a topic to attract and hold students' attention, and to engage them in active participation. Impact looked into the impact a topic had on participants' writing ability, attitude towards writing and outlook on life.

RESULTS

The results were organized to address the research questions. Participants' initial and final writing topics were identified and their self-selected topics and large-scale test prompts were compared and commented.

⁶ A topic labeled as "extremely good" in orientation is one that touches upon a public issue but targets at the average students' depth of thinking and language proficiency.

Participants' Selection of Writing Topics

Altogether eighty-nine topics were collected, but only fifty-two remained on the list after repetitive or similar ones were excluded. These fifty-two topics covered a wide range of aspects in the participants' school life. To reveal students' matters of real concern, I classified them. This was done according to the key words in the topics, for example, "playing sports" in "It's Wrong to Pay People Too Much for Playing Sports". In case of either-or situations like "Surfing the Internet" which can be put under the category of either "education" or "recreation" or "communication", the root function "communication" was given the priority. As a result, the topics fell into 12 topic areas. They included family and friends, job, recreation and sports, health, education, finance, communication, society, frustrations, beauty, travel and childhood, which were listed out in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Distribution of Participants' First Topic Choices

Topic Areas	52 Initial Topics	
	Number	Percentage
family/ friends	2	3.85
job	3	5.77
recreation/ sports	7	13.46
health	1	1.92
education	8	15.38
finance	4	7.69
communication	7	13.46
society	4	7.69
frustrations	9	17.31
beauty	4	7.69
travel	2	3.85
childhood	1	1.92

Quite a number of the first topics elicited writing in a personal, expressive mode such as narration and description. They touched upon participants' favorite things as well as first experiences, for example, "my favorite song"; "my pet"; "my birthday"; and "my part-time job experience". These topics were deleted due to their autobiographic nature, leaving thirty-eight topics to

be compared with test prompts. The 38 topics now fell into 10 topic areas, cutting down on “travel” and “childhood”.

The students picked 70 final choices from the two lists. They left out no topic on the self-selected topic list or the test prompt list. Their final topic choices fell into 13 topic areas (see Table 2). The votes each final topic received added up to the sum total of the votes each topic area got. As it turned out, “education”, “frustrations”, “society” and “communication” were the hottest topic areas since they contained most of the students’ favorite topics.

TABLE 2
Distribution of Participants’ Final Topic Choices

Topic Areas	70 Final Topics		
	Number of Topics	Number of Votes	Percentage of Votes
family/friends	4	73	6.85
job	5	86	8.08
recreation/sports	3	34	3.19
health	3	76	7.14
education	10	174	16.34
finance	5	83	7.79
communication	8	135	12.68
society	14	148	13.90
frustrations	9	157	14.74
beauty	4	17	1.60
travel	3	67	6.29
science	1	8	0.75
arts	1	7	0.66

Differences between Topics and Prompts

The thirty-eight topics screened out from participants’ initial choices touched upon 10 topic areas, while the thirty-two writing prompts from national tests could be grouped in the same way into 11 topic areas (see Table 3). Topics and prompts differed in two aspects. First, either of them had some particular topic areas that the other did not have. For example, students’ self-selected topic list contained topics on “frustrations” and “beauty”, while the

test prompt list had topics on “travel”, “science” and “arts”. Second, topics and prompts had different areas of focus. The topic list emphasized areas like “frustrations”, “communication” and “education/finance/society/beauty”, whereas the prompt list laid importance on “society”, “education” and “job/travel”.

TABLE 3
A Comparison of Topic Areas between Self-Selected Topics and Test Prompts

Topic Areas	38 Self-Selected Topics		32 Test Prompts	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
family/friends	2	2.86	2	2.86
job	2	2.86	3	4.29
recreation/sports	2	2.86	1	1.43
health	1	1.43	2	2.86
education	4	5.71	6	8.57
finance	4	5.71	1	1.43
communication	6	8.57	2	2.86
society	4	5.71	10	14.29
frustrations	9	12.86	0	0.00
beauty	4	5.71	0	0.00
travel	0	0.00	3	4.29
science	0	0.00	1	1.43
arts	0	0.00	1	1.43

The ratings assigned to the eleven criteria (see Appendix) for measuring the viability of each list were analyzed by SPSS15.0. A paired samples t test was conducted eleven times to test the null hypotheses that the average of the differences between the points given to each criterion for the topic list and those for the prompt list was zero. The results displayed in Table 4 suggested statistically significant differences in topic orientation, participants' topic familiarity and the impact of the topics on participants' outlook on life, for their calculated p-value was less than 0.05. Therefore, we can safely arrive at the following conclusions from the signs of differences:

- 1) The test prompts are more publicly oriented than the self-selected topics ($t < 0$).
- 2) The self-selected topics are more accessible than the test prompts ($t > 0$).

- 3) The test prompts have a stronger impact on participants' outlook on life ($t < 0$).

TABLE 4
The Results of the Paired Samples t Test

Self-selected Topics – Test Prompts	Mean	SD	95% Confidence		t	p-value
			Interval of the			
			Lower	Upper		
Topic content	0.02	1.16	-0.27	0.32	0.16	.870
Topic orientation	-0.45	1.46	-0.82	-0.08	-2.44	.018
Genre	-0.12	1.13	-0.41	0.16	-0.85	.401
Topic familiarity	0.78	1.12	0.50	1.07	5.51	.000
Language proficiency	0.10	1.04	-0.16	0.37	0.79	.432
Interest	0.10	1.60	-0.31	0.50	0.48	.635
Attentiveness	-0.25	1.53	-0.64	0.14	-1.29	.202
Personal value	-0.30	1.39	-0.65	0.05	-1.69	.096
Writing ability	0.07	0.95	-0.17	0.31	0.60	.549
Attitude towards writing	-0.10	1.10	-0.38	0.17	-0.75	.455
Outlook on life	-0.58	1.21	-0.89	-0.27	-3.78	.000

Students' reflective comments also centered on these differences between their self-selected topics and test prompts. Some said the test prompts were "professional" and therefore "attractive". For example, prompts like "Young People Today Are More Self-Centered" and "Should One Expect a Reward When Doing a Good Deed?" were "socially-significant", for they were "thought-provoking" issues that "awakened our sense of social responsibility". In contrast, topics such as "How to Deal with the Coming Test – TEM 4" and "My Birthday" were "childish and lacking in profundity".

Some noticed that the self-selected topics were more personal than the prompts. For example, "Our topics like 'How to Prepare for TEM4' and 'Are You Homesick – A Way Out' deal with the problems we are facing now. They are closer to our lives"; "Our topics reflect our situation, world outlook, likes and dislikes. That's our view of life"; "They [our own topics] are of immediate relevance to our daily life. We have a lot to say about them like 'Why Do I Choose English as My Major?'". Others remarked that the self-selected topics were dearer. Some of them even cherished them "like my

[their] children”; “They are full of our emotion. I feel strongly about them”, since “these topics enable us to spill out our hearts instantly”.

Others remarked that test prompts like “What Have I Learnt from My Years at University?” and “The Benefits of Volunteering” were “spiritually uplifting”, for they “make us think about how we can improve ourselves and get prepared for our life and future”. Prompts like “Will E-Books Replace Traditional Books?” and “Digital Age” were “hot” and could “easily catch readers’ attention. ... They are just what I want to talk about”.

Despite the major differences, students made sporadic comments on the “shortcomings” of the final topic choices. Few participants found the prompts too difficult. According to them, “Prompts such as ‘pirated software’ are too hard for me. Maybe it is easier for me to write in Chinese”; “‘Ambition’ is too abstract; “‘Going abroad’ is far from our daily life and we have no experience”. However, students’ self-selected topics were under more severe attacks. For instance, some of the topics were considered “too old, technical and broad”. Namely, “‘Does Happiness Lie in Money’ is too old; ‘Plastic Surgery Is Wrong’ is too technical; and ‘Generation Gap’ is too broad”. And “test prompts such as ‘Is It Wise to Make Friends Online?’ and ‘The Impact of the Internet on Communication’ are more manageable than our topic ‘Surfing the Net’” so that we can write with a “focus”. ...

During the interviews, participants briefly described the process of drawing up their own topic lists, which revealed three major sources of their topic choices as well as the reasons behind their reactions to this topic generation requirement. Among them, three students reproduced topics (e.g., “Does Happiness Lie in Money”) either from writing prompts in previous large-scale tests or from debate topics offered by teachers of other courses such as the spoken English course, because they found it “too difficult to come up with topics for writing themselves” (student Jiang), or they were “too frustrated by the test pressure” (student Wang), or even “too lazy to think” (student Dong); Two students scribbled down whatever topics they had bumped into from dormitory conversations or newspaper headlines (e.g., “House Prices in Chinese Cities”, “Should We Encourage Plastic Surgery?”

and “Marriage Certificates Should Be Abolished”), for one of them said “I have no topics. But I have to do what the teacher asks me to do [i.e., to write topics] ... I wrote the plastic surgery topic. Because my roommates were talking about it these days ...” (student Li); Seven students picked up topics from their main concerns in life (e.g., “Surfing the Net”, “How to Deal with the Coming Test – TEM 4” and “My Birthday”), since they believed that familiar topics enabled them to “meet the word limit” (student Zhang), to “write longer and score higher” (student Wu) and to “feel relaxed to write about personal worries and happiness” (student Miao).

DISCUSSION

The results showed that the participants were not fully capable of choosing topics for themselves. Although one or two test prompts failed to mimic students’ real life situations⁷, the open criticisms on their own topic choices suggested that the participants were not really pleased with their performance in topic selection and there was much more room for improvement in students’ topics. Such inadequacies observed in students’ topic generation can be attributed to the specific EFL teaching and learning context, which leads to the following problems: students’ failure to adopt more effective strategies in the topic selection process, their lack of topic choice training in early writing instruction and their inability to learn topic generation from reading prompts.

Failure to Adopt More Effective Strategies in the Process

An analysis of the sources of students’ self-selected topics shows that their direct and indirect experiences are factors that may have impact on students’

⁷ Originally, the test prompt “Pirated Software” is for non-English majors and “Ambition” is for senior English majors. It is no wonder that some of the English sophomores participating in this study found them challenging.

choice of topics. Whether these factors are constructive or destructive depends to a large degree on the use of strategies. However, as “language learning strategies” is not listed as a compulsory course in the Syllabus for English Majors, students use different strategies intuitively and randomly. Generally speaking, collaborative learning strategies that promote higher order thinking skills are less likely to be employed, since on the whole classroom management in China still follows the traditional norm. For example, seats are arranged in rows and columns instead of in a circle or in the horseshoe shape. Such configuration facilitates independent work but discourages student interaction.

In the present study, three kinds of strategy misuse are discerned. First, a few participants followed the avoidance strategy. Instead of modeling their topics on the previous writing prompts or debate topics, they would copy others' topics indiscriminately. This partially accounts for the overlap of topics and topic areas between the topic list and the prompt list (see Table 3). Second, some participants used the perfunctory strategy. They turned to hot issues for reference and would choose topics for themselves but they wanted to get the process over with earlier and were too anxious to assess the feasibility of their choices (see the popularity of the topic area “society” in Table 2). Hence some of their topics are not manageable, for there may be a gap between what they have noticed in everyday life and what they can actually complete a piece of writing. For example, topics like “House Prices in Chinese Cities” and “Should We Encourage Plastic Surgery?” challenge writers' topical knowledge and terminology, and “Marriage Certificates Should Be Abolished” touches upon a controversial issue. The participants were aware of the shortcomings of the topics themselves. In their comments they wrote: “The prompts are uplifting and healthier”; “Topics like ‘House Prices in Chinese Cities’ and ‘Should We Encourage Plastic Surgery?’ are too technical”. Third, some participants adopted the compensatory strategy. Preoccupied with possible future “benefits” of being able to choose their own topics, they exploited their first-hand experiences to write what they feel strongly about. Thus, they could either avail themselves of this opportunity to

overcome their weaknesses in writing or to write for themselves. In general, these topics are manageable but need improving both in depth and in orientation as compared to prompts. For example, some participants found it easier to “meet the word limit” if they avoided reaching deeper into their experiences, so they came up with the topic “Surfing the Net” (versus “The Impact of the Internet on Communication” in the test prompt list), although they knew the importance of narrowing the topic down. A few other participants combined public writing with private writing like “How to Deal with the Coming Test – TEM 4” and “My Birthday” to reduce their anxieties about writing and to find an outlet for their thoughts and emotions. This change in orientation resulted in weaker topic impact on students’ outlook on life (see topics concerning “frustrations, finance, job, beauty and education” in Table 1) and higher accessibility of these self-selected topics (see Table 4).

Lack of Topic Choice Training in Early Writing Instruction

Students’ topic selection process was affected not only by the strategies they had employed in accomplishing the task, but also by some general constraints. In China, determined by its status as a foreign language, English is mainly learned in the classroom where students hear and speak it in an artificial context. Teaching and learning is highly ordered and organized and students’ progress is checked by way of exams. Naturally, prompts have to be used to assess students’ writing ability. These prompts in turn affect teaching. In test preparation, the ability to choose topics is neither required nor necessary. A multiplicity of prompts are available from national and international standardized tests such as TEM, CET, TOEFL and IELTS, not even including those from simulated tests. In course books, none of them (Bander, 1978; Langan, 2004; Ma & Mao, 2003; Wang, 1997; Yang, 1999) credits a section to topic choice except *A Handbook of Writing* (Ding, Wu, & Zhong, 1994). This best-selling course book on writing which has been reprinted 32 times within 18 years and which has reached about one million total copies does devote a part to topic choice, nevertheless, only thesis topic

choice. The situation seems better in everyday teaching when some teachers ask their students to keep a journal regularly. Students get an opportunity to write freely on whatever topics they like, but the casual nature of the journal may well restrict students' choice to light topics and topics of immediate relevance to them, which may account for the differences between their topics and the prompts in orientation, accessibility and impact (see Table 4).

Inability to Learn Topic Generation from Reading Prompts

Though topic generation is not taught in class, students have rich exposure to prompts. But their ability to choose topics for themselves is not thus facilitated. In China, students and teachers regard books as an unparalleled authority which embodies "knowledge, wisdom and truth" (Maley, 1986, p. 103). Book knowledge is not only treated with high reverence and value but also "can be taken out and put inside the students' heads" (Maley, 1986, p. 103). Many Chinese students exert great efforts to memorize the contents of their books so as to reproduce them in tests. In this way, they have a better grasp of basic factual knowledge than higher order thinking skills (HOTS) such as creative and critical thinking skills, which hampers the structuralization and internalization processes of knowledge⁸. As a result, students have difficulty in building up new knowledge upon what they have already known and in making connections between concepts and skills as well as between the world and themselves. With regard to topic selection, they are poor at recognizing areas of writing possibilities and insensitive to potential points for discussion. For example, they have to rely on what is near to their experience rather than what is further from their experience for topic

⁸ While the concept of HOTS became a major educational agenda item with the 1956 publication of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, it did not receive due attention from Chinese educationalists until the recent decade. For example, "logic and critical thinking" was first offered as an elective course in Beijing University in 2003 and publications on macro-level (Yang, 2004) as well as micro-level training of critical thinking and writing (Qu, 2005, 2006) began to emerge.

ideas, such as “My Birthday” instead of similar topics, say, “The World Car-Free Day”. Even when the latter choice is suggested, students tend to abandon it for “it’s boring to keep repeating the necessities of designating a car-free day”. They fail to relate what they have learned about audience and purpose in writing to the present topic and see other possibilities of approaching the topic like questioning the car-free day’s role in promoting green transport or developing it into a piece of narrative or expository writing.

CONCLUSION

In view of these participants’ performance and the cause analysis, the following recommendations need to be considered to revise the current practice and provide assistance to students in topic selection:

- 1) Give students learner strategy training. When students have a general idea of the classification system of strategies, they may pick up whichever strategy that satisfies their present need. For example, if cognitive strategies like analyzing and generalizing do not work in topic selection, they may resort to social strategies, say, working in pairs or groups. Collaborative learning activities relieve the tension and provide scaffold support. In so doing, students may further discover and develop more strategies to supplement their repertoire.
- 2) Add a section of topic choice to course books on basic writing. This section will lead teachers to reexamine our current curriculum for writing instruction at the college level and offer students some formal training. Through hands-on experiences, teachers are in a better position to monitor students’ progress at any step, say, narrowing down the subject into manageable topics for writing, screening the plethora of possibilities, playing with features of topics, or following guidelines to word the topics. Both successful and failed attempts will help students improve, assess as well as interpret topic choices.

- 3) Engage students in reflective writing. Although students do not normally have teachers' breadth of vision and their topics lack profundity, reflection pushes students to process what they have learnt and to assimilate the unstructured parts so that they may maximize their knowledge and experience. It enhances students' HOTS such as critical thinking, analysis and problem solving. In this manner, they retain and conceptualize prompts better. Also, the development of critical thinking ability aids the idea generation process, reducing the probability of topic rejection.

The significance of this study lies in the awareness-raising findings and their potential relevance to other foreign language speakers especially Asian EFL learners. Based on data from Mainland Chinese EFL students, we can see that differences between self-selected topics and large-scale test prompts are caused by teacher-centered, test-oriented and book-centered English teaching methods. As long as the traditional teaching methods prevail in English classes, students' topic selection ability is bound to be impaired. But this situation has not aroused due attention and studies examining students' topic choice are underrepresented in current literature related to EFL writing instruction. As is revealed in this study as well as other studies carried out in first language or ESL context, topic choice carries profound implications in EFL writing instruction and teacher education programs. Future studies are worthwhile. They may be conducted in the following two directions.

One is to further explore the possible variables involved in students' choice of writing topics, for topic selection is no simple task. When participants are given the freedom to write on any topic they can think of, choice is more than choice itself. It is a multifaceted construct that may be influenced by factors other than students' direct and indirect experiences such as their interest, concern, needs and ability. The improvement of students' topic selection ability requires orchestrated workings of all the factors.

The other is to further verify the effects that topic choice exerts on writing performance, as disagreement is perceived in the findings of previous researches. That is, some maintain that topic choice leads to improvements in

writing scores (Gordon, 1986; Gradwohl & Schumacher, 1989; McCutchen, 1986), while others do not (Barry, Nielsen, Glasnapp, Poggio, & Sundbye, 1997; Juliebo & Edwards, 1988; Sullivan, 2007). Students' incompetence in topic choice may explain the difference, but such an explanation needs verification.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study has been funded by a research grant from Shanghai Municipal Education Commission on key curriculum projects. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of her students at Shanghai Normal University in making this research possible. She is also indebted to Professor Barbara Levin, Professor Hephzibah Roskelly and Professor Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro for valuable discussions. Finally, the author wishes to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions.

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APPENDIX Cover Sheet

Regardless of the time and word limits imposed by the test prompts, please rate the two lists of topics carefully on a five-point scale and then elaborate on one or several points that impress you most.

5=extremely good; 4=good; 3=moderate; 2= poor; 1=extremely poor

	38 Self-Selected Topics	32 Test Prompts
Authenticity:		
Topic content		
Difficulty:		
Topic orientation		
Genre		
Topic familiarity		
Language proficiency		
Involvement:		
Interest		
Attentiveness		
Personal value (emotion; pragmatic concerns)		
Impact:		
Writing ability		
Attitude towards writing		
Outlook on life		
Total		

The above is only for your reference, please feel free to voice your own opinions. Thank you for your participation.