Integrating Participation Goals in Writing Activities for EFL College Students

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Abstract

Many EFL students have difficulty generating ideas for writing topics. Writing instructors tend to select topics that are too abstract, repetitive, uninteresting, vague, too broad or unfamiliar. To help students generate ideas for writing topics, the present study suggests the integration of participation goals in writing instruction. Participation goals are those that require the students' involvement in social and civic issues. Writing teachers can select topics related to local and global social, educational, health, political and/or technological issues with which the students are familiar and to which they can relate. The students can describe a problem, its causes and suggest solutions to it. The integration of participation goals proved to be effective in developing college students' writing skills.

Keywords: EFL Writing Problems, EFL Writing Instructors, Generating Ideas

Introduction

Writing poses numerous difficulties for first and second language learners of all ages and in all subject areas because the writing process is very complex. It involves numerous sub-skills such as generating ideas, writing a thesis statement and/or topic sentences, developing single and/or multiple paragraphs, selecting an appropriate organizational structure, making the paragraph or essay cohesive and coherent, constructing various types of sentences, choosing appropriate words, paying attention to grammatical correctness, use of transitional words, correct spelling, capitalization, indentation, writing the first draft, revising it and formatting the paragraph and/or essay.

A review of the literature has shown numerous studies that have investigated the difficulties that learners, in general, and college students, in particular, have in writing in the foreign/second language. For example, academically at risk undergraduate students with writing difficulties made more spelling errors and used less sophisticated vocabulary in their essays (Harrison, 2009; Harrison &Beres, 2007). Turkish EFL students made verb related and noun modification errors (Demirel, 2017). Similarly, Chinese students misused tenses and verb forms in addition spelling errors, errors in singular and plural forms, parts of speech, non-finite verbs, pronouns, run on sentences and transfer of Chinese expressions to English (Zhan, 2015). Saudi female students at the English Department, Majmaah University in Saudi Arabia made punctuation, spelling, preposition and article errors, used wrong verb tenses and faulty word forms in that order (Khatter, 2019).

A second group of studies revealed problems in generating and organizing ideas as in Fareed, Ashraf & Bilal's (2016) study which revealed Pakistani undergraduate ESL students' lack of ideas and poor

organizational structure, insufficient mastery of grammatical structures, and vocabulary, writing anxiety and dependence on their L1. In Mogahed's (2011) study, students complained of lack of ideas whenever they wanted to write an essay and writing instructors expressed their unwillingness to spend half of the class time telling their students what to write in their essays. In addition to difficulties in choice of words, grammatical structures, spelling, and punctuation, Iranian EFL students had problems with the organization of ideas in their essays, unfamiliarity with the different writing genres, rhetorical structures, negative transfer from L1 to English, and difficulty in using idioms and collocations (Derakhshan & Karimian Shirejini, 2020). Most Indonesian students had problems in generating and organizing ideas and content, could not write a thesis statement and topic sentences, could not develop coherent essays, and could not write comparison and contrast essays. 90% of Indonesian students in the study did not know what a thesis statement is, had limited vocabulary, and made a lot of spelling and grammatical mistakes (Uba & Souidi, 2020; Toba, Noor & Sanu, 2019). Students in Mason, Harris & Graham's (2011) study lacked planning, composing, and revising skills required for effective writing. Likewise, Gezmis (2020) found that drafting and revising are problematic for freshman students studying English, translation, and interpreting.

A third group of studies analyzed factors that lead to effective writing instruction and sources of difficulties in L2 writing. Zumbrunn & Krause (2012) identified five major factors that lead to effective writing instruction: (1) writing instructors' beliefs, experiences, and practices; (2) student motivation and engagement; (3) clear and flexible planning; (4) daily writing instruction and practice; and (5) a scaffolded collaboration between instructors and students, i.e., successive levels of support from instructors to help the students reach higher levels of writing skill acquisition and greater independence in the writing process that they would not be able to achieve without the help of their instructors.

As for the sources of writing difficulties, Tanyer & Susoy (2019) identified three main sources of difficulties that Turkish first-year preservice English teachers have: (i) student-based sources such as limited practice, nervousness and fear, inadequate linguistic competence, skipping classes, low mastery of writing skills, lack of planning and time management, negative attitudes towards the instructor and lack of motivation towards writing; (ii) lecturer-based sources such as the instructor's attitude, instructional strategies and low expectations of students; and (iii) educational practices such as language learning before entering college, type of writing exams given to the students, the complex nature of the writing skill, inadequate feedback given to the students on their writing, use of unclear evaluation criteria of students' essays by the instructors, and insufficient time allocated to L2writing instruction.

A fourth group of research studies focused on specific writing practices that proved to be effective in enhancing students' writing skills. Fareed, Ashraf & Bilal (2016) used remedial exercises such as reading extra material, conscious and incidental vocabulary learning, more writing practice, reforming the writing assessment techniques, creating writing competitions, and training writing instructors.

To improve the form of writing, some studies had students construct simple sentences and word sequences in writing descriptive paragraphs (Datchuk & Kubina, 2017; Datchuk, 2017); teaching grammar, spelling, and punctuation in context (Zhan, 2015; Derakhshan&KarimianShirejini, 2020); and brainstorming words related to the topic the students have to write about in class before assigning the topic for homework (Mogahed, 2011).

To improve the content of writing, some researchers recommended strategy and language skill development (Myles, 2002); giving students an input text with comparative ideas to read before writing, then writing an argument essay of the same topic in 30 minutes (Han, 2020);use of learning tasks designed as epistemic practices, i.e., processes and procedures to make content similar to real life experiences, and following a learning progression approach to enhance student-instructors' argumentative writing (Álvarez Valdivia & Lafuente Martínez, 2019); focused free writing (Asraf, Ahmed &Eng, 2018); collaborative writing combined with reflective exercises and classroom reporting strategies (Villarreal, & Gil-Sarratea, 2020; Mutwarasibo, 2013); and using Facebook to practice write in English (Sabaruddin, 2019).

The review of the literature has shown that prior studies that investigated students' writing weaknesses mainly focused on identifying students' errors in grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics (capitalization, punctuation, and spelling). Fewer studies focused on students' weaknesses in generating and organizing ideas. However, none of the previous researchers investigated the types of writing topics that are easy and interesting and those that are difficult, abstract, repetitive, uninteresting, or unfamiliar for EFL students to generate ideas about. None of the previous studies has investigated the integration of participation goals when selecting writing topics forL2students to write about.

Need for the Present Study

The author conducted an exploratory study to reveal EFL undergraduate students' writing weaknesses and their views about the topics they are asked to write about in their English writing courses at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. At the beginning of the semester, the students were given a writing pretest. They were asked to write a paragraph in which they introduced themselves. A qualitative analysis of the students' paragraphs revealed weaknesses in

generating and organizing ideas and difficulties in expressing themselves. Many students wrote incomprehensible sentences and could not put few words together to form correct sentences. They made several spelling mistakes per line, did not use punctuation marks at all and did not capitalize words.

Moreover, responses to a questionnaire-survey with a sample of 120 students enrolled in the Writing I, II, III and IV courses at COLT about the writing topics given for homework and on midterm tests and final exams by writing instructors at COLT showed that the students feel that writing assignments are a chore. They have difficulty generating ideas, selecting relevant details, expressing ideas clearly, and organizing main ideas and details. The students reported that the topics are uninteresting, abstract, too broad, vague and unfamiliar. Many do not relate to the topics. They do not know what to write. They do not have ideas. They feel anxious and worry every time they have a writing assignment or a writing test. Some even hate writing classes and resort to copying paragraphs and essays from the Internet or seek the help of a specialized person or a student in higher levels in the college to write an essay for them.

Likewise, responses to a questionnaire-survey by 15 writing instructors at COLT showed that many instructors have difficulty selecting topics for writing activities that are interesting for the students. They complained of the students' inability to generate ideas for the writing topics they assign. No matter how hard they try to brainstorm the writing topics in class, very few students can generate ideas, but most students do not know what to say or what to write.

Furthermore, analysis of a sample of writing topics collected from the 15 instructors who taught Writing I, II, III and IV over 12 semesters showed that instructors tend to select topics that are too abstract (topics 2 & 5 in the Appendix), repetitive (topics 18 &19), uninteresting (topic 4), unfamiliar (topic 1, 5& 17) for the students, or the students might write a story or topic they have already memorized (topic 20). The students have no direct experience with some topics such as *hosting a person from another country; gadgets, what it is like to live in a multicultural society;* and *someone who started a personal business.* Topics 2, 3 & 5 are too broad, and topics 1, 4, 6, 7&8, are vague. For topics 9 to 17, the students may supply a word such as "Yes or No", a short sentence *"my father pays for my education",* a single example, few words such as *"I use WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook",* or "T.V., newspapers, Twitter and Facebook" rather than a paragraph or essay as the way the topics are formulated require such short answers, and sound like Yes/No questions. Some instructors confuse narrative, descriptive, persuasive topics. The instructions they give are not specific and do not define what the students should do, and how. Some give the students 2-3 topics to choose from. This affects the test validity and reliability and makes it difficult to compare students' performance.

Aims of the Study

To help college students learning English as a foreign language at COLT generate ideas for the topics assigned in writing classes, this study proposes the integration of participation goals in writing instruction in English. It proposes a model for integrating participation goals in in EFL college writing classrooms. It defines participation goals and gives examples of writing themes and topics that involve participation goals.

The integration of participation goals in writing instruction will reduce students' stress and mental burden when they have to write about a topic and will help the students focus on the form (grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics) only rather than on form and content together. They will help students generate ideas about current and global topics they are familiar with and to which they can relate. In addition, mastery of the writing skills is significant for the students at COLT as they are being trained to become professional translators and interpreters. Producing an English translation which is comprehensible, cohesive, coherent, using correct sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, is important.

Curriculum, Tasks and Materials

Students at take 4 semesters of English language courses in the first four semesters of the translation program (6 courses per semester, 20 hours a week) as follows: 4 listening, 4 speaking, 4 reading, 4 writing, 2 vocabulary building and 2 grammar courses. The textbooks used for the writing courses at COLT are as follows:

[1] **Writing I:** Segal, Margaret &Pavl, Cheryl (2015-2016). *Interactions 1: A Writing Process. Middle East Diamond Edition. McGraw-Hill.* This textbook is for high beginning to low intermediate-level students. It follows a writing-process approach. It focuses on sentence development and introduces students to the paragraph.

[2] **Writing II:** Segal, Margaret & Pavlik, Cheryl (2007). *Interactions 2: Writing. Middle East Diamond Edition. McGraw-Hill.* This textbook is for low intermediate to intermediate-level students. It follows a writing-process skill development approach. It focuses on paragraph development and introduces students to the essay.

[3] **Writing III:** Blass, Laurie & Pike-Baky, Meredith (2015-2016). *Mosaic 1 Writing. Middle East diamond Edition.* McGraw-Hill. This textbook is for intermediate to high intermediate-level students. It follows a writing-process approach and focuses on paragraph review and essay development.

[4] **Writing IV:** Pike-Baky, Meredith & Laurie Blass, Laurie (2013). *Mosaic 2 Writing. Middle East Diamond Edition.* McGraw-Hill. This textbook is for high intermediate to low advanced-level students. It follows a writing-process approach and focuses on academic essay development.

Instructional Model with Participation Goals

What Are Participation Goals?

The model for selecting writing topics for EFL college students is based on Boocker's (1985) classification of goals. Boocker classified goals into: (i) *Knowledge goals*, i.e., goals that specify the facts, concepts, or generalizations to be acquired by the students; (ii) *skill goals*; (iii) *participation goals* which focus on students' involvement in social groups and civic affairs.

The proposed model focuses on participations goals and on writing topics that require the students to describe a current social issue, problem, or event; diagnose the problem; and propose solutions.

Selecting Participation Topics for writing Activities

Writing instructors can select topics related to current local and global social, educational, health (medical), political, economic, travel, and/or technological issues, events and/or problems with which the students are familiar, which they read or hear on T.V, and social media, and to which they can relate. To help the students relate to the topic, the instructor should personalize the topic, i.e., formulate it as the students view it, and give a context situation. Project-based activities can be also used. The instructor should make the topic specific and focused by asking for certain details, causes, factors, and/or solutions. Flow charts and cognitive maps can be used to show the details, relations, environmental and social factors. The following are some examples of participation topics:

- Give 5 precautionary measures for people in your community to reduce the risk of catching the corona virus.

- Give 5 ways for creating leisure-time activities for children staying home during the COVID-19 lockdown.

- Street children in your city: examples, causes, and solutions.

- Causes of obesity in children: what are your suggestions for helping children lose weight and avoid obesity?

- Traffic jams during the rush hours in the morning, afternoon and at night in Riyadh. Give 3-5 causes of traffic jams and 3-5 ways for reducing traffic jams.

- Describe a terrorist attack in Saudi Arabia or another country. Describe what happened, who did it, the casualties, why it happened and is there a way to stop terrorist attacks?

- From your point of view, give 3-5 problems or negative issues related to social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and others. Choose one only and give some negative personal experiences.

- Give 3-5 causes of air pollution in your city, 3-5 effects of pollution on the environments, and 3-5 solutions to reduce air pollution in your city.

- Since people cannot travel abroad due to the corona virus pandemic and if you were the minister of tourism, give 5 actions that you would take to promote tourism in Saudi cities such as Abha, Mada'in Saleh, or beaches along the red sea in Saudi Arabia (choose one area only).

- Some people have lost their jobs due to corona virus pandemic. Are there new types of jobs? Give 3-5 examples of alternative jobs for unemployed people in your community.

The topic has to be new and has not been practiced before. The topic should be concrete and within the students' background knowledge. The instructions should specify the essay length and components such as how to write a topic sentence, a conclusion, types and number of supporting ideas (factors, causes, uses, classification, arguments, differences, and similarities), use of cohesive ties, correct grammatical structures, spelling, capitalization, punctuation and so on, as in the following example:

Many children nowadays spend a lot of time browsing their mother's mobile phone or iPad. Do you think children should use the iPad as long as they wish? *Write a 5-paragraph essay in which you give 3-5 benefits and 3-5 negative effects of the iPad on children. You may interview few mothers in your family and ask them about the positive and negative effects of the iPad on their children and report their opinion in your essay. Give your paragraph a title. Your paragraph should have a topic sentence and a conclusion. Use simple, compound, and complex sentences. Pay attention to verb tenses, articles, and prepositions. Add transitional words and conjunctions where necessary. Indent, insert punctuation mark, and capitalize words where necessary. When you finish, reread your paragraph, and edit it for content and form. Double-check your spelling, use of punctuation marks, indentation, capitalization, conjunctions, tenses, prepositions, use of articles and so on.*

Instructional Phases with Participation topics

Pre-task Phase

In this phase, the instructor assigns a topic either to be brainstormed at home or in class. At home, the students can brainstorm the assigned topic individually, in pairs or small groups, online or off-line. They can read some articles, conduct some interviews, collect information, or watch a video related to the topic.

Task Cycle (during the class session)

In class, the students brainstorm the topic individually, in pairs or small groups by asking *"what, who, whom, where, why, how, when"* on the topic. Vocabulary items, grammatical structures, or functions that the students need to use to express themselves can be given and explained briefly. After brainstorming, the students start writing a thesis statement for their essay or a topic sentence for their paragraph. The instructor checks and helps the students with their topic sentences and gives feedback on them. Then the students make a list of points or details related to the thesis statement or topic sentence. A time limit is always set for writing the topic sentence or thesis statement and the list of details. Students are encouraged to write and not to worry about grammatical or spelling mistakes. At this stage, focus should be on ideas, making them relevant, clear, and specific and on how to arrange ideas. The instructor checks and helps the students. The students may finish writing their essays, revise and format them at home. They can post their essays on Blackboard or any other platform.

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Post-task phase

In correcting the finished essays or paragraphs, focus should be on ideas and information, i.e., the topic sentence and supporting details and making sure the paragraph is cohesive and coherent, and that ideas are relevant, concrete, specific, clear, and detailed. One or two types of grammatical errors are marked and corrected by the students each time an essay is assigned as it is impossible for the students to conceptualize and correct all types of grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors. The instructor provides feedback on areas of improvement and comments on few weaknesses. If a task is difficult, additional examples of the same type are given and practiced. Always thank the students for their efforts. Give a new topic and instructions for brainstorming it at home for the next class or next week's tasks.

Assessment

At the end of the semester, students enrolled in the different sections of the Writing II courses were given a posttest that required them to write an essay about a participation topic. Clear and specific instructions on the specifications of the essay were given as follows:

> *Based on your experience with distance learning during the corona virus pandemic, what do you like and dislike about distance learning and face-to-face learning in the classroom. Write a paragraph between 10-15 lines in which you give 3-5 likes and 3-5 dislikes to support your comparison. Give your paragraph a title. Your paragraph should have a topic sentence and a conclusion. Use simple, compound, and complex sentences. Pay attention to verb tenses, articles, and prepositions. Add transitional words and conjunctions where necessary. Indent, insert punctuation mark, and capitalize words where necessary. When you finish, reread your paragraph, and edit it for content and form. Double-check your spelling, use of punctuation marks, indentation, capitalization, conjunctions, tenses, prepositions, use of articles and so on.*

Reflections

Results of the pot test essays written by the students in the sections that integrated participation goals in writing instruction scored significantly higher than students in the sections that practiced writing traditional topics as those mentioned in the appendix. Use of participation topics in writing practice was significantly more effective. They proved to be an important factor in enhancing the writing quality of unskilled, low ability EFL students and resulted in a significant improvement in their post-test scores.

Qualitative analysis of the posttest essays showed that students who wrote about participation topics exhibited a great improvement in their writing ability and writing quality. They became more competent, could write fluently, and communicate easily. They wrote long essays, long sentences and compound and complex structures instead of incomprehensible sentences at the beginning of the semester. They produced more details, more cohesive and coherent essays, and better organized ideas.

Furthermore, responses to a post-treatment questionnaire administered at the end of the semester showed that the integration of participation goals in writing instruction had a positive effect on students' attitude towards writing. Writing about current local and global issues and proposing solutions to social problem made the writing class fun. They enjoyed writing about tangible real-life issues with which they are familiar. They used writing as a means of communication about favorable authentic everyday-life situations. Writing became an enjoyable task rather than a chore. The students became more relaxed. They learnt to search for information related to the assigned writing topics. Their English improved greatly as they did not have to struggle with lack of ideas and had only to focus on the form. Writing about participation topics enlarged their vocabulary knowledge in many fields.

Conclusion

The present study proposed the integration of participation in the topics chosen in writing courses offered to students in Writing I, II, III and IV at COLT. A variety of participation themes should be covered. The themes selected should be of interest to the students and should be related to what is going on around them locally and globally. The Difficulty level, degree of complexity and familiarity should be chosen in terms of students' proficiency level and the writing course level they are enrolled in, and reason for which the students are learning English. Students can also suggest writing topics of interest to them. The more the students write, the more they improve and master the different writing skills.

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APPENDIX

Sample of Writing Topics Collected from Writing Instructors at COLT

Topics sharing the same instructions were grouped together.
1. Write a 5-paragraph argumentative essay, of no less than 600 words, on:
   - *Women hit the gym only to look beautiful not healthy.*
   - *Selfies promote self-obsession.*
   - *Is there more pressure on men to succeed than on women?*
   - *Advantages/disadvantages of living in a multicultural society.*
2. Write a 5-paragraph classification essay, of no less than 400 words, on:
   - *Discrimination*

- *Bias*
- *Favoritism*
- *Mental disorders*
- *Social issues*
- *Gadgets*
- *Genetic-Diseases*
- *Educational system.*

3. Write a 5-paragraph essay, of no less than 400 words, on one of the following topics:
   - *Success*
   - *A Good Husband*

4. Write a two-paragraph anecdote, of no less than 250 words, on the following topic:
   - *The day you made the right choice that changed your life.*
   - *The day you realized that life is not a bed of roses (life is not all about comfort and ease)*
   - *The day you learnt not to let grass grow under your feet (meaning not to delay doing any task)*
   - *Look before you leap (you should not act without first considering the possible consequences or dangers).*
   - *One man's meat is another man poison* (things liked or good for one person may be disliked or harmful to another).

5. Write one paragraph, of no less than 100 words, on the following topic:
   - *Islamophobia*
   - *Bullying*
   - *Racism*
   - *Xenophobia*
   - *Ethical Hackers*

6. Write one paragraph, using the "divided" organizational style, on *a local belief or saying about 2 types of food, herbs, or beverages.*

7. Write a paragraph (7-10 sentences) *describinga step-by-step process performed by you or a machine.*

8. What resources exist in the community to help teens who are depressed or in trouble?

9. Have you ever seen a medical emergency?

10. Have you ever had guests from other countries to your home?

11. Is there much crime in the area where you live?

12. Give an example of introducing a personal opinion.

13. Who is paying your expenses while you are in school?

14. What are the media? Give examples.

15. What methods of communication do you use to keep in touch?

16. How can you describe the treatment of animals in the world?

17. Talk about people you know who have started their own business.

18. Write a paragraph about one of the following topics. (A) Your best friend (B) Yourself

19. Describe your family.

20. Write a short story that includes a main character, setting, conflict, and resolution. It could be a *personal story, a family story, a story about your town or country, or a folktale* that you have heard as a child.

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