TOPIC INTEREST AND TOPIC CONGRUENCE: AFFECTS L2 WRITING?

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ABSTRACT

Writing in second language is, in nature, a complex cognitive process that involves a series of mental activities like 'logical thinking, reasoning and deduction'. L2 writer has to confer with his knowledge, understanding, beliefs and experience about the topic along with employing other skills and strategies whilst writing. This article examines the role of two variables like 'topic congruence' and 'topic interest' in L2 writing of Bangladeshi EFL learners at undergraduate level. Twenty-five FL learners wrote an argumentative essay in English on 'Death Sentence –should be banned as an inhuman penalty'. A quality analysis of 'content', 'organization', 'vocabulary', 'mechanics' and 'grammar' has been done and the results showed that 'topic interest' had positive effects on L2 writers' content, organization, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics to a great extent. But 'topic congruence' had little or no impact on their writing performance. Than five of the participants from each of the interested and uninterested groups chosen randomly were interviewed by the author so that the results obtained from the quantitative data analysis be confirmed in qualitative scrutiny too. Finally, implications have been put so that EFL teachers in the same context use up much attention in the discourse and pragmatic aspects of L2 writing instead of caring grammar only.

KEYWORDS: Topic Interest, Topic Congruence, L2 Writer, Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Mechanics and Grammar

INTRODUCTION

Acoording to Xinyan Li (2008), writers in English are required to conceive the ideas, choose the appropriate words and material to construct the paragraphs complete the sentences in logical order, use certain writing techniques and doing the revisions etc. from preparing the writing to its completion. Writing is really much more than 'orthographic symbolization of speech' and most notably it is 'a purposeful selection and organization of experience' (Arapoff, 1967: 33). Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) assume that writing, together with other cognitive strategies, 'involves the mental construction of the topic and is developed in view the demand and the knowledge systems of the writer' [cited in (Rűdiger J. Seitj 2009: 74)].

L2 writing is, so, more complex than L1 writing. L1 writing involves 'producing content, drafting ideas, revising writing, choosing appropriate vocabulary, and editing text' while L2 writing involves 'all of these elements jumbled with second language processing issues'. (Mark Wolfersberger 2003: 1). L2 writing 'challenging' because they are faced with social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition. This is also dynamic cognitive process where writers transform, confirm and generate ideas; retrieve L2 forms; and control the writing procedure [Guo, Liu 1997, (cited in Xinyan Li, 2008: 114)].

Devine *et al.* (1993) noted that both L1 and L2 writers demonstrated a 'multidimensional representation' of different writing behaviors like emphasizing 'cohesion, consistency of ideas, style, and creativeness' etc and L1 writers, in his study, showed a 'coherent representation' of the interaction among all these dimensions while the majority of the l2

writers considered these dimensions as conflicting and competitive (Cited in Marie-Laure Barbier and Nicole Spinelli-Jullien 2009: 25).

Generating, planning and formulating ideas and text seems more difficult in L2 writing than those in case of L1. Roca de Larios *et al.* (2008) concluded that proficient L2 writers spent a lot of time to find a good match between intention and expression. (Cited in Marie-Laure Barbier and Nicole Spinelli-Jullien 2009: 26) This translation process of concept into words is also more constraining in L2 than in L1 (Yau 1991, Cited in Marie-Laure Barbier and Nicole Spinelli-Jullien 2009: 26). It has been recognized that L2 writers naturally draw topic – related phrases and conceptualize topic related sentences from and in mind while generating a text. Thus learners' knowledge, information and beliefs regarding the topic work along with 'transforming' and 'reworking information' strategies during writing. And in Berieter & Scardamalia's (1987) conclusion we find an L2 writer puts 'concepts and solving problems' together 'in a two-way interaction between continuously developing knowledge and developing text' (Cited in Johanne Myles 2002: 3).

The Flower & Hays model (1980, 1981) exemplifies 'the problem solving activities' as conferring with audience, topic, assignment, the writer's persona, the construction of meaning and the production of the formal text. (Cited in Johanne Myles 2002: 3) 'Topic', of any writing assignment directly relates to learners' attitude and motivation in performing the task as the presented idea of topic interacts with their existing cognitive capacities. Moreover, any culture-specific schemata or abstract mental representation of the concepts about things, events or situation might also lead to L2 writing difficulties. The nature of topic influences the performing way of brainstorming, understanding the idea, selecting gist to build paragraphs, logical judgment, analysis and deduction through writing. Topic interest creates integrative motivation of the writer as he feels easily connected with that particular context. And an L2 writer having integrative motivation retrieves content from memory with regard to topical and genre cues more appropriately than a learner with no interest does (Knowledge-telling Model).

However, it is natural that L2 learners might often face some assignments or tasks having a litigious topic. Besides, their interest in that issue is also considerable. So, this essay specifies to find out whether L2 writers' prior beliefs towards a debatable topic, their stance with regard to a position, and interest in the topic could affect their written text or writing process. Would these facilitate or impede the performance in some way?

L2 Writers' Topic Congruence and Topic Interest

Human memory is highly constructive and Bartlett (1932) and Spiro (1980) have observed that we are likely to 'reorganize and reevaluate it in a way that is coherent to the truth values held' in our belief system [Cited in Lee 2009: 160].

Lee, 2009 and many other researchers especially in the field of social-psychology raised the question whether L2 learners' 'prior beliefs about a topic would affect how they comprehend, remember and learn factual information given in a text'. Besides the effects of the compatibility of textual information with the readers' existing viewpoints on their memory and reproduction has also been extensively investigated. [references….] In this way prior beliefs and attitudes towards a particular topic impinge on memory and reproduction to an adequate and statistically reliable degree. Lee, 2009 further illustrated Read and Rosson's (1982) findings about 'readers' tendency to adjust the textual information to what they believed was true'. Later, Reutzel and Hollinhsworth (1991) reported that readers having positive attitude remembered fewer ideas on the negative passage than the 'negative belief group' which recalled fewer ideas than the 'positive belief group' (Cited in Lee 2009: 160).

To the best of my knowledge, no studies have taken L2 writers as research participants. This un-explored result along with findings from 'reading comprehension' demands further studies about 'how L2 writers' present attitude to topic affects their 'cognitive operations' and 'composition' in writing.

This is quite significant to recognize the role of existing beliefs of L2 writers about the topic because they might 'emotionally react' to it from either positive or negative position. Besides, L2 writers tend to have much more cognitive load than L1 writers if they confront an 'attitude –incompatible' topic to write on and consequently produce inferior quality and quantity text than the expectation. Existing researches have addressed the same issue of congruence in 'reading' comprehension. In this study, the focus has also been on whether L2 learners 'topic congruence' affects their writing performance or not and to what extent if it does so.

'Topic interest' is an affective variable in L2 writing while 'topic congruence' is cognitively interrelated. Being so, topic interest tends to impact directly on both the integrative and instrumental motivations of the writers. Only because of 'special personal interest' an L2 writer may create specific intense attitude to the topic and thus influence the organization or logical sequence of his text. Rűdiger J. Seitj (2009: 74) cited from 'Hays & Flwoer, 1980' that 'in a certain environment'….the writing actor becomes aware of the topic, the potential audience and his motivation to initiate writing. Again Joh (2006: 207) argued that topic interest could be a different and independent issue which relates to L2 readers' 'knowledge of the topic'. But in writing it could trigger up the brainstorming process, conception, organization and the substance of the product.

Studying the impacts of topic 'interest' and 'congruence' in L2 writing is more necessary than in reading as;

- Affection is usually higher in reception than in writing because of it's being a faster cognitive process than producing.

- Information value of reproduction can be assessed more prominently and independently in writing.

- Writing maximizes revealing learners' psychological process.

- Writing provides a better measure of thoughts, attitudes, linguistic performance and tester interference.

- Some mixed or conflicting ideas between the text and existing views may come out easily in reading if the text is not properly read what is less likely in writing.

METHODS

Research Question and Hypothesis

The leading research- question of this study is: how do topic interest and topic congruence affect the quality of 'creative writing' of Bangladeshi L2 learners at undergraduate level. A free writing test was taken and this was expected to result contrasting scores between the 'interested' and 'uninterested' groups especially in 'content' and 'organization' of their text. Moderately different results of interested and uninterested writers in 'vocabulary', 'grammar', and 'mechanics' were also expected (Hypothesis1).Secondly, the investigator also desired 'some considerable impacts' on the ratings of the sub-skills of both the groups of writers who agree with the topic [congruent group] and those who do not[incongruent group] (Hypothesis 2). On the whole, the claim of the research is that the L2 writers having interest in the topic should write well more consistently than those who haven't and their being congruent or incongruent with the topic would manipulate the quality of writing.

Participants

Twenty-five Bangladeshi L2 writers (passed H.S.C. in the same year) enrolled in 1st year 1st semester of different undergraduate programs (science, arts and business faculty) in Dhaka University and Jagannath University, Dhaka were chosen as subjects. All of them had taken their Mid-Term Exam in 'Fundamentals of English' under a single course outline with this author in April, 2010 and scored above 20 out of 30.They sat for a writing test for this research in May, 2010. It had been ensured that their age, background study and socio-economic background were same.

Topic Selection and Scoring

A moderately contentious topic of social interest and comprehensible level was selected. The author consulted a professor of English before writing the title. The written products of the participants were rated by two different scorers that included the author and a senior Assistant Professor in order to get reliable scoring. Only one script was excluded from final analysis as the grades given by the scorers differed in more than two aspects.

The 'Analytical Method' of scoring (that requires a separate score for each of a numbers of aspects of a task) was followed by the scorers. The analytical scheme proposed by Johnson (1970) was adapted for measuring the writing performance:

- **Content:** substantive development of a thesis or main idea; adequacy and relevance of supporting details; demonstration of knowledge of the subject;

- **Organization:** fluent expression of ideas (not choppy or abrupt); logical sequencing, cohesiveness; main points and supporting detail clearly and succinctly stated;

- **Vocabulary:** sophisticated range with effective choice of words and idioms; meaning not obscured by incorrect words; word choice not limited by lack of vocabulary;

- **Grammar:** use of complex constructions; few errors of agreement, tense, number, word order or function; correct use of articles, pronouns an prepositions; meaning not obscured by grammatical errors;

- **Mechanics:** mastery of conventions of spelling, punctuation and capitalization; meaning hard to grasp or totally obscured by lack of appropriate punctuation and /or spelling; paragraphing demonstrates coherence of ideas; handwriting is legible;

100 point was disbursed among these five components. Each of 'content', 'organization' and 'vocabulary' was valued at 20 points; 'grammar' at 30 and mechanics was valued at 10 points. The total point obtained by each writer was graded in ranks like Good (70 and above), Medium (50 and above), Low-medium (40 and above) and Low or Poor (below 40).

PROCEDURE

At the very beginning the learners wrote about their background study and consented not to answer morally. Then they were given the topic and instructed on writing about their beliefs and attitudes to the topic (agree or disagree). It was a free writing task before the test. Only 9 participants were found to be congruent with the topic while rest 15 disagreed to it.

Topic interest on the other hand, was measured by asking the subjects to respond to 2-point Likert scale with options like 'interested' & 'uninterested'. Written responses of the participants were scrutinized by the two raters and they agreed that 13 and 11 participants were found to be interested and uninterested respectively in the topic.

In the second phase, author arranged a lively interview session with ten respondents of whom five were interested and five were uninterested in topic. They were taken in an arbitrary selection. The purpose if this was to rationalize the outcome found in the prior data analysis. The explanation of the L2 writers supported the aforementioned inference through interpreting the way their standpoints in topic interest and topic congruence influence their writing strategies.

RESULTS

This study investigated the quality of the written texts of 25 participants using a measurement scale. And it might be claimed that *hypothesis 1* became supported with reasonable evidences while *hypothesis 2* proved null.

Manual analysis of the data shows that writers with 'interest' outperform those with 'no interest' in the quality of 'content' (Good 11:1) and 'organization' (Good 12:1). There is no 'low' or 'low-medium' performance in the interest group while the other group has 9 'low' and 4 'low-medium' performers. Only 3 interested writers' content and organization are 'mediocre' while 6 uninterested writers' had the same points.

Though, in case of vocabulary, the ratio of the good writers from these two groups is comparable (1:2), the ratio of second-rate (medium) writers is quite contrasting (11:1). The uninterested group has 1 low-medium and 6 low quality performers while interested group has only 1 poor (low) performance.

For grammar, it is seen that most of the interested (08 out of 13) participants have achieved medium score while 7 out of 11 uninterested learners have achieved poor score. Only 3 interested participants are good. Again 5 interested and 1 uninterested participants have used good mechanics in writing while 7 mediocre interested writers might be compared with 5 mediocre uninterested writers. Only 1 interested writer has used poor mechanics in contrast of 04 uninterested users. There is 1 low medium mechanics user only in the uninterested group.
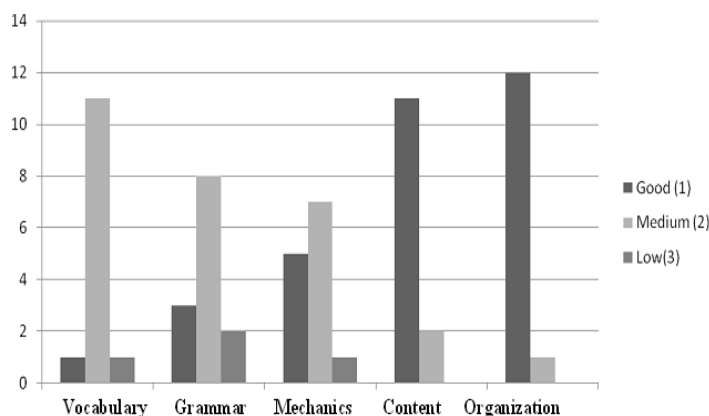

Figure 1: Interested in the Topic

Figure 1 and 2 graphically show the same information reported above. The highest bars (1) in the Figure 1represent the number of the good content and organized writers while in Figure 2 the highest bars(4) and lowest (1) bars depict the large number of poor writers. Thus in Fig.1 highest (2) bars represent that the majority of the interested writers were mediocre in vocabulary, mechanics and grammar while in Fig.2 high (4) bars and low (2) and (1) bars expose the poor performance of the interested group. The most noticeable issue is the existence of bar (3) in Figure 2 indicating

low-medium scores which is non-existent in Figure 1.Thus the effects of 'topic interest' have been proved statistically significant.
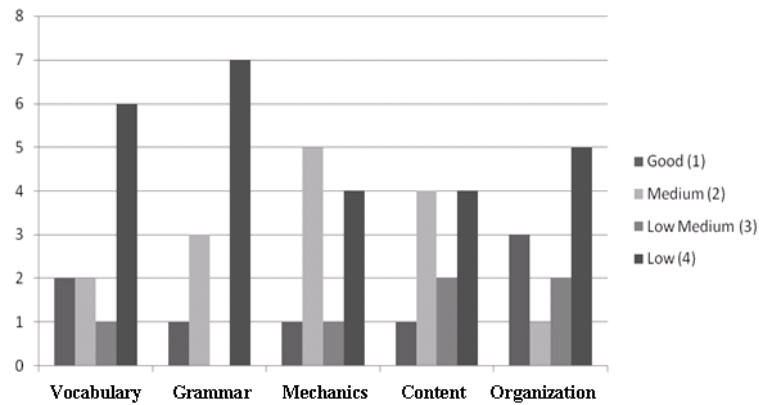

Figure 2: Uninterested in the Topic

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the effects of 'topic congruent' in writing. It has been observed that writers from no particular group outperform those of the other in any criterion.

Table: 1 Descriptive Statistics

Topic Congruence			
Skills	**Grades**	**Congruent**	**Incongruent**
Vocabulary	Good	5	7
	Medium	2	5
	Low	3	1
	Low Medium	1	1
Grammar	Good	5	8
	Medium	2	1
	Low	2	4
	Low Medium	2	1
Mechanics	Good	2	3
	Medium	6	6
	Low	2	4
	Low Medium	1	1
Content	Good	2	2
	Medium	3	7
	Low	6	4
	Low Medium	0	1
Organization	Good	1	2
	Medium	4	8
	Low	5	3
	Low Medium	1	1

The grades are quite comparable. No sliding or highly contrastive numbers in performances have been found. The only noticeable difference found is between the numbers of poor performers in vocabulary and grammar of 'congruent' group and mediocre performers of the 'incongruent' group.

The statistical data proves the hypothesis (2) null that is no large impact has been found on 'congruent' or 'incongruent' group performance as the numbers of grades are almost overlapping in every case.

Afterwards the descriptive data drawn from interviewing interested respondents demonstrate once more that while writing on the topic, they-

- Enjoyed some extra facilities of utilizing clear ideas and personal viewpoints and arranging those in writing without engaging excessive thoughts and time;

- Easily justified the essence of the topic and organized the content as there were few chances of missing points;

- Benefitted from using appropriate and standard vocabulary as well as adequate information;

- Wrote a high-quality topic sentence and supporting details with necessary length;

- Could present own arguments and easily developed the logical sequence; and

- Edited the text conveniently with confidence.

  In Case of the Topic Being Uninteresting to the Other Five L2 Writers-

- The write-up was found unorganized or less organized, incomplete and insufficient in length by them;

  They perceived themselves less creative and a sort of task-anxiety restrained them in using higher order thinking for retrieving necessary and accurate information, syntax and vocabulary;

- They had to focus on only conventional concepts and added wrong information as well as commented without understanding in some cases.

- They were just waiting to finish writing anyway to get relief of the task-anxiety which left them less assured about their performance.

But the congruent and incongruent group of writers could not report of such precise advantages and barriers faced while writing except the congruent group talked of managing right arguments 'for the topic' while the other groups of writers notified that they had ease in writing 'against the topic' though both of the groups felt confident enough in developing arguments for both sides. This data actually reflects their stands only and doesn't focus any affect on their quality of writing.

Occupying a divisive issue to elucidate the influence of 'topic interest' as a writing condition the author in this study found significant different behaviors in L2 writers' developing the text, logical sequence, vocabulary, mechanics and grammar because of their being interested in the topic. So, the first hypothesis is supported.

By contrast, the other variable 'topic congruence' is not found to have perceptible effects on their performance. Both the groups have performed in a near competition. That is their selection of materials, diction, syntax may not compromise even if they have to write on an unfavorable topic. In other word, topic congruence imposes less affective burden or anxiety on the strategic performance of Bangladeshi L2 writers at undergraduate level.

Limitations

A number of limitations of the research have to be acknowledged. Firstly, selection of topic might be one of them. As this study deals with a controversial topic, the theme might not fit all personality types of writers subjective to their socialization. Because of confronting less discussed theme learners' beliefs, interest and performance might not be uncovered as concretely as it was expected by the researcher.

Secondly, few aspects of investigation procedure could be improved. For example, if it was possible to record learners writing strategies asking them to be loud, this could ensure the author about the conveniences and hurdles faced and reported by them rooted from topic interest or congruence.

'Level of proficiency' can be considered as another issue, lastly. The results might not remain the same if the participants were at a different proficiency level other than under-graduation as the affective and cognitive factors are

obviously proved to be concerned with the age and proficiency level of the L2 learners. Besides grouping the participants of multi-proficiency level could also bring different or improved outcome.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finally, this study directs us to infer that 'topic interest' is a controlling factor in writing and L2 writers should be given writing topic of appropriate level of difficulties and interest so that they comprehend it as it should be and generate and/or formulate precise ideas and develop adequate content of high value and right discourse. On the other hand 'congruence' is of 'not mentionable consideration' while choosing topic at least at this level of proficiency as the learners can aptly argue for or against an issue staying beyond their individual stance and thinking.

The logical inquiry in this essay concludes that a topic would be 'meaningful' to an L2 writer if it is of his interest and then he achieves his 'writing goals' in cooperation with his lexical, syntactic and spelling knowledge while expressing ideas in a correct linguistic form. In most EFL setting ' traditional feedback procedures' focus only on writers' forms, structures, words and other linguistic aspects only- not on cohesive development of content or clarity of the text as well. But according to Zamel (1985: 99), mastering organization of a cohesive text is difficult for learners and this type of feedback fails to put emphasize on that particular aspects.

Sengupta and Falvey (1998) also denies teaching of only 'accuracy in lexis and syntax' in teaching writing as they found EFL teachers' immense care for language but not for 'making meaning using language' and no concern to 'address issues of developing or formulating ideas' in a study in Hong Kong (Cited in Damian Rivers 2009: 3). Researches on teaching L2 writing suggest that L2 writers need to be taught about being aware of and making use of the method of writing, developing and arranging ideas, dealing with language correlated anxieties etc. (Raimes 1985, Cited in Damian Rivers 2009: 3)

'Topic interest', now, has a proven effect on creating good discourse unit and so more awareness should be disbursed while choosing topic for L2 writers in such a context. And EFL teachers should encourage the learners to use enough time to write considerable amount of content. Uzawa and Cumming (1989) talked of two strategies used in L2 writing called 'keeping the standard' and 'lowering the standard'. In their study he L2 writers who used the first type of strategies like 'taking more time, revising extensively and seeking assistance' achieved the same level of L1 writing while the users of 'lowering the standard' wrote without excessive mental effort in limited time and used reduced information, simplified syntax, substituted lexical items. They also ignored reader concerns and had less content. (Cited in Mark Wolfersberger 2003: 2)

In unison, the null hypothesis or that topic congruence showed no or little contact with writing quality verifies that creating a good writing environment is not difficult but tricky as the L2 learners at this level hold abridged and monitored affective factors. They have low language performance anxiety. Therefore, only appropriate time constraint, topic of real interest and its intelligible presentation can ease the barriers in writing 'what they can write'. Further analysis on this would expectantly introduce a quantity of new results and move our present understanding and learning ahead.

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