When Students Join the Debate about the Control of Writing Courses

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ABSTRACT

In a debate in the Forum section of the *TESOL Quarterly*, Jones and Silva (1998) exchanged views about the merits and demerits of teacher-assigned themes and topics in tertiary-level EFL/ESL writing classes. However, much more remains to be explored. Should teachers assign the topics of papers, or even the content themes for the entire course, to writing students? Or should students be encouraged to develop their own topics and themes? How much control of course content should a writing teacher have? How much autonomy should students have? How might decisions in response to these questions affect learning?

This research explored these issues from the students' point of view by examining Taiwanese students' perspectives about the assignment of paper topics in an English writing class. Fifty-five writing students majoring in English at National Tsing Hua University (NTHU) responded to open-ended written surveys. Applying the qualitative technique of the Constant Comparative Method of data analysis, the researcher grouped the raw data into emergent categories.

The results support limits to learner autonomy within writing classes. NTHU students mostly preferred assigned paper topics, as they reported a need for the teacher to guide them in the early stages of preparing to write. The implications suggest that writing teachers should work with students carefully to interpret teacher-assigned writing prompts and, over time, to develop in students the skills needed to discover paper topics appropriate for tertiary-level courses. Suggestions for further research are included.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written about the theoretical roots and applications of the process approach in teaching EFL/ESL writing. Briefly, the process approach, which is well established in the literature, encourages students to use writing as a heuristic to explore ideas about a topic and as a means to express personal ideas and feelings, often beginning with free-writing and brainstorming in the initial stages of the writing process (Blanton, 1987; Spack, 1984; Zamel, 1980, 1982). Although it does not preclude the teaching of grammar and form in writing class, it emphasizes more the exploration of meaning and the expression of ideas (Spack & Sadow, 1983; Zamel, 1976, 1985, 1987).

Throughout the process, students share drafts in various stages of development with peers and teachers, the latter negotiating the meaning of ideas with student authors in an encouraging classroom environment (Huang, 1995; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Spack & Sadow, 1983). Another important feature is that a paper is never really finished. Rather, it can be steadily, constantly improved through multiple revisions (Huang, 1995; Taylor, 1981; Zamel, 1983, 1985).

Because of its learner-centered focus, the process approach encourages a more egalitarian relationship between students and teachers than in traditional product-oriented writing classrooms, in which the teacher might assume the role of a director and academic expert. Proponents of the process approach tend to see the teacher as more of a facilitator and a fellow writer, someone who will listen to the needs of students, learn from them, and offer related suggestions for improvement. Zamel (1976) reflects this sentiment:

> While this instruction might still entail indirect teaching concerning particular structural problems, language study and rhetorical considerations, the primary emphasis should be upon the expressive and creative process of writing. The experience of composing could in this way have a purpose, that of communicating genuine thoughts and experiences. ESL students could begin to appreciate English as another language to *use*, rather than just a language to learn (p. 74).

Since the process approach encourages creativity, self-expression, and negotiation, how much control should the teacher have over the course, including its goals, its content, and its tasks? How much autonomy should learners have as they prepare their assignments? Most recently, this issue has become controversial.

Some have suggested that students should have considerable control of the content of their EFL/ESL language learning (Crabbe, 1993; Kenny, 1993a; Nunan, 1988, 1994), including in the control of topics and themes for writing classes (Kenny, 1993b; Silva, 1997, 1998). Reflecting the view that students should be free to write on topics of their own choice, Silva (1997) argues that teachers should focus more on the process, location and timing of writing, leaving the reason and the content to the students: "I suggest that students be given control of the why and what of writing and

that teachers focus on the how, where, and when, on facilitating rather than controlling student writing" (p. 362).

In contrast to Silva's (1997, 1998) published views, I have argued that it is sometimes helpful, perhaps even necessary, for writing teachers to control the *why* and the *what* of their students' writing (Jones, 1998a, 1998b, 2002). I do not imply that students should always be denied opportunities to develop their own themes and topics. Rather, my point is that teachers who do choose to use teacher-assigned themes and topics may have legitimate, practical, and ethical reasons, ones that support the process approach of teaching writing.

I have already presented an extended case for assigning themes and topics in EFL/ESL writing classes (Jones, 1998a, 1998b, 2002), making it unnecessary to examine the issues in detail here. Nevertheless, it would be helpful to discuss briefly how assigning themes and topics may promote the learning of writing as a process and how it may prepare students for writing assignments beyond the writing class.

In a process-based writing class, peer review is an important learning activity. However, in a writing class that lacks shared subject matter, it would be more difficult for students to work together as a community of writers, a group of knowledgeable peers. In Bruffee's (1984) words, "A community of knowledgeable peers is a group of people who accept, and whose work is divided by, the same paradigms and the same code of values and assumptions" (p. 642). Lacking a shared content, students would probably be less effective in responding well to the contents of each other's papers.

In fact, Mendonca and Johnson (1994) found that some students of their study preferred to be reviewed by peers of the same academic discipline, because of concerns about content expertise. This desire is certainly understandable. In academic

writing, authors are frequently writing for readers (peers) who are highly knowledgeable about the contents of papers (Reid & Kroll, 1995).

What is more, several studies have shown that in the world of academic writing beyond the writing class, students often have little if any individual choice about selecting writing topics (Braine, 1989; Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Horowitz, 1986, 1989). Unfortunately, they often struggle to decode writing topics (sometimes referred to as *prompts*) (Johns, 1986, 1991; Leki & Carson, 1994), causing some scholars to suggest that an important responsibility of a writing teacher is to teach students how to interpret writing prompts correctly (Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Horowitz, 1989; Johns, 1991).

Elaboration of this is found in the following recommendation and warning offered by Canseco & Byrd (1989), who studied writing assignments in syllabuses of graduate business courses in the US:

> What we have seen in these prompts is that a composition course that emphasizes selection, prewriting, revision, and editing within the confines of academic formats (including learning to deal effectively with topics presented by instructors rather than selected by students) would be useful for students going into graduate courses in business. On the other hand, an extreme version of the process approach, in which writers must be free to select their own topic and invent their own organization of the final product, might not be as realistic a preparation for the U.S. academic world. (p. 312)

Although there may be valid pedagogical reasons for teachers to assign themes and topics in writing classes, little if any research has been conducted about the preferences of EFL/ESL writing students regarding this issue. While most scholars have ignored it, a few have appeared to *assume* that students would prefer to select

their own. Writes Silva (1998), "It seems reasonable to me to suggest that students often dislike taking college composition classes because they are usually compelled to do so and that forcing topics on them could well compound the problem, adding insult to injury" (p. 346).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

What is needed is evidence about what EFL/ESL students actually want regarding the assignment of topics in their writing classes. Do they want the freedom and autonomy to select their own, or would they prefer to have the topics assigned to them? Why? What implications might their insights provide for the teaching of EFL/ESL writing?

To answer these questions, I administered an open-ended survey to three sections of my Freshman Writing students of National Tsing Hua University. The 55 undergraduate students were English majors attending their first week of classes in the fall semester. Hence, when they wrote their views, they had no experience in writing college assignments and had no knowledge about my own views and practices concerning the teaching of writing.

Each student received two stapled sheets of A-4 size paper with the following question printed on the top of the first page: When setting out to write a paper for class, which do you prefer: (a) the topic is chosen by you, or (b) the topic is assigned to you?" I advised the students that the purpose of the writing was to provide me with information about their views for this research project as well as to serve as an ungraded diagnostic assessment of their in-class writing ability. I also refrained from sharing my own views about this question. The students had 30 minutes in which to write their responses.

After the essays were finished, I analyzed them using the Constant Comparison Method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using this qualitative approach, the smallest units of information that made sense within the context of the paper were written onto note cards, which were grouped into categories that emerged from the data. To ensure that my interpretations and groupings were reasonable, I invited a colleague experienced in qualitative research methodology to examine the categorization of the data. I also invited another colleague experienced with qualitative research methodology to audit the categorization of the data, to ensure reasonableness of the interpretations. In the few cases of differences of opinion, we negotiated the meanings of categories to find mutually acceptable interpretations. Next, I conducted member checks by inviting students to review for reasonableness of fit interpretations of units and groupings of units into categories. Once the data had been collected, assembled, and reviewed, I counted the frequency of the units within broader categories, enabling me to present the qualitative data in quantitative form within tables.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows that the majority of students (62%) preferred teacher-assigned paper topics and a sizable minority (36%) preferred student-selected paper topics. Only one student was undecided.

Table 1
Preferences of Students about the Sources of Paper Topics

Prefer teacher-assigned paper topics	34
Prefer student-selected paper topics	20
Undecided	01
Total Number of Students Surveyed	55

Table 2 shows that there were many different reasons offered by those favoring teacher-assigned topics. Among the top ones, 34 students mentioned that teacher-

assigned paper topics would challenge them to think about new issues and to learn new subject matter. Here is a typical reflection from one student:

> If topics are assigned to me, I would feel it is more challenging, wheater it is a hard one or, fortunately, an easy one. When touching on a new topic, I can always having new ideas, which makes me learn more. Although at first I may feel frustrated and annoyed about not knowing what to write, I know things will work out somehow, and then, when I complete my writing, I will have a sense of achievement, which gives me a lot of pleasure and joy. Also, by this way, I believe I can learn much more.

Another important reason for 17 students to prefer a teacher-assigned topic was their perception that it would save them much time in drafting a paper. Remarks about this issue often resembled the following one:

> Based on my experience, if I am free to choose any topic when writing, I would first spend a long time choosing the topic, and then, maybe on the half way of my writing, another topic(s) would occur to me, and which means I have to start my writing all over again. This kind of problems usually happens and, moreover, bothers me because it takes up my precious time.

Providing students with a structure for organizing ideas within papers was mentioned by 13 students as a reason for preferring teacher-assigned topics. Wrote one student, "An assigned topic sets a direction in advance for me to follow." Another described her predicament in greater length:

> When I start writing, I do really need a very clear direction to let me know and follow. If I don't have, maybe after writing in the middle, I will change and give up my original thoughts and ideas, and then choose another one. The situation will become a bad circle. Finally, I can't decide my topic.

Seven students specifically mentioned that providing more structure in assignments appeared to help them in developing the content of their papers. Here is a representative view:

> The instructor will be able to give us guidances or ways to complete a paper. What the instructor might expect to read in our paper is important. Students would understand what should be included in a composition, such as details, background, color, and so on. If we take a [student-selected] general subject as our paper's topic, we may not be able to write out the essence of what a paper should be.

Three students claimed that assigning paper topics to students is a common practice in Taiwan, suggesting that it might have cultural roots. Another three claimed that assigning paper topics to students would help the teacher to become more knowledgeable about the subject matter, enabling him or her to develop effective lessons and materials.

The range of categories identified by the students and the frequencies of each one are provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Reasons Favoring Teacher-assigned Topics

Categories	Units
Broadens students' views about subject matter	34
Saves students' time in finding a topic	17
Provides students with structure for organizing papers	13
Enables students to focus on developing the content of papers	07
Conforms to the cultural expectations of Taiwanese students	03
Enables teachers to provide students with more guidance about the topic	03
Eases writing teachers' preparation of lessons	01
Encourages students to be more creative in writing	01
Encourages students to read more about a topic	01
Promotes better in-class discussions of topics	01
Reduces opportunities for plagiarism of papers	01
Reduces students' writing anxiety	01
Reflects writing task requirements of other courses	01
Total Units	84

Note: The 84 units are from the comments written by the 34 students in favor of teacher-assigned topics

Table 3 shows that there were several reasons offered by those favoring student-selected topics. As for the most-common reasons, 25 students mentioned that student selection would provide more interesting writing topics. Reflecting this sentiment, one student shared the following observation:

> The topic chosen by someone else is absolutely impossible for me to write down interesting and creative article. Why? Well, the answer is easy. The assigned topic is like a lock to tie my thoughts. I can not write something queer. Instead, I must write something formal which is allowed to write. To tell the truth, the assigned topic is often formal and serious. Writing this topic can kill one's creative idea.

Seven students favored student-selected topics to encourage the expression and sharing of personal views among students. Wrote one student, "When I need to illustrate a general idea by using supporting materials, I can write down my experiences to share with others and I can express in a more natural way."

Six praised how the self-selection of paper topics made the writing content more personally relevant. Wrote one, "Writing a paper, you must chose the topic you are really interested in, willing to share your experiences with others, to make them feel your earnest about your writing stuff."

A handful of miscellaneous reasons for using student-selected topics received limited support. Notably, one student mentioned the value of learning responsibility for personal decisions, another the reduction of anxiety in writing papers, and another the reduced need to perform background research for papers.

The range of categories identified by the students and the frequencies of each are provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Reasons Favoring Student-selected Topics

Provides students with more interesting topics	25
Encourages the expression of personal viewpoints among students	07
Makes the content of writing more personally relevant for students	06
Encourages students to accept responsibility for decisions	01
Encourages students to develop research skills	01
Generates diversity in papers for teachers to read	01
Reduces writing anxiety among students	01
Requires students to perform less outside research	01
Saves students' time in writing papers	01
Total Units	44

Note: The 44 units are from the comments written by the 20 students in favor of student-selected topics

DISCUSSION

According to the results of this research, teacher-assigned topics were preferred by most of the students surveyed. This supported Jones' earlier arguments (1998a, 1998b, 2002), that at least some students would prefer to have topics assigned to them. The students in this study who preferred teacher-assigned topics reported practical, responsible reasons for their choice. They claimed that teacher-assigned topics introduced new subject areas, provided a convenient start to writing papers, offered appropriate guidance and structure for writing, conformed to culturally appropriate norms in Taiwan, and assisted teachers in the evaluation of papers. In contrast to Silva's (1997, 1998) speculation, they had little trouble with the notion of surrendering considerable control of the content of their writing to the teacher, as they viewed teacher control of writing topics as a necessary step in the evolution of their writing skills.

In contrast, a much smaller number of students preferred student-selected topics in writing classes. Their reasons for preferring this option were also thoughtful and

reasonable. Instead of wanting to learn under the teacher's control of topics, they wanted more autonomy to explore personally relevant topics. For them, freedom to choose was motivating. In addition, they hoped that learning about the subject matter interests of others would stimulate communication among classmates and strengthen group cohesion. In short, they wanted the teacher to assume the role of a facilitator--not a director--of the content of the writing course, letting the students control the content of their papers.

These findings deepen the current discussion of the optimal role of learner autonomy within writing courses. Clearly, teachers who assign paper topics to students are acting responsibly and ethically, including in the eyes of many students. As Reid & Kroll (1995) point out, it is fairly common within the academic community for teachers to assign topics to students:

> Formal school writing differs from most non-academic writing tasks because the social context is unusual: The writing is not voluntary, the topics are usually assigned, and the written products are evaluated. The audiences and purposes for school writing are thus unique. The audience is usually limited to the person (the teacher) who designs, assigns, and assesses that writing. (p. 18)

Much has been written already about the guidelines of how to develop appropriate writing topics, often called “prompts.” According to Reid & Kroll (1995), a prompt should provide:

- Context (objectives, limits, reasons, authenticity)
- Content (accessible information, authentic audience, authentic purpose)
- Language (comprehensible instruction, transparent wording)
- Tasks (challenging content, reasonable boundaries)
- Rhetorical specifications (format, register, tone)

- Evaluation (clear criteria)

To this list could be added White's (1994) contribution:

- Validity (assessment of different ability levels)
- Reliability (consistency of scoring of writing samples)
- Interest (appeal of the prompt to teachers and students)

That teacher-assigned prompts may effectively challenge student writers to improve should not be overlooked. In their famous models of writing, Bereiter & Scardamalia (1987) suggest that less-experienced writers, reflecting the processes of the Knowledge-telling Model, have a limited ability to analyze the prompt. In contrast, more-experienced writers, reflecting the processes of the Knowledge-transforming Model, are better able to analyze the prompt, then to set reasonable goals to achieve in their writing. In order to grow, the authors conclude that writers must be challenged. Scardamalia & Bereiter (1991) write, "Experts acquire their vast knowledge resources not by doing what falls comfortably within their competence but by working on real problems that force them to extend their knowledge and competence" (p. 174).

How can a writing teacher use prompts to challenge students systematically to improve their knowledge and competence? One tool would be to apply Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives in the development of prompts. By Bloom's account, educational behaviors and cognitive understandings may be grouped into six major groups, beginning with the demonstration of the easiest skill, knowledge, and extending on to the most challenging one, evaluation:

- Knowledge
- Comprehension
- Application

- Analysis
- Synthesis
- Evaluation

In the case of teaching academic writing, less-cognitively challenging prompts calling for knowledge-based narrative papers might be assigned to beginners or to advanced students as a warm-up activity. For more advanced students in need of a good challenge, article reviews, movie reviews, and research papers would encourage more-advanced analysis, synthesis, and evaluation skills.

In addition to developing appropriate prompts, a good writing teacher should also guide students in how to interpret them correctly (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Once again, Bloom's taxonomy offers a helpful tool. The teacher could spend some class time teaching students how to interpret practice prompts, showing how to deconstruct assignments using Bloom's taxonomy. Which assignments would require more recitation of knowledge? Which would require more higher-order synthesis and evaluation?

Writing students need to be able to interpret assigned topics and, should they be given the freedom to develop their own topics, to write their own. Learning how to interpret and how to develop appropriate writing topics are important, challenging skills for EFL/ESL students to develop.

Although these prescriptions are valuable, students often need practical, simple, and versatile tools for getting started in how to interpret and develop topics. A reasonable strategy would be to work with them in two stages. In the first stage, they could be given assigned writing topics and plenty of guidance in how to interpret these responsibly. In the second stage, they could be invited to write their own self-selected topics for papers. Using a heuristic like the Reporter's Formula (who, what,

when, where, why, and how?) can often help to organize quickly information on a variety of task levels. By applying the Reporter's Formula in my own classes, I have found it helpful to show students how to responsibly interpret assigned topics, how to organize thinking before approaching an instructor for guidance or clarification about an assignment, and how to prepare to write self-selected topics.

For example, one task level might focus on exploring the responsibilities of rules and deadlines, which are lower-level knowledge and comprehension skills. Applying the formula, some possible questions are listed below:

- *Who* is to write and research the paper? Could it be a team effort? An individual effort?
- *What* background materials or experiences are to be used in the writing? Are supporting materials beyond the textbooks required or allowed? If so, which ones?
- *Why* are some background materials acceptable for this assignment while others are not?
- *How* are supporting materials to be collected for the paper and presented within it? How is the paper to be organized? How long should it be?
- *Where* should the paper be submitted after completion? Where can background information be found about this topic?
- *When* is the final draft due? When can students show the teacher an initial outline of ideas to get some formative feedback?

Another task level might focus on helping students to explore the cognitively more demanding features surrounding the content of a developing paper. Once again, some possible questions, generated by the formula, are listed below:

- *Who* were the major players of the story, incident, or text?

- *What* happened that was important, unique, or interesting? What contradictions were in the text?
- *Why* were some facts more important than others? Why were some good or bad? Why were some contradictions important?
- *How* did these facts come about? How might they have been prevented or changed?
- *Where* did the facts take place and was this important to the outcome of events?
- *When* did the facts take place and has time affected the outcome or our understanding?

These and other heuristics might help in the learning of how to interpret assigned topics by breaking them down into components. After mastering this stage, it would be possible to encourage students to apply the heuristic in the development of their own self-selected topics. While developing their own topics, they would need to accommodate issues associated with key questions generated by the formula.

No matter the heuristic a teacher might choose to teach students to use, clearly something would be better than nothing. As the results of this study have shown, writing students often would like the teacher to assign paper topics to provide structure and guidance in the writing process. In addition, those preferring to select and develop their own topics independently would likely benefit from being taught how to do it well. Simply giving students unbridled freedom to select and develop their own individual topics can become problematic, resulting in trouble in areas such as focus, collection of evidence, peer review, plagiarism, and assessment of content (Jones, 1998a, 1998b).

FURTHER RESEARCH

Much more needs to be explored about these issues. This initial study examined the views of 55 undergraduate English majors in Taiwan about their perceptions of the value of teacher-assigned vs. self-selected writing topics. It did not explore how other variables might affect the perceptions and products of students. Future research could explore how learner autonomy in the selection and development of writing topics might affect the perceptions and performances of different types of students. Student variables for further study might include, but not be limited to, learning style, level of motivation, socio-cultural background, gender, and prior academic performance. Course variables might include, but not be limited to, length of the term, purpose of the course, teaching method, and instructor's style.

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