

**INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF SELF-SELECTED AND  
TEACHER ASSIGNED WRITING TOPICS**

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**ABSTRACT**

One of the skills that is strengthened in language learning, especially English and foreign languages, is the ability to write. Writing means expressing in writing ideas, opinions, thoughts, and feelings. Familiarity with the topic in writing can be one of the factors that influence students' perceptions of their writing. Topics chosen by students and topics chosen by the teacher provide opportunities for students to convey their perceptions. And this can be developed when writing descriptive text. The purpose of this research is to examine how Indonesian EFL students perceive the writing topics they choose themselves and the topics the teacher chooses through their students' writing by asking them to write descriptive texts as a form of writing. The characteristics in this study are in the form of texts written by participants for researchers, and the resulting data is in the form of an analysis of the participant's writing process. The research method used is a qualitative descriptive research method where data collection is carried out through interview techniques, observation, and document studies. The researcher conducted unstructured interviews by asking questions related to the important points of the problem the participants wanted to explore. The researcher made direct observations of the participants who were working on the assignments given to them. Then the researcher applied the study of primary and secondary documents. The participants in this study were 36 students from 10th grade at one of the public high schools in Tanjungbalai. The results of this study indicate that students are more motivated to write when they are given the right to choose their own topics in writing class as opposed to topics chosen by their teachers.

**Keywords:** Descriptive text, Indonesian EFL Students, Perception, Self-Selected Topics, Teacher Assigned Writing Topics



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**INTRODUCTION**

One of the skills that is confirmed in learning languages, especially English and foreign languages, is the ability to write. Writing is an activity in the form of short writing or long paragraphs. Harmer (2007: 112) argues that writing gives students more chances to think than speaking. types of writing such as fiction, reports, essays, articles, novels, non-fiction, drama, and poetry (Brown 2007: 362).

Writing skill in English is the most difficult skill because, in order to write, students must have other skills as a component of writing skill, such as vocabulary, grammar, spelling, etc. The use of teaching materials that are already available in schools is sometimes not in accordance with the context in which students are learning; for this

reason, the creativity of the English teacher is needed in creating their own teaching materials according to the student's environment.

According to Tarigan (2009:5), writing means expressing in writing ideas, opinions, or thoughts and feelings. The factors that help someone write easily are not only that he is used to writing but also that he is supported by his penchant for reading. Because by reading, a person will get varied information, knowledge, and vocabulary, so it will be easy to put it in written form because he knows and understands things to be written.

The usual way schools teach writing skills is by giving students a title or topic to write about. Students are asked to make an outline with a focus on how their writing will turn out. This strategy is a constraint for the development of students' writing skills. This is because students are not used to directly examining the problems they want to write about. As a result, students are hampered in writing material that is negative, even though their writing abilities will depend heavily on the assignment of what they want to write.

According to Pradnyawathi and Sastra Agustika (2019), "personal writing skills are shown by his ability to express ideas in a well-organised way through writing". In learning English, students are said to have the ability to write good texts if they can use the English language in writing according to the writing rules, context, and specified topics (Engliana et al., 2020; Koswara, 2021; Ratnawati, 2020).

Mastery of various linguistic elements is a must in the writing process (Mabruri, 2021). This shows that in learning to write, there are several aspects that need attention, such as ideas, grammar, vocabulary, and the use of punctuation. Furthermore, it is also necessary to have knowledge about the context of an idea to be written so that the writing is more interesting and easy to understand.

Writing activities should ideally provide opportunities for students to experience the writing process. Furthermore, there will be an increase in their ability as they gain more writing experience. In order to be more focused and have a comparison of the perceptions of writing results, students need feedback from readers. This activity is often referred to as peer review. Peer review fosters student self-regulation because students learn to view their writing from the perspectives of other students (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

The perspective of the teacher or other students will improve it. Therefore, the writing process will have a positive impact by improving the quality of students' writing and skills. This is comparable to the opinion that students will gain experience when participating in peer review activities (Brown, 2001). Writing is also not solely oriented to results but to the process experienced by students as writers. The process approach

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provides the view that writing is a creative activity, and for that, time and positive feedback are needed (Rollinson, 2004).

Since the point of writing advice is to get students to write well so they can communicate effectively, it is important to find out why some students do not want to take part in classroom writing activities. This resistance, which may be a result of how they feel and think, usually causes students to lose interest in writing. They would finally come to the conclusion that they could not get any better in their writing classes. In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, where the target language is not used much outside of the classroom, this is a big problem. According to the theory of reasoned action, studies on education show that how a student thinks and feels about a subject affects how well they do in school (Popham, 2005; Royster, Kimharris, & Schoeps, 1999). So, it is important to think about how the way students see and feel about their classroom writing affects their writing.

Threadkell (2010) studied how students' opinions of teacher-assigned and self-selected reading varied through a qualitative study. His research showed that allowing students to choose their own books increased their reading motivation. Reading material that they independently chose proved to help students understand the subject better. Participants in the study did, however, express positive opinions about several books given to them by their teachers, suggesting that superior reading materials with compelling content may take precedence over student preference.

Gradwohl and Scumacher (1989) looked at how much students knew about the things they wanted to write about, the things they did not want to write about, and the things that the teacher chose. The results of their study showed that students knew a lot more about the topics they wanted to learn about than the ones the teacher picked. They said that their findings showed how important content understanding is to the writing process and how choosing a topic helps students support their own choice of topic.

Bonzo (2008) performed an experimental study to determine how topic choice-teacher vs. student-selected topics-affected the participants' writing fluency. The study's ANOVA findings showed that when students chose their own themes, it did affect the overall fluency of their writing (as determined by a general fluency index). The ratio of unique terms to total words was also higher when participants picked their own themes as opposed to being given predetermined ones. Furthermore, the study's findings showed a strong, substantial relationship between fluency and grammatical complexity.

In their writing classes, Bonyadi, Zeinalpur, and Reimany (2013) used a qualitative technique to investigate how EFL students perceived both teacher- and student-selected themes. In order to collect data for this study, EFL adult students (N = 30) wrote self-written reports that reflected their own opinions on the subject. The study's conclusions showed that, in general, students felt more inspired and motivated to write when they were allowed to select their own topic in their EFL writing lessons. However, just a few of the participants shared their favourable opinions of the themes that the teacher had assigned. The authors of the study came to the conclusion that flexible teaching strategies might be developed by EFL teachers by better understanding how different students view choosing a topic for a paper. They said that the writing teachers should try to adjust topic choices to the students' perspectives by offering them the option of choosing their own favourite topic or the one that their writing teachers have suggested.

People have also said that self-selected topics are usually easier on students' brains because they are more likely to choose things they already know about. In truth, encouraging children to write expressively through exercises like journaling or personal narratives or by giving them the freedom to select their own topics has proven to be the most effective method for developing their writing (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982).

Most studies on self-selection and writing skills show that there are good reasons for students to choose a certain major. Teachers refrain from using prompts, and students choose their own topics. Teachers could encourage students to write on topics they find significant in their own lives because they think doing so will help shape the writing curriculum in their schools.

Ellis (2003) says that the goal of teaching and learning is to get students interested in and motivated to negotiate meaning. Since this is the goal, it is important to think about how important the job topic is. What's the point Dornyei (1994) says that the learner's interest is one of the things that affects second language acquisition (SLA) in general. This is one thing that depends on each person's personality, so it can have different effects in different scenarios.

According to Ellis (2003), a learner's propensity for meaning depends on how well they are familiar with the subject. Learners of a language use what they know about the world to help them understand or write messages. One of the things that has been said to help with task-based language learning is that the learner already knows about the topic. According to Ellis (2003), a learner's propensity to negotiate meaning depends on how well they are familiar with the subject matter or people who use or learn a language.

Bonyadi and Zeinalpur (2014) looked at how EFL students felt about writing topics they chose themselves and ones that their teachers gave them. They used a certain method to collect data: adult EFL students (N = 30) wrote self-written reports about the problem that showed how they saw it. The results of this study show that students in EFL writing classes are thought to be more inspired and driven to write when they are allowed to choose their own topics. But only a small number of them said that they liked the topic that the teacher had picked.

According to Jabrohim (2001: 71), creative means inviting students to be open to new experiences, flexibility in thinking, freedom in expressing opinions, imagination, great attention to creativity, firmness of opinion, attention in submitting opinions or views, and finally independence in making decisions. Creative writing can be said to be an activity that requires creative thinking. According to Kurniawan (2014: 31), students creative writing is the result of students' writing in the form of memorable and interesting experiences for students who have been created with children's fantasies and imagination. And this can be developed when writing descriptive text.

Mahsun (2014: 28) defines a descriptive text as one that has the social goal of describing a specific object or group of objects based on their physical qualities. A descriptive text also explains something that the author will reveal, giving the reader or listener the impression that they have personally seen the subject under discussion even though they have not. In writing assignments, many students struggle to comprehend the format, organisation, and linguistic components of descriptive texts.

Students who are less informed or less self-reliant should be helped with decision-making, according to the research that has been conducted above. Topic selection's function in fostering the development of reading, speaking, and writing skills is another trend in research on the subject. According to this research, students who choose their own reading, writing, and speaking themes are more fully involved in the reading and speaking activities that foster critical thinking.

The impact of topic selection on students' impressions of writing descriptive texts in senior high schools has not been studied in the Indonesian context, despite the relatively few studies on the subject. By using descriptive texts, this study intends to determine the impact of topic selection by teachers and students on the writing performance of EFL students in high school.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

Data collection in this study used qualitative methods that emphasized the views and experiences of informants that occur in everyday life (Frenkel & Wallen, 1990; Noor, 2009; Idrus, 2009; Mariam, 1998; 1987; Creswell, 2010). And according to Bogdan & Biklen, S. (1992:21–22), qualitative research is a type of investigation that produces descriptive data in the form of spoken or written words and the actions of the subjects studied.

The research techniques used in this study include interview, observation, and document study techniques. The researcher conducted unstructured interviews by asking questions related to the important points of the problem the participants wanted to explore. The researcher made direct observations of the participants who were working on the assignments given to them. Then the researcher applied the study of primary and secondary documents. Which documents are written based on participants who directly experienced an event, and which are written based on reports or stories of other people. The characteristics of this study were in the form of texts written by the participants for the researchers, and the data obtained from this study were in the form of interviews and analysis of the participants' writings.

In this research, the researcher visited one of the Public High Schools in Tanjungbalai. From that school, the researcher took 10th grade students as participants who would participate in this study. There were 36 students who participated in this study. To maintain ethics in this study, the authors will only use scientific designations for participants. Examples include stating participant 1, participant 2, participant 3, and so on.

The purpose of this study was to examine how Indonesian EFL students perceive the writing topics they choose themselves and the topics the teacher chooses through their students' writing by asking them to write descriptive texts as a form of writing. In this study, the researcher asked EFL class participants in Indonesia to compose a text on a topic of their teacher's choice with the theme "idol" and a text on a topic of their own choice. In addition, as a way to show gratitude to the students who have participated, the researcher collects the resulting texts and gives them an evaluation. And the researcher checked the students' writing results. However, it does not provide an assessment based on writing with correct grammar.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

The researcher examines the student-submitted data from the research and searches for concepts that stand out from the rest. That way, to answer the purpose of this research, the researcher identified themes that appeared in the students' writings that liked topics that students chose themselves or topics assigned by their teachers.

The results obtained from student writing using descriptive text on the topic the teacher chose with the theme "idol" found that students had opinions that looked the same. Many of the students have similarities in their writing and the same figure in choosing their writing idols. Students choose a community figure as their idol.

Most of the public figures that they conveyed through their writings came from social media, and most of them did not use their own language. Furthermore, in choosing this topic, students liked many public figures, both domestic and abroad. They like these public figures, from their daily lives to their achievements.

Then, from the students' writings and the topics they chose themselves, the researcher grouped the students' writings and found that students chose 12 topics at random. And of the 12 topics, many conflicted with the ones assigned by the teacher. And here are topics randomly chosen by students regarding: animals, countries, food, tourist attractions, cities, friends, rooms, experiences, flowers, agencies, buildings, and themselves.

The results of students' writing on topics they chose themselves found that students preferred to write about whatever they liked; they understood more than anyone when talking about what they liked. Students feel free and confident in their writing when faced with what they like.

Then having experience and suitability with the title appropriately for themselves is very influential in writing. Someone can classify statements by what is written above in words. Most students believe that, given their prior knowledge, they will be more equipped to research self-selected themes and create good and interesting class writing than with teacher-assigned topics.

### **Discussion**

Based on the interviews conducted by the researchers with the participants, the researchers found statements regarding assignments with topics assigned by the teacher and topics that were chosen by themselves. The following are statements made by participants to researchers:

- The topic chosen by the teacher

Participant 1: I worked on my writing related to the topic chosen by the teacher using the references I found on Google. Besides that, I get more of the writing that I do from the internet than from my own language.

Participant 2: I find it more difficult to do assignments with titles given by the teacher compared to assignments with titles that I choose myself.

Participant 3: I feel the topic the teacher chose helps me make a choice, and I do not need to think about other titles and will only think about the material I will write about.

Other participants: Most of the writing that we do is based on the topic chosen by the teacher. We take most of the references from Google, and mostly we write them directly and do not replace them with our own language. In addition, the topic chosen by the teacher is more difficult because they have to find information about the title.

- Self-selected topics

Participant 1: I feel more free to do my writing because it is related to my wishes and I can use my own language.

Participant 2: I find it more difficult to do assignments with titles given by the teacher compared to assignments with titles chosen by myself.

Participant 3: I do my writing based on what I know.

Other participants: We feel that writing on topics that we choose ourselves makes us more flexible in expressing our opinions, and we feel that we are not forced to do it.

Based on the participants' opinions above, the researcher can conclude what the students' perceptions are regarding the topics assigned by the teacher and the topics chosen by themselves. Following the procedure for analysing the qualitative data taken, the researcher analysed the data submitted by the students and looked for ideas that stood out from all the data. In order to respond to the research's questions, the researcher identified themes in the students' writings that related to either the topics they chose themselves or the topics their teachers assigned.

The results of the study reveal that the perceptions of Indonesian EFL students are similar to those of students in the research conducted by Bonyadi and Zeinalpur (2014) regarding topics that were chosen by themselves and which were assigned by the teacher in



their writing class. When students get to pick their own writing assignments, they become more invested in the process.

In this study, the researcher asked the participating students to write a text in the form of a descriptive text, in which each student made a text based on the topic they chose themselves and the topic chosen by their teacher.

Students who participated in this study had a connection with the material they were studying in EFL classes. Which is the ongoing EFL class discussing a text in the form of a descriptive text. And material about descriptive text really encourages them to make a text.

Descriptive texts made by students begin by using their mother tongue, then the text is translated into English. After that, the students collected the text and gave it to the researcher to see whether they did or did not make the text.

After the teacher has explained what a descriptive text is and how to make one, the students write the text. After that, students are required to write a text on a subject of their choice or one the teacher has chosen.

When the teacher asks students to write a text on a topic chosen by their teacher. The researcher found that the students became confused when writing what their teacher asked for because the topics asked for were considered too difficult to describe and not in accordance with their daily lives.

In addition, students also find it difficult, do not know what to write on their paper, and think it takes a long time to think about it. In the end, students get confused and do not want to do it.

In contrast to writing a text whose topic is chosen by themselves. Where researchers find students play an active role in writing their texts. They look more active and creative in conveying the contents of their thoughts.

The students also considered the text they were working on more flexible because they were free to express their opinions. In addition, the texts they worked on also had no errors because they conveyed the results of their thinking based on their own thinking and not on the justification of others.

In addition, when students write a text on the topic they choose, they think without fear and do not have to get approval from others because what they write is based on facts related to their lives. And they think they understand more about what they write than people who read the text.

On the other hand, the researcher discovered that some students who wrote about the teacher's chosen topic were able to write a text without feeling any pressure because they

believed they were no longer considering other topics or titles. They become focused on the topic, which makes it easier for them to write a text.

So students who write in EFL classes are more driven and motivated when faced with topics of their own choosing compared to topics chosen by their teacher. And the students' writing also looks more unique and creative in conveying their opinions.

Then the students' interest in choosing their own topic is considered higher than the topic chosen by their own teacher in the writing class. This interest can be seen in the text they wrote themselves.

When writing a text on a topic that their teacher has chosen, students struggle to understand and adapt to it. Due to the difficulty of the issues and the fact that they are unfamiliar to the students, they experience pressure. Due to the difficulty of the issues and the fact that they are unfamiliar to the students, they experience pressure.

Indirectly, students are asked to understand the material on the topic first; only then can they focus on writing the material. Students must read at least some material or references related to the topic so that they are not mistaken in conveying the material in their writing.

Instead of wanting to make students more diligent, they require students to read material on the topic from various sources. Students choose to write about the topic at random, not necessarily in a specific direction. Which indirectly tells people who read it that the text is ready as long as something is displayed.

However, some students who feel lazy to read material on the topic choose not to do their writing on the topic and ask the teacher to change the topic to a more interesting one and motivate them to do it.

It is different from students who write texts with their own topics; they are more interested in doing their writing because it is considered more related to their lives. In addition, the selection of topics by themselves helps them convey their thoughts in their writing.

They feel more carried away and are free to convey what they have not conveyed so far. In addition, this also encourages students to be themselves and to associate themselves with the writing they make.

As a result, students express more interest in the topics they choose for themselves than in the topics their teachers select. The exception to this rule is if the teacher chooses an interesting topic; in that case, students may write about a subject of their own choosing.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the above research, it can be concluded that students are more motivated when they get to choose what they want to write about in writing class. Still, not many students think that the topic chosen by the teacher also makes it easier for students to write and not get pressured into thinking. Then, regarding students' interest in writing, students' interest will increase when they are faced with topics that they choose themselves compared to topics that the teacher chooses because they are considered more suitable for their lives and there is no need for justification in their writing.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

With this research, it is hoped that English teachers in Indonesia who give writing assignments in EFL classes will adjust the level of students' abilities in selecting writing topics so that students are more free to express their opinions in their writing.

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