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The CATESOL Journal

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ESL Writing Assignments: Student Preferences

Each term teachers of academic writing, either for native speakers of English or nonnative speakers, must determine what topics to assign and how best to help students acquire the skills needed for college writing. In making these determinations, instructors often overlook or underestimate student preferences. This paper reports the results of a survey of student preferences regarding the type of topic assigned and the amount of freedom allowed in choosing a topic. The survey was administered to 168 ESL students enrolled in composition classes at the University of San Francsico in 1984, 1985, and 1987. The results suggest that students prefer controlled assignments based on previous classwork.

In organizing academic writing classes and in choosing writing topics, instructors must decide what balance to strike between making writing meaningful to the student and making it meaningful to the academic community (Connors, 1987). What should be the balance between subjective, personal writing and practical, objective, impersonal writing? How much freedom should students have in choosing topics?

In seeking answers to these questions, a teacher often fails to consider student preferences. (See Kroll, 1979, and Olster, 1980, as examples of student preference surveys.) This paper describes a survey I conducted to determine ESL student preferences regarding types of topics assigned and the amount of freedom students are allowed in choosing topics.

Method

The survey of student topic preferences was administered during the 1984, 1985, and 1987 academic years at the University of San Francisco. The subjects were 97 nonnative speakers enrolled in a writing class in the Intensive English Program (IEP) and 71 nonnative speakers enrolled in Expository Writing 200 (EW 200), a freshman composition class with sections for native speakers of English and for nonnative speakers. Students in IEP had TOEFL scores between

450 and 547, whereas those in EW 200 had TOEFL scores of 550 or above. On the survey itself the means and variances of these two groups did not differ significantly except on Question 7, preference for using sources (see Figure 1). On Question 7 the difference between groups was statistically significant ($p < .05$), with IEP students answering the question more negatively than the EW 200 students. Therefore, I considered the groups as one population, making a total of 168 subjects.

The survey consisted of nine questions on a Likert scale of 1-5 with 1 being "strongly agree" and 5 being "strongly disagree" and one open-ended question. (See Figure 1.) Questions 1 through 3 dealt with the degree of freedom students preferred in choosing topics. Questions 4 through 8 dealt with their preferences in types of topics and types of information used to write papers. Questions 9 and 10 asked about the ease with which they found a topic and how they found a topic if none was given. The surveys were completed anonymously with only the date and class written on the questionnaire.

Figure 1.
Questionnaire of student topic preferences

Read the following statements dealing with composition topics. Circle the number which best describes your opinion for each statement: (1) strongly agree (2) agree (3) have no opinion (4) disagree (5) strongly disagree.

1. I prefer the instructor to assign a topic for a composition.
2. I prefer to choose from two or three topics given by the instructor.
3. I prefer to find my own topic without any suggestions from the instructor.
4. I prefer to write on personal subjects (e.g.,"The Most Important Person in My Life," "My Vacation Last Summer").
5. I prefer to write on impersonal subjects (e.g., "The Importance of Oil in the World," "Advantages of Living in an Urban Area").
6. I prefer to write papers in response to something I have read and have discussed in class.
7. I prefer to use other sources (e.g., magazine or newspaper articles) to write an essay.
8. I prefer to write more imaginative papers (e.g., narratives or descriptions) than expository essays (e.g., arguments, analysis).
9. It is easy for me to find a topic for an essay if none is suggested.
10. Give a short answer to the following question: How do you find a topic for a composition if none is given?

Results

The students surveyed preferred to be given a choice of two or three topics (Question 2) and preferred to write in response to readings and discussions (Question 6) ($X = 1.91$ and $X = 2.38$ respectively). To determine the statistical signifance of the differences in responses to the two questions, I computed the means and 95% confidence intervals (see Figure 2). Only responses to Questions 2 (2-3 Topics) and 6 (Response) differed significantly from the other questions ($p < .05$).

As the responses to the open-ended Question 10 show, students draw on numerous sources for ideas when they must choose a topic themselves (see Table 1). (Many students gave more than one answer to this question, making the total number of answers 228.) The two most frequent responses were (a) using written material and other media for ideas (26%) and (b) using personal experience (18%). Neither of these two responses, however, were a majority. The only other response with over 10% was to write on anything that was easy, for example, to rewrite a composition written in a previous class or to translate a composition written in one's native language into English.

Figure 2.
Means and 95% confidence intervals of student preferences for questions

1 (1 topic), 2 (2-3 topics), 3 (free), 4 (personal), 5 (impersonal), 6 (response), 7 (sources), 8 (imaginative), and 9 (ease).
See Figure 1 for questions.

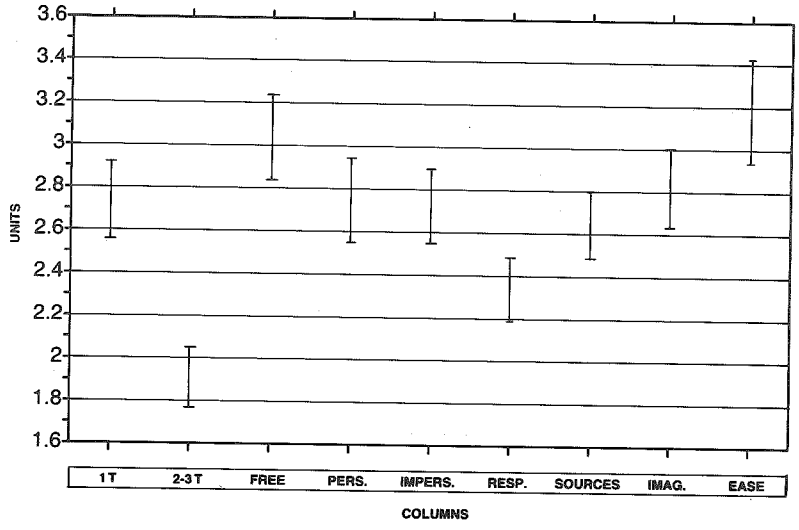

Table 1.
Ways of finding a topic if none is given and percentage of responses, Question 10 (See Figure 1.)

WAYS OF FINDING TOPICS	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES
From written material or other media	26%
From personal experience (e.g., about myself, my country, or my family)	18%
Anything that is easy to write about	11%
Any idea that comes to me	9%
Ask friends, family, or teachers	8%
Personal interests and hobbies	8%
No response	7%
Imagination	4%
I can't find a topic by myself	4%
It's easy to find a topic	4%
Miscellaneous (e.g., something entertaining and interesting for the teacher, or something about the U.S.	2%

NOTE: N = 228

Discussion

The results of this survey suggest that university-bound ESL students have no strong preferences regarding the type of writing assignments given. There is, for example, no preference if assignments call for personal, impersonal, or imaginative essays. The results do, however, indicate that these students prefer to be given some information on possible topics through readings and class discussions and prefer to choose a topic from a limited number of possibilities. The responses to the open-ended question (Question 10) also suggest these same preferences. One student wrote, "If I am not given a topic I will simply choose an easy and general one on something I know to write about. In this way I will find much easier to write because I had already know the topic but this is not too good because we can't write all we know all the time and we also need to write something else. Otherwise, I'll be bored and my knowledge will be limited." Another wrote, "I find a topic for a composition with my heart interest. If I interest to something then I write it for my composition. So no problem in choosing the topic, but the problem is how to write my idea clearly and right."

Similar results were found when the questionnaire was administered to a group of native speakers taking EW 200 at the University of San Francisco and a group of native speakers taking an analogous course at San Francisco City College in 1984 and 1985 (N = 51). The main difference was that the variance of the responses to each question was larger for the native speakers than for the nonnative speakers.

The two strong preferences of the ESL students are compatible with two common characteristics of academic writing assignments: (a) Assignments are based on content and/or data given to students in readings, lectures, and discussions; and (b) they are controlled, perhaps even containing possible thesis statements or a series of questions to answer (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1983; Horowitz, 1986; Johns, 1981, 1985; Shih, 1986; Spack, 1988).

These student preferences, or indeed any student preferences, should not dictate how we structure our classes and assignments; nonetheless in assigning topics we must strive to strike a balance between our students' "heart interest" and their academic needs, and we must help them express both their personal and their more objective ideas clearly so that they may become succesful academic writers. ■

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