THE EFFECT OF TOPIC INTEREST ON IMPROVING WRITING SKILL AMONG PRE-INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS

Sakineh Behbudi[1],
Hossein Sadeghoghli[2i]
[1]PhD Student, Department of English, Faculty of Humanities,
Sarab Branch, Islamic Azad University,
East Azerbaijan Province, Sarab, Iran
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Humanities,
Sarab Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sarab, Iran

Abstract:
This study investigated the effect of topic interest on Iranian EFL learners' writing skill. To fulfil this objective, two intact pre-intermediate classes were selected from a private language institute in Sarab, East Azerbaijan, Iran were selected. The selected participants were then non-randomly divided into two equal groups; experimental group and control group. After that, the topic interest questionnaire was given to the students to assess their interest level in each topic. When the students' level of interest was specified, the experimental group received five high-interest topics and five low-interest topics were given to the control group. Then, the researcher measured the participants' English writing skill by administering a researcher-made writing pre-test. In both groups' classroom, the interested topics were taught to learners in 12 sessions and learners wrote on each topic. After the instruction, a writing post-test was administered to the both groups and finally the data were analyzed by using paired and independent samples t-tests. The obtained results indicated that there was a significant difference between the post-tests of experimental and control groups. The findings indicated that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group ($p <$ .05) on the post-test. The implications of this study can make the teachers aware that topic interest plays an important role in improving writing skill.

Keywords: interest, topic interest, writing skill, Iranian EFL learners

1. Introduction

Human naturally has more tendencies to do the things he/she is interested in. We do the tasks better if we are interested in them; we will enjoy our travel if we are interested

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[1] Correspondence: email hsadegh2000@yahoo.com

in the target places. We will learn more efficiently if we are interested in the materials and topics. Thus, interest plays a fundamental role generally in our life and particularly in our learning. Individuals demonstrate more durability, engagement, and affirmative impact toward tasks that they are interested in (Renninger, 2000). The use of learning strategies and selections for the direction and length of heed can be affected by interest (Scraw & Lehman, 2001). Interested individuals represent higher levels of recall (Hidi, 1990). Capacities vital to learner autonomy, such as being able to investigate and discover meaning, set aims, and use effectual learning strategies, are increased by interest (Renninger, 2000). Individuals with characterized interests are more probably set objectives that are task- particular, and have efficient learning behaviors that are similar to habits (Lipstein & Renninger, 2006).

Interest is accepted to be students' precedence in accomplishing one task or activity rather than others, and it is specified with considerable care and emotional involvement of learners (Schiefel, 1991). Regarding the learning process, Interest can be considered into 3 kinds; individual, situational, and topic interest (Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002). Individual interest is depicted as one's unremitting preference towards one particular substance territory or completing a task or activity rather than other contents or exercises, contrarily, situational interest is the sensation of gratification created by the writings or the circumstance that the learner is occupied with (Schiefel, 1991), and ultimately topic interest is a learner's level of interest when a special topic is considered (Hidi, 2001; Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002).

A. Schiefel (1991) defines topic interest as a form of individual interest and compared it with situational or content-based interest, but Ainley, Hidi, and Berndorff (2002) believe that these 2 sorts of interest are interactive and topic interest cannot only be individual or situational interest and it has qualities of the two sorts. Moreover, Hidi (1990) underlines that situational and individual interest are not segregated from each other and they overlap in numerous regions, hence, this is not really situational or singular interest alone that help premiere learning but both of them and their interaction simplify learning; thus, it is not always accurate to say that origination of the learners' interest is merely individual or situational and not the other. Hidi (2001) also believes that both situational and individual interest assist the topic interest. She emphasizes that topic interest has a crucial role on learning due to the fact that the tittle of a passage is the first thing every will encounter when they are aim to read a text. There are various perspectives on how and why interest may have effect on learning.

Topic interest can influence writing skill positively. Writing is indeed much more than *"orthographic symbolization of speech and most prominently it is an intentional choice and infrastructure of experience"* (Arapoff, 1967, p. 33). Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) accept that writing, together with other psychological and cognitive techniques, *"includes the mental construction of the topic and is developed in view the demand and the knowledge systems of the writer"* (Seitj, 2009, p. 74). As indicated by Li (2008), writers in English are needed to figure out the ideas, select the proper words and material to create the paragraphs

complete the sentences in logical and coherent order, and utilize specified writing procedures and doing the amendments from preparing the writing to its completion.

Second language (L2) writing is more complex than first language (L1) writing. L1 writing includes generating content, sketching opinions, rectifying writing, selecting proper vocabulary, and editing text while L2 writing requires all of these parts scattered with second language processing issues (Wolfersberger, 2003). L2 writing challenging since they are encountered with social and cognitive difficulties related to second language acquisition. This is a dynamic cognitive process where writers metamorphose, affirm and produce ideas, recover L2 structures, and control the writing procedure (Li, 2008).

1.1. Objectives and significance of the Study

There have been rare similar studies which investigated the impacts of topic interest on improving Iranian EFL learners' writing skill. Therefore, the major goal of the present study is to inspect the possible impacts of topic interest on Iranian EFL learners' writing improvement. This study aims to enhance Iranian EFL learners' writing via teaching them the materials they like more.

The findings of the present research may help Iranian EFL learners to be more fluent writers through writing about those topics which they are interested in. The current study can contribute to the existing literature on writing instruction by examining the role of interest in the effectiveness of writing interventions. The outcomes of this research can encourage English teachers and material developers to provide the students with their favorite topics to maximize their learning. In addition, findings of this study may convince English instructors and material developers that one source of L2 English learning problems is the lack of interest in topics.

1.2. Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study tried to answer the following research question:

RQ. Does topic interest have any significant effect on improving Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' writing skill?

Based on the research question the following null hypotheses was formulated:

HO. Topic interest does not have any significant effect on improving Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' writing skill.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Theoretical Background

Topic interest is momentous to teachers because it can be controlled in classroom activities and it creates a point of confluence among the more fugacious situational interest and the more enduring and engaged (hence more valuable to learning) individual interest (Eidswick, 2009). The dynamic nature of topic interest emphasizes the interdependent relationship between situational and independent interest, as well

as the contributions of other motivational variables (i.e., background knowledge, goals, self-efficacy, etc.) that individuals bring to learning situations. Ainley, et al. (2002) illustrated this relevance utilizing student reactions to a text called "Black Holes and Quasars".

Individuals uninterested in astronomy might nonetheless find such a topic interesting because of compelling qualities (i.e., novelty, mystery or danger) incorporated in the title. On the other hand, individuals having singular interest in astronomy will be interested in the text because of a shaped and persevering attraction to it (Eidswick, 2009). A standard approach of studies managing topic interest is the correlation of participants' reported interest, repeatedly in replying to a text topic, with their latter learning (Lepper & Cordova, 1992). An issue with this approach is that it confines the capacity to find out changes in topic interest because of reading the text. Other different issues emerge from the practice (e.g., Ainley et al., 2002) of characterizing "topic" as a proposition embedded in a text title. First, a text title can distort the contents of a text. Second, this definition does not consider reactions to the subject as apparent upon actually reading the article in question.

It has been discovered that written work is one of the most troublesome language skills to learn (Kurk & Atay, 2007). Alsamadani (2010) demonstrated that *"writing is an exhorting and hard process as it incorporates numerous skills such as reconnaissance of the thesis statement, writing supporting details, reviewing, and editing"* (p. 55). Similarly, Abu-Rass (2001) included that writing is a tough skill for native and nonnative speakers as students should make adjust between innumerable issues such as content, organization, objective, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics.

Writing is a complex skill. Students in English as a foreign language context will require English writing skills ranging from an easy paragraph and summary skills to the ability to write essays and professional articles. As students enter the workforce, they will be requested to transmit ideas and information in a clear manner. If students' writing skill is improved, it will permit them to graduate with a skill that will take advantage for life (Albert-Margan, Hessler, & Konrad, 2007). Indeed, good EFL writing, as Lee (2003) stated, is an important concern for teachers, researchers, textbook writers, and program designers in the realm of foreign language teaching.

Writing is the process of conveying thoughts and ideas into written messages. Writing is a contemplated and cognitive process which needs sustained intellectual endeavor over a remarkable period of time. Good writing requires the writer to state himself/herself in a more effective way to concern spelling and dictation. Many writing components are including in writing thus, to accomplish a composition task, writers go through different stages of writing. Alexander (2008) stated that "*the writing process is classified into a five stages sequential pattern (pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing''* (p. 1).

2.2. Empirical Background

Several empirical studies have been done to reveal the effectiveness of topic interest on improving language achievement of English learners, for example, Lee (2009) explored the relationship between topic interest and reading comprehension of upper-intermediate to advanced level learners in Korea. Results revealed that topic interest did not have an effect on recall of high-level information, and both interested and less interested learners could remind major opinions and significant information equally. But for low-level information, or details, interested learners were capable to recall better than less interested learners. Lee (2009) proposed material developers and teachers to utilize interesting topics to motivate learners and assist them recall information successfully.

In another experimental research, Ay and Şen Bartan (2012) investigated the impact of readers' interest, gender, and assessment kinds (multiple-choice items, Yes/No questions, and short-answer formats) on second language reading comprehension in three various levels (A2.1, A2.2, and B1 in the CEFR), and five diverse types of topics. Results showed that females generally attained higher scores overall (in all three levels, five topics, and three test types), but the difference between male and female scores was significant in the short-answer formats. Although females were found to be more prosperous with all of the text topics in this study, both genders got the highest scores from the text of their highest-interest.

In a similar vein, Sadeghpour (2013) checked the impact of interesting topics on reading comprehension of Iranian advanced-level learners. Fifty six Iranian advanced-level students answered an interest questionnaire, and depending on the answers, participants were listed in 2 groups of interested and less-interested participants. Participants read a text and after reading, they responded an immediate and a delayed free recall task. Analysis of recall tasks indicated that topic interest did not impact readers' recall significantly. It was discovered that the effect of gender and interest had significant impact on immediate recall of readers; female readers outperformed males in recalling interesting topics. Results proposed that less-interesting topics can be utilized in classroom activities as well as interesting topics.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

To carry out this study, two intact pre-intermediate classes were selected from a private language institute in Sarab, East Azerbaijan, Iran. In each class, there were 30 students. The students have studied English as a Foreign Language for three or four years. The selected participants were all female and their age range was between 13 to 17. The first language of all participants was Persian. The learners were non-randomly divided into two groups of experimental and control.

3.2. Instruments

Ten topics from the students' course book were used in this study; five portraying high-interest topics and five portraying low-interest topics. These topics were chosen among: religion, travelling, suicide, election, war, love, sport, fashion, cooking, and plastic surgery. The participants portrayed their interest toward these passages prior to the treatment. Based on the students' answer to the topic interest questionnaire, five topics were selected as the high-interest topics and five portraying low-interest topics.

The second instrument which was used in this study to determine the participants' interest level in each topic was a researcher-made topic interest questionnaire. The students were instructed to rate their level of interest in each topic. They had to choose one of these options to determine their level of interest (not interested, low interested, interested, and very interested). Ten topics from the students' course book were included in this questionnaire and participants were required to rate their level of interest in each topic. Five topics were selected as high-interest and five of them as low-interest. As previously mentioned, the topics of the questionnaire were religion, travelling, suicide, election, war, love, sport, fashion, cooking, and plastic surgery. These topics were selected with the help of supervisor. The reliably of the questionnaire was calculated through test-retest method as ($r=0.890$) and its validity was authenticated by 5 English experts.

The third and the most important instrument for gathering the needed data to reply the research question was a researcher-made writing pre-test. It was based on the students' course book. It included two topics which the students were required to write about one of them arbitrarily. The researcher asked the participants to write a composition on a selected topic. The respondents should write a composition with at least 100-150 words. The pre-test was administered in the class under the supervision of the researcher so as to make sure that the students do it by themselves. After writing about the topic, all the compositions were collected and graded by two English teachers according to the same criteria. The raters considered the students' grammatical correctness, the meaningful of the sentences and the length of each composition while measuring the students' writing skill. The students' errors in (grammatical correctness, the meaningful of the sentences and the length of each composition) were counted and then scored. The validity of the pre-test was confirmed by two English experts and its reliability was computed through using inter-rater reliability by means of Pearson correlation analysis and it was 0.925 ($r=0.925$).

Finally, a researcher-made writing post-test was used in the present study. The post-test was based on the topics which were taught to the groups. The post-test included two topics and the students should write about one of them. Two raters rated the students' compositions. The post-test was run to measure the impact of the treatment on the participants' writing improvement. It should be noted that the validity of the post-test was confirmed by two those English experts who validated the pre-test and its reliability was calculated through using inter-rater reliability by means of Pearson correlation analysis and it was 0.898 ($r=0.898$).

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

This study was administered in twelve sessions over a period of six weeks. In the first session, two intact classes were selected and randomly assigned into two equal groups; one experimental group (n=30) and one control group (n=30). After that, the topic interest questionnaire was given to the students to assess their interest level in each topic. When the students' level of interest was determined, five high-interest topics were given to the experimental group and five low-interest topics were given to the control group. Then they were pretested through the researcher-made writing pre-test. Before writing on the topic, the teacher used prewriting activities including brainstorming technique to collect the students' ideas and information about the topic. This was done to activate and prepare the students to write. In each session, one topic was given to the students to write a composition about it. Their compositions were collected and graded at the end of each session. This procedure continued to teach all the topics. After teaching all the topics, a writing post-test based on high-interest topics was given to the experimental group and a writing post-test based on low-interest topics was given to the control group. Finally, the data were analyzed by following the next section.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

In order to answer the research question, data analysis were carried out by using SPSS software version 25. Firstly, Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test was used to check the normality of the gathered data. Secondly, descriptive statistics including means and standard deviation were computed. Thirdly, to examine the impacts of topic interest on Iranian EFL learners' writing skill, independent and paired samples t-tests were run.

4. Results

In order to analyze the gathered data, the SPSS software, version 25 software was used.

Table 1: One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test (Groups' Pre and Post-tests)

		Exp. Pretest	Exp. Posttest	Cont. Pretest	Cont. Posttest
N		30	30	30	30
Normal Parameters[a,b]	Mean	13.3333	26.8667	12.6667	13.2000
	Std. Deviation	1.74856	1.77596	1.93575	2.07448
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.144	.154	.139	.119
	Positive	.144	.154	.139	.119
	Negative	-.096	-.113	-.088	-.117
Test Statistic		.144	.154	.139	.119
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.115[c]	.068[c]	.146[c]	.200[c,d]

a. Test distribution is Normal.
b. Calculated from data.
c. Lilliefors Significance Correction.
d. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

Table 1 indicates that the statistics of scores are normal as the results obtained from using SPSS 25. In this case, the parametric statistics like independent and paired samples *t*-tests can be used to get the final results.

Table 2: Group Statistics (Pre-test of Both Groups)

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	Experimental Group	30	13.3333	1.74856	.31924
	Control Group	30	12.6667	1.93575	.35342

Table 2 shows that the mean scores of both groups on the pre-test; the mean of control group is 12.6667 and the mean of experimental group is 13.3333. Even though the difference of the two groups seems not to be significant regarding the descriptive statistics; however, the data at hand needs more exact clarification. To this end, an Independent Samples t-test was used on the pre-test scores of the two groups. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Independent Samples T-test (Pre-test of Both Groups)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pretest	Equal variances assumed	.363	.549	1.400	58	.167	.66667	.4762	-.286	1.620
	Equal variances not assumed			1.400	57.41	.167	.66667	.4762	-.286	1.620

Table 3 shows that the level of significance is .167 which is greater than the identified level of significance (p<0.05). So, it could be concluded that there is not a significant difference between the performances of the experimental and control groups on the pre-test. In fact, they performed the same on the pre-test.

Table 4: Group Statistics (Post-test of Both Groups)

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Experimental Group	30	26.8667	1.77596	.32424
	Control Group	30	13.2000	2.07448	.37875

Based on Table 4, the mean of the control group is 13.2000 on the post-test. As the above table shows, on the post-test the mean of the experimental group is 26.8667. The mean of the experimental group is greater than the control group. To be sure that the mean difference between the post-tests of the experimental and control groups is significant,

an Independent Samples *t*-test was applied between the post-test scores. Table 5 indicates the results of this *t*-test.

Table 5: Independent Samples T-test (the Post-test of Both Groups)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	1.523	.222	27.41	58	.000	13.6666	.49858	12.66	14.66
	Equal variances not assumed			27.41	56.65	.000	13.6666	.49858	12.66	14.66

Table 5 indicates that the difference between the both groups is significant at (p<0.05). In fact, the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test.

Table 6: Paired Samples Statistics (Pre and Post-tests of Both Groups)

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Exp. Posttest	26.8667	30	1.77596	.32424
	Exp. Pretest	13.3333	30	1.74856	.31924
Pair 2	Cont. Posttest	13.2000	30	2.07448	.37875
	Cont. Pretest	12.6667	30	1.93575	.35342

Table 6 shows the mean scores of the participants in the control and experimental groups on their pre and post-tests. The mean scores of the participants in the control group on their pre-test and post-test were 12.6667 and 13.2000 respectively. The mean score of the experimental group was 13.3333 on their pre-test and their mean score on the post-test was 26.8667. In order to ascertain the significance of the difference, *Paired-Samples t*-test was run between the mean scores of the two groups' pre and post-tests. The results are given in Table 7.

As table 7 indicates since Sig (.088) is greater than 0.05, the difference between the post-test and pre-test of the control group is not significant. Moreover, as Sig (.000) is less than 0.05, the difference between the post-test and pre-test of the experimental group is significant. The treatment resulted in significant difference in pre and post-tests of participants in the experimental group. It can be concluded that the topic interest was effective.

Table 7: Paired Samples T-test (Pre and Post-tests of Both Groups)

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Exp. Posttest - Exp. Pretest	13.533	2.31537	.42273	12.66876	14.39791	32.014	29	.000
Pair 2	Cont. Posttest - Cont. Pretest	.53333	1.65536	.30223	-.08479	1.15146	1.765	29	.088

5. Discussion

In this part the research question "Does topic interest have any significant effect on improving Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' writing skill?" is answered based on the results obtained in the tables above. In order to answer the research question, the researcher compared the two groups of participants in the pre and post-tests. The pre-test was compared to the post-test to show any difference between the participants' performance on developing writing skill concerned with using topic interest.

After analyzing data through the software "SPSS", version 25, the results obtained from the descriptive statistics of the pre-test showed an increase in the mean score of the experimental group in the pre-test. Then based on the administration of an Independent Samples t-test, it was revealed that the significance level was less than the sig. set for this study, so it was clear that there was not any significance difference between two groups in the pre-test. As a result, the two groups were homogeneous.

The results obtained from the descriptive statistics of the post-test also indicated an increase in the mean score of the experimental group in contrast to the mean score of the control group in the post-test. Through the administration of another Independent Samples t-test, it was revealed that the observed t was greater than the critical t. It means that there was a significant difference between two groups of the participants in the post-test and consequently, experimental group had a better performance.

Moreover, the results taken from the descriptive statistics of the pre and post-tests indicated another increase in the mean scores of both groups in the post-test in contrast to their pre-test. This time, through the administration of the Paired Samples t-test, it was revealed that there was a significant difference between the performances of the experimental group in the pre and post-tests in contrast to the control group. Since through the data analysis had been proved both groups were homogeneous before the treatment, the recent results showed that the experimental group performed more successfully than the other group after the treatment.

The reason of this progress can be interpreted in terms of the explanation the experimental group received topics which they were interested. However, in this regard the control group received low-interest topics. The results of this study revealed that topic interest has a significant positive effect on students' writing skill. In other words, the more interesting the topic is, the more comprehensible the reading text will be. This

study provided empirical evidence in Iranian context for investigating the role of interest in reading comprehension.

The findings of this study are in line with identical studies in foreign contexts such as Lee (2009). The outcomes of this study confirm those of Eidswick (2009) who found that interest has a significant influence on EFL learners' reading comprehension. Moreover, the results of this study support those of Sadeghpour (2013) investigated the impact of interesting topics on reading comprehension of Iranian advanced-level learners. She understood that the influence of gender and interest had significant impact on immediate recall of readers; female readers outperformed males in recalling interesting topics. It was also revealed that less-interesting topics can be utilized in classroom activities as well as interesting topics.

6. Conclusion

The present study which aimed to examine the effectiveness of topic interest on EFL learners' writing skill indicated that the type of topic (high-interest and low-interest) plays an important role in learners' writing performance. As students cannot do well in English and have difficulty in writing, teachers can take advantage of the study to provide their students with a more interesting and effective strategy- topic interest. The experimental group received high-interest topics and the control group received low-interest topics. The instructor explored to see if the application using different interested topics have any effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing improvement.

Having administered the pre-test and post-test and analyzing the data through specific statistical analysis of Independent and paired samples t-tests, the researcher found that results indicated that topic interest did affect the learners' writing ability positively. The researcher came to the conclusion that topic interest can help students to increase their writing skill.

Outcomes of the present study put more stress on the importance of interest in writing skill. This is in line with previous studies that claim teaching methods are not provided in accordance with the necessities of students so that these methods do not open up superior opportunity for students to develop their writing skill. Hence, it is crucial to expand more interesting topics to assist learners with their writing improvement. The major limitation of this research was the number of respondents. This study, with regard to the lack of time, could not involve a large number of participants. It may impact the generalizability of the findings.

The current study examined the effect of topic interest on writing improvement. It is proposed for further studies to precisely scrutinize the usefulness of topic interest on other language skills such as speaking, listening, and reading.

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