



Essay Topic Writability Examined through a Statistical Approach from the College Writer's Perspective

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Abstract

No published studies have sufficiently focused on essay topic writability from the perspective of college writers of the new millennium including native English speakers and ESL speakers. In this study, 500 college writers in Metro Toronto in Canada were interviewed to uncover if they found some essay topics easier than other topics. The results indicate that over 90% of them did. The interviewees explained that factors determining the writability of an essay topic include knowledge, interest, experience, and data availability. The positive responses are examined along with the negative ones. Cross-comparison confirms consistency between the two groups. In agreement with previous studies, through a statistical approach and by focusing on essay topic writability, this study alerts frontline teachers as well as language testing administrators to the issue of consistency of difficulty of essay topics in examinations, which can lead to improved validity of such writing tests and examinations across disciplines.

Keywords: Essay topic writability, College writer, Knowledge, Interest, Experience, Data

1. Introduction

According to Applebee, Langer, and Mullis (1987), writing serves as a tool for three thought processes basic to learning: 1) to draw on relevant knowledge and experience in preparation for new activities, 2) to consolidate and review new information and experience, and 3) to reformulate and extend knowledge. In other words, writing may be interpreted as a knowledge-based activity that consolidates itself or snowballs in the process of learning from the student's perspective. In their recent study, twenty years after the publication of the aforementioned study, Lee and Anderson find that "it is hard to identify how far writers' general linguistic competency would account for the performance of a specific task [...]" (2007:327). Lee and Anderson recommend that further research be conducted to illuminate the role of background knowledge on these topics more clearly by using a separate measure of students' knowledge critically related to each of the three topics used in the current writing test (2007). It is a well-known fact that other than writing ability, factors such as knowledge, information, and experience may affect the quality of a student's writing. Numerous studies on topic validity, rating schemes and frameworks, effects of topic interest and prior knowledge on second/foreign-language reading and listening and writing have been conducted (e.g., Lee & Anderson, 2007; Harris et al., 2006; Wing et al., 2006; Cumming et al., 2002; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Reaves et al., 1993; Baldwin et al., 1985). However, no published studies have sufficiently focused on essay topic writability examined from the perspective of college writers of the new millennium including both native English speakers and ESL speakers. As difficult to measure as any other form of mental activity, the influence of linguistic competency on an essay topic may not be immediately available in a statistical format. Nonetheless, this study is intended as the first step to start the attempt by identifying the causal factors of essay topic writability from the college writer's perspective, and through a statistical approach. Lee and Anderson point out that "with the growing use and interest in integrated writing measurements among test users and developers, these inquiries could become important leads for future researchers" (2007:327). It is the author's belief that knowing the determining factors of the degree of difficulty of essay topics not only will benefit researchers, but also examination administrators, examiners, and especially classroom teachers of first and second languages, and that it can improve the validity of essay writing tests and ultimately enhance curriculum delivery by means of appropriate placement of students and beyond. It is with this purpose that the author conducts this study.

2. Collection of data

Between Christmas of 2006 and New Year's Day of 2008, 500 students randomly selected from colleges in the Toronto area in Canada were interviewed. The data generated from these interviews constitute the primary data of this study. It should be pointed out that 43% of Metro Toronto's population of five million is defined as visible minorities. (Javed &

Keung, 2008:A1, A12-A13). The author assumes that native English speakers consist of approximately 70% of the interviewees, though no question was asked about the interviewees' first languages, since it had never been the author's intention to separate English speakers from ESL/EFL speakers. In the author's view, a study of a heterogeneous group will more accurately represent the general population in Canada and likely the United States and most other English-speaking countries.

The author's interview comprises 6 questions designed to uncover whether or not college writers find certain essay topics easier or more difficult than other topics. And if they do, what is the reason? Three of the questions, worded differently, in essence, ask for the same answer or explanation, aiming to verify the validity of their answers. It is the last summary answer or explanation that appears to be the most valid, for it was provided after the interviewees had given examples of easy and difficult topics to support their previous explanations and answers. (See the appendix for details of the survey.)

A small number of interviewees answered No or N/A to the first question, which technically indicates that the interview was over, but they went on to answer the rest of the questions. The primary purpose of continuing the interview with them was to verify the validity of their first answer: the author wanted to know whether they answered No or N/A to the first question because they really meant it, or because they had insufficient time to deliver an accurate answer, or misunderstood the question for any reason. The subsequent answers and the examples of easy topics and difficult topics and explanations provided by the "No" respondents are thus cross-compared with those of the majority—the "Yes" respondents.

3. Data analysis

It is no news that student writers of different age groups perform differently. Children's writing development involves strategic behavior, knowledge, and motivation (e.g., Graham & Mason, 2006). At the theoretical level, Alexander, Graham and Harris (1996), among others, discern knowledge as strategic knowledge and domain-specific knowledge. When high school graduates start their college education, however, this pattern of development does not seem to exist based on analysis of their answers. First, examine the answers (Table 1) to the first question of the interview: "Do you find some essay topics easier to write on than other essay topics?"

As Table 1 indicates, of the 500 interviewees 452 found some essay topics easier than other topics. Forty-one gave a "No" answer, while 7 answered neither "Yes" nor "No." What deserves one's attention is that the explanations of the "Yes" and "No" groups to the easy topic given as an example appear to have much in common. Compare the respective answers to those of Question 3—"Could you please explain why (the topic you have just given is easy for you)?"—in Table 2.

Not surprisingly, the results of the survey reveal that examples of easy topics given by some college students, such as "Sports," "Music," and "Politics," may turn out to be difficult ones for other students. Except two students in the "N/A" group who stated throughout that they were not good at writing and therefore all writing was equally difficult for them, all the 498 interviewees provided an essay topic that was easy for them and explained why. As Table 2 indicates, the biggest group found an essay topic easier if they have the necessary knowledge: the "Knowledge Subgroup" constitutes 33.8% (out of the 90.4%) of the "Yes" group, and 2.4% (out of the 8.2%) of the "No" group. It is not immediately clear why some participants answered no to the first question, and yet gave answers similar to the "Yes" group to Question 3. It is possible that they may dislike essay writing, or find all writing equally difficult, or would rather not distinguish the easier topics from the harder ones. For the two interviewees who said that they were not good writers and that all topics were impossible for them, there was no question of easier topics and harder topics. These two were consistent with the answers from beginning till end, but except for these two, the other five "N/A" respondents still share similarity in their explanations with those of the "Yes" majority, noticeably claiming that one finds an essay topic easier when he/she has the experience.

According to the "Yes" majority, the second most important factor that makes essay writing easier is interest. The author has no intention to review the old issue of whether prior knowledge and interest are highly correlated as some scholars have claimed (e.g., Guthrie, 1981) or if prior knowledge and topic interest are autonomous factors (Baldwin et al., 1985). Nevertheless, according to the analysis of the answers given by the interviewees, interest in this context is simply defined as willingness, eagerness, and joy that students have or experience in the process of writing. Hardly did any one of the interviewees mention directly or indicate clearly whether or not their topic interest came with prior knowledge. In light of the availability of data, the author thus chooses to avoid further discussion of the issue, and to focus on the jargon-free examination of the data generated from the interviewees. The Interest Subgroup—100 in the "Yes" Group and 6 in the "No" Group—forms 21.2%. The knowledge and interest subgroups combined form a clear majority of 57.4%. Then except with the two non-writers, as indicated in Table 2, data and experience other than unreported reasons also contribute to the writability of a college essay topic.

Regarding “Other” in Table 2 and the other tables, it refers to activities or events that any single item listed in the tables does not suffice to cover accurately, such as “I am taking a course,” “I have a family,” and “I’ve got a piano at home.” Another reason for listing such explanations as “Other” is to reduce the risk of misunderstanding the interviewees.

After the interviewees explained why a certain topic was easier for them, they were asked to name a topic that was difficult or impossible for them. As mentioned above, topics such as “Sports,” “Music” and “Politics” may be furnished as examples of easier ones by some students, but may turn out to be difficult topics for others. Nonetheless, the specific topics given by the participants are not our focal discussion. What this study attempts to discover, as mentioned previously, is why they are harder or easier.

From another perspective, the interviewees explained that they found an essay topic more difficult if they lacked what is listed in Table 3.

As indicated in Table 3, lacking knowledge, interest, data and experience is what makes college essay writing more difficult. Except the two non-writers, the 498 interviewees each gave a reason why they found some essay topics more difficult than other topics. The explanation further supports the previous one that explains why one essay topic may be easier than another. In other words, each individual interviewee’s explanation reported in Table 3 verifies his or her previous statement through a negative answer. What deserves one’s attention is that in Table 3 the Knowledge Subgroup increases to 44.6% from the previous 36.2%. The Interest Subgroup, though decreasing to 19.6% from 21.2%, remains the second largest. These two groups combined form a clear majority of 64.2%. Again, this strongly indicates that knowledge and interest alone may make an essay topic easier for the majority of college students. The rest of the factors, including data, experience and others, may play an equally important role for the other 35.4% of the interviewees. One is reminded that this set of factors corresponds to the explanations given through the positive answers.

To allow the interviewees one last opportunity to summarize, repeat or change their answers and explanations that they had given previously, the author requested a summary explanation from each of the interviewees: “Could you please summarize again why (or why not) some essay topics are easier to write on than other essay topics?” The answers are listed in Table 4.

In their summary statements, all groups combined, 52.2% of the interviewees said they found some essay topics easier when they had the knowledge, 22.4% indicated that having the interest was important for them, 11.2% found data useful, and 5.2% found experience valuable, while 8.6% found something other than those listed above helpful. Again 2 people stated they were non-writers and all topics were equally impossible for them. Note that the data in some aspects changed significantly, especially with the Knowledge Subgroup (respectively from 36.2% and 44.6% to 52.2%). The Interest Subgroup stays at 22.4% with a modest increase compared with their explanations for the previous two questions.

Though this may be subject to discussion, as observed during the interviews, most of the interviewees, as the interview progressed, appeared to become more confident and comfortable when they gave their answers, and their answers gained clarity and some previously less logical answers became more logical. The final summary explanation, as stated previously, appears to be the most valid one and is therefore assumed to be the interviewee’s most accurate explanation as to why he or she found some essay topics easier or harder than other topics.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the data generated from the 500 interviews clearly indicates that the majority of college students find some essay topics easier to write on than other topics depending on the knowledge they have. This confirms the findings of many studies that indicate examinees often choose topics of general knowledge rather than a highly specialized topic (e.g., Wang, 1996). In Wang’s words, essay topics perceived easier are chosen more frequently by student writers (1999). A recent study confirms from another perspective that topics generated from specific disciplines are perceived to be more difficult by students of other majors (Lee and Anderson, 2007; also cf. Graham et al., 2006). By the same token, examiners and markers also rely on their own knowledge. Cumming et al. confirm that “groups of raters with common professional or cultural backgrounds act in reference to certain norms and expectations, as has been shown in previous inquiry comparing the behaviors of differing groups of raters of ESL compositions” (2002:89). Also, students depend upon their knowledge of the discourse conventions of their fields of study to help them make decisions about how to revise their own essays (Mendonca & Johnson, 1994). Then comes the issue of *knowledge*, which is defined in almost as many ways as the number of dictionaries published and/or as the number of scholars who have defined it (e.g., Wallace, 2007; Alexander et al., 1996). While Alexander, Graham and Harris (1996), in particular, divide knowledge as “strategic knowledge” and “domain-specific knowledge,” college students who obviously lacked such terminology just mentioned the word *knowledge*, which, based on the interpretation of the explanations they gave, falls within the scope of the latter defined by Alexander et al. To the interviewees, as they clarified in the interviews, knowledge simply means knowing, understanding and being familiar with something which may be derived from

reading, learning, experience and other activities. Further discussion of controversial definitions of knowledge and other terms do not contribute to the focus of this study, and accordingly, the author takes the liberty to leave the rest of the key factors in the ambiguous way they have been used by the average college writer. In brief, the majority (52%) of the college students find that knowledge makes writing an achievable task.

On the other hand, the minority of the interviewees find interest, data and experience play an important role in making an essay topic writable. Avoiding the controversial issue of whether prior knowledge exists with interest or both are autonomous factors does not mean we should not attempt to find out the relationship between interest and knowledge. Indeed, Guthrie's opinion (1981) may easily be proven wrong, as shown in the author's interviews. In the post-interview chatting, an additional question was asked when four of the interviewees claimed that all topics were easy for them or when they insisted that interest was the only factor that made writing easy for them. (This information has not been tabulated, for it is not part of the survey.) Indeed, one who has an interest in a topic may possess prior knowledge of the topic, but equally true, one may be interested in a topic without knowing the topic. The answers of the following dialogue, provided by an interviewee, may shed light on the relationship between interest and knowledge.

Q: Are you interested in space science?

A: Yes.

Q: Are you able to write a good essay on the space shuttle?

A: No.

Q: Why not?

A: Because I know nothing about it, but I can do research or take a course.

Such simple answers as those in the preceding dialogue speak for themselves: interest does not equal prior knowledge, but neither are the two totally irrelevant factors in essay writing, as found in the study by Baldwin et al. (1985). The relationship between interest and knowledge seems to be one of common sense that may not necessarily require many a complex theory to explain. In many cases, interest just serves as a motivating force. As Angelicchio puts it, if students are genuinely interested in a topic, not only will they find the writing more enjoyable, but they will probably be motivated to write a more interesting paper (1989). The interviewees' responses confirm Angelicchio's opinion that interest is a motivating power that ultimately transforms the student's willingness and eagerness to learn to acquisition of knowledge, or new information and data needed for their writing. In other words, interest serves as the start point of education—from not knowing to knowing something. Needless to say, if college writers possess prior knowledge in a topic of interest, substantial learning may not be necessary, and, as it appears, neither is further discussion of the issue. In brief, it is self-apparent that interest on a topic will motivate the college writer to acquire new knowledge for essay writing, which makes writing easier in the final analysis (also see Rief, 2006).

As indicated in Table 4, 11% of the college students find the availability of data, which includes various forms of reference materials, makes an essay topic easier. This claim may be interpreted in more than one way. Firstly, it can be taken as a time saver. It is common sense that the availability of references and other support data simply means time saved for the writer who may otherwise research in the library or through other channels. Naturally, saving time means increasing the writer's efficiency or reducing his or her workload. Therefore the college writer has reason to believe that the availability of the necessary data makes essay writing easier. Their view is duly supported by classroom teachers in colleges and universities who hold that data collecting is a time-consuming activity (e.g., Huang, 1993).

Experience, though not necessarily a systematic body of knowledge, may be interpreted as personal knowledge. In their study on writing-to-learn activities, Reaves, Flowers and Jewell conclude that "[...] seniors, with more practical experience and a better understanding of course content, would be able to make more connections [...] in learning [...]" (1993:40). Dictionaries such as *Merriam-Webster Online* (www.merriam-webster.com) and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, among others, consider experience as the source or basis of knowledge when they define the latter. For the majority of college students and undergraduates in university, expository essays are what they often write, and personal experience or anecdotal examples from personal life are often acceptable in their personal essays. Clearly, the nature of the expository essay appears to support the college writers' claim that experience makes writing easier.

To sum up the discussion, in the final analysis, the results of the survey that involves the 500 college students indicate that it is knowledge that appears to make essay writing easier. Experience may be considered as a form of knowledge in the broadest sense, while interest may serve as motivation for acquisition of new knowledge. Data, apparent sources of knowledge, provide student writers with certain information/support needed for their writing, which is or may be turned into knowledge. The author concludes that, linguistic skills aside, what the majority of the 500 college writers said is that whether an essay topic is easier or more difficult largely depends upon the writer's knowledge of the topic. That confirms the opinions of earlier studies, such as Kavaliauskiene's: knowledge of genre is a key element in all

communication and especially significant in writing academic or professional texts (2005; also see Englert et al., 1988; Clapham, C. 1996).

5. Conclusion

Freedman admits, “Very little is known about the process of evaluating students’ writing” (1979:328). Twenty-eight years later, Lee and Anderson find in their study that “the three topics [of a test, with writing being an integrated component] were not equivalent in terms of difficulty” (2007: 324). Conducted from the students’ perspective, this study confirms that an essay topic is easier for the majority of student writers if it falls within their scope of knowledge. For the minority, an essay topic is easier if they have the interest or the necessary data or experience. That prior knowledge makes one essay topic easier for college students than another finds theoretical support in various studies which discover that a specific topic assigned in a test or examination may affect the examinee’s writing performance due to various factors including subject knowledge (e.g., Lee & Anderson, 2007). The same study by Lee and Anderson points out that the matter of topic content of a writing test becomes even more problematic and important when measuring graduate students as the EPT [English placement test] does, because these students study in a variety of subject areas, with deeper knowledge in their own major (2007). Their study raises the questionability of the validity of essay topics that are assigned without avoiding such bias as that of knowledge, or writing topics provided by examiners unaware of the existence of such bias.

The college students’ confirmation of the researchers’ findings has significant implications in classroom teaching and testing of both first and second languages. In the delivery of the curriculum, when a teacher assigns an essay topic to the students, he or she has to be aware of not only the often discussed linguistic and cultural biases that may come with the topic, but has to weigh the priority of measuring the student’s writing skills through the essay or by testing their knowledge on the essay topic, or both. In light of the findings discussed above, though interest and knowledge including experience may be beyond control, examiners may provide appropriate essential and supplementary reading materials for examinees where data availability may be a questionable issue, especially when such materials are deemed capable of enriching examinees’ knowledge needed for the writing. This, beyond classroom teaching, also applies to institution enrolment testing, national college-entrance examinations and international testing, such as the TOEFL. The essay topics in question include those of any subject. It is hoped that this study will lead to improved validity of examinations across all disciplines at different levels, of which writing is the only, or one of the only components. Most importantly of all, the author hopes that it will minimize the number of victimized examinees whose representatives have generously participated in this study.

Appendix. The Survey and the Primary Data

A. Survey on Essay Topic Writability

- 1) Do you find some essay topics easier to write on than other essay topics?
Yes_____ No_____ N/A_____
- 2) Could you name a topic that is really easy for you?
- 3) Could you please explain why (the topic you have just given is easy for you)?
- 4) Could you name a topic that is very difficult or impossible for you to write on?
- 5) Could you please explain why (the topic is difficult/impossible for you)?
- 6) Could you please summarize again why (or why not) some essay topics are easier to write on than other essay topics?

B. The Primary Data

Table 1. College writers who find some essay topics easier than other topics

Some essay topics are easier	Yes		No		N/A		Total	
	Number	of	Number	of	Number	of	Number	of
Number of interviewees	452	90.40%	41	8.20%	7	1.40%	500	100%

Table 2. What makes an essay topic easier for college writers

What makes an essay topic easier	Yes		No		N/A		Total	
Knowledge	169	33.80%	12	2.40%	0	0.00%	181	36.20%
Interest	100	20.00%	6	1.20%	0	0.00%	106	21.20%
Data	52	10.40%	4	0.80%	0	0.00%	56	11.20%
Experience	79	15.80%	5	1.00%	1	0.20%	85	17.00%
Other	52	10.40%	14	2.80%	4	0.80%	70	14.00%
N/A: No writer	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	0.40%	2	0.40%
Total	452	90.40%	41	8.20%	7	1.40%	500	100.00%

Table 3. What is lacking that makes college essay writing more difficult

What is lacking that makes an essay topic harder	Yes		No		N/A		Total	
Knowledge	209	41.80%	14	2.80%	0	0.00%	223	44.60%
Interest	94	18.80%	4	0.80%	0	0.00%	98	19.60%
Data	54	10.80%	4	0.80%	3	0.60%	61	12.20%
Experience	49	9.80%	2	0.40%	0	0.00%	51	10.20%
Other	46	9.20%	17	3.40%	2	0.40%	65	13.00%
N/A: No writer	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	0.40%	2	0.40%
Total	452	90.40%	41	8.20%	7	1.40%	500	100.00%

Table 4. Summary responses to what makes college essay writing easier

What makes an essay topic easier: Summary responses	Yes		No		N/A		Total	
Knowledge	244	48.80%	15	3.00%	2	0.40%	261	52.20%
Interest	108	21.60%	4	0.80%	0	0.00%	112	22.40%
Data	49	9.80%	6	1.20%	1	0.20%	56	11.20%
Experience	25	5.00%	1	0.20%	0	0.00%	26	5.20%
Other	26	5.20%	15	3.00%	2	0.40%	43	8.60%
N/A: No writer	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	0.40%	2	0.40%
Total	452	90.40%	41	8.20%	7	1.40%	500	100.00%

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