STUDENTS' CHOICES ON TOPICS PUBLISHED IN PROJECT IBUNKA AND THEIR RATIONALES

(A CASE STUDY)

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Abstract

For novice writer, choosing a topic to write can be a difficult stage process since there are many factors to consider. The process of choosing topic and factors contribute to those choices are important to investigate since it can inform the writing teachers and lecturers about possible topics they may bring to the writing class. In addition, the students' topic choices and their motives provide valuable information for writing teachers and lecturers to understand the students' writing process, especially pre writing stage, which is very important to consider in teaching writing. This case study reveals students' choice on topics and their rationales for choosing those topics. Fifteen English department students who took part in an online writing forum for more than twelve weeks, Project Ibunka, were observed and interviewed. The results show that campus activities and friendship were the top two topics chosen by students regarding school life. Meanwhile, entertainment and Events&Spots dominated students' choice when they were asked to write about cultural topics. On the subject of social theme, majority of students chose educational issues for their topic. Various rationales of students topics choices were also discovered such as students' interest on the topic, students' consideration of audience and familiarity on the topic.

Key words: Project Ibunka, Writing, Writing Process, Topic Choice, Rationale

INTRODUCTION

Obstacles faced by EFL students in their writing process such as writer's block, lack of English proficiency and concern toward grammatical errors (Maolida, 2015) often lead to a negative perception that writing is difficult. In this case, it is important that teachers of a writing class provides opportunities for students to select writing topics that they care about, topic that invite them to say what is they want to say (Johnson, 180: 2008). This preference on topic is part of the writing process particularly in the *Prewriting* stage. This stage is very important since this will create greater motivation to write, which in turn, will improve students' writing and communicating skills and result in a more interesting and engaged classroom or tutoring session (Ibid,

181). The goal of prewriting stage is to generate ideas. Generating ideas will help writer to map out what they are going to write. However, for novice writers of EFL students to generate ideas really need great efforts since they do not use English as their mother tongue in their daily conversation. The circumstance can be even more challenging if the students are difficult to deliver their idea into writing form. Moreover, the fact that writing activities in schools are mostly oriented toward formal features (Göçer, 2011; Temizkan, 2007; Ülper, 2012 in Bayat, 2014) is another reason for this difficulty. Therefore, teachers or instructors need to grasp the process of gaining ideas by exploring the students' preferences on topics and figure out factors influenced it in order to undertake the problem.

Previous studies dealing with the process writing approach, students' preferences on topics and the factors contribute to the choices have been conducted and inspired this paper. In the process of writing, Huang (2004) conveyed a research regarding to the use of process writing and internet technology in an EFL writing class with the focus on peer reviews. The purpose was to evaluate the effectiveness of using process writing and Internet technology for helping Taiwanese college students overcome the obstacles they encounter in learning to write in English. The study also investigated the students' and their teacher's attitudes towards the implementation of the On-line Writing Project which designed by the researcher as well as the influence of Chinese/Taiwanese culture on the implementation of the On-line writing project. The outcomes indicated both the online writing project and the peer reviews were effective such the students responded positively to process writing, peer reviews and the use of Internet technology in their English writing course, that the students prefer teacher feedback on their writing better than peer feedback since teacher feedback more helpful based on their opinion. Furthermore, the on-line writing project decreased the value of the students' engagement on searching the World Wide Web but increased their excitement about e-mailing and the trust in their partner's effort in peer reviews.

It also reveals the effects of process writing activities which are specified in terms of pre-writing, peer reviews, and publishing. The pre-writing activities supported the participating students find ideas for writing; they helped the students focus while expanding their views. In peer reviews the positive outcome also helped the participating students find their blind spots, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and realize what was important about the written topic, what to revise, and how to revise.

They also learned to pay more attention to content, organization, and audience needs as well as learned to think more and look at things from different angles. The effects of the On-line Writing Project as a whole were significant, too (Huang, 2004) it reveals the participating class performed significantly better than the previous semester, while the other class did not. The students also showed that they learned a lot from the On-line Writing Project where they can get more opportunities to write, interact, cooperate, and think.

Another study is conducted by Lubold et.al. (2016) investigating the effect of topic selection on writing fluency among Japanese high school student. The purpose of this replication study is to explore previous findings on the effects of topic selection on writing fluency for high school English as foreign language learners which focused on a timed, non-graded writing activity administered to groups of Japanese engineering students. This research readjusted from the work of Bonzo (2008 in Lubold et. al., 2016) which argued that "learners often 'hold back' and avoid taking chances with less familiar forms for fear of diminished accuracy, thus not only producing less complex writing but also less writing overall" (p. 723). This tendency in the Japanese EFL environment is fostered through writing instruction that focuses mainly on accuracy (Connor-Linton, 1995; Kobayakawa, 2011 in Lubold et. al., 2016). The outcomes of this study reveals that offering students' choice on topic indicating to a higher fluency score as measured by higher ratio of unique words to total words. All in all, there are two findings regarding to this research, the benefits of self-selected topics include increased fluency and increased meaning to classroom writing tasks. Lubold et. al. (2016) also asserts that a balanced language curriculum supports students' opportunities to practice and develop as language users through ownership over the topics. Therefore, the opportunities allow them to take risks and create their own conceptualization of language, and bridge the gap between what students are taught in the classroom and what learners need to become fluent language users.

Togatorop (2015) conducted a research utilizing a web as the media for collaborative learning of his students. The objective of the research was to increase the students' interest in writing activities and hence improve their writing performance since his students' writing skill are poor and they are reluctant to write in English. Employing a quasi-experiment method, a purposive sample is performed; those were two classes that took the Academic Writing Courses. A web forum was provided in the

experiment class. In this web Togatorop (2015) explains that students were asked to share their writings and to give comments or feedback (do peer editing) to their friends' uploaded writing tasks. The web system provided accumulated mark for the quantity and the quality of those writings and comments or feedbacks. Lecturers also provided feedback before students did revising and rewriting. The control class, on the other hand, was taught with a conventional method. The development of the students' writing quality of both experiment class and control class were compared by applying pre-test and post-test analyzed quantitatively using SPSS. In result, the average performance of the experiment class better than the control class.

Meanwhile, Hsieh (2016) conducted a research on students' topic preferences and oral development in an English-only short term intensive language program. His research intended to investigate the potential topics that motivated learners to practice speaking and their oral performance. The outcomes appear that learners preferred topics related to their daily life meanwhile their speaking improved in terms of speech unit, clause unit, and words uttered. From the results of this study, the majority of the learners expressed their choice for topics that describe (1) the leisure activities they can practice, (2) how to organize a party and what to be careful with to manage their interpersonal life and social network, and (3) how to report to people their process of solving a common day-to-day problem. For teenagers, the above topics interested them more than the others such as cultural exploration, and technology and innovation.

This present research, however, reveals students' choice on topics and their rationales for choosing those topics in Project Ibunka since the students' topic choices and their motives provide valuable information for writing teachers and lecturers to understand the students' writing process which can give benefits as recommendation materials for the process of writing which in turn will create greater motivation to write for EFL students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Process Writing Approach

The Prewriting stage belongs to the process writing approach proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981, in Bayat 2014) which allows the written product to be

checked and evaluated during the writing process. In this approach, the points to be realized throughout the writing process are focused on improvement of the written product (Bayat, 2014). Three dimensions of the act of writing are emphasized: the *task environment*, *long-term memory*, and the *writing process*. Two important units of the *task environment* are the topic and the text. The writer's ability to decide and present the topic is a major part of the writing process. The writer's *long-term memory* is important for retrieving information from memory or activating hints that will realize it. The retrieved information is expected to be integrated into the topic. However, although correct information about a specific topic can be retrieved, sometimes it cannot be organized in a way the reader can understand (McCurdy, Schmitz, & Albertson, 2010 in Bayat, 2014). *The writing process* is the third unit of the cognitive process approach (Bayat, 2014). This unit is composed of the stages of planning, translating, and reviewing. Planning refers to content production and organization (Graham, 2006 in Bayat, 2014). In the planning stage, Harmer (2004) proposes three main issues writers should think about when planning to write:(1) the purpose of the writing, (2) the audience they are writing for, and (3) the content structure of the piece. During the translation stage, opinions are transformed into written language, and the writer addresses numerous details of written language such as syntax, grammar, and spelling. During review, the writer reads to develop the text or correct any errors (Flower and Hayes, 1981 in Bayat, 2014).

Presently, the stages of the process writing approach have been performed in similar ways that differ in part from the arrangement proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981) in some sources (Johnson, 2008; Karatay, 2011; Simpson, 2013 in Bayat, 2014). One difference is that the subcomponents of the main stages of the process are instead posited as separate stages: *prewriting, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing* (Bayat, 2014). This study employs the current subcomponents of the main stages of the process of writing while the prewriting stage will be the main focus in this research.

Project Ibunka

'Project Ibunka' is a cross-cultural exchange projects on the Internet (Watanabe, et. al., 2007). This project was held since 2000. More than 2,400 students from seventeen different countries have joined it. 'Ibunka' means different cultures in Japanese. Students from various countries with different cultural background meet and

exchange their views on a particular designed website (Ibid.). Further, Watanabe et al (2007) clarifies that Project Ibunka has three main activities, 1) text-based bulletin board discussion, 2) chat sessions, and 3) video letter exchange. Among them, the bulletin board discussion is the biggest one. It consists of three main themes, 1) school life, 2) cultures, and 3) social issues – world peace. Each theme has a number of sub-themes so that students can choose any topic they like. On the other hand, partner teachers supervise students' postings and interaction. The database management tools that the web-site offers help this. They pick up most excellent postings of the week and put them on the weekly newsletters. The project aims to constitute only some part of an existing course. Therefore, it isn't aim to substitute a locally organized face-to-face course (Ibid,.).

METHOD

It is a case study focusing on students' preferences on topics written for Project Ibunka and their rationales. Project Ibunka is an online writing forum administered by professor Masahito Watanabe from Yokohama National University, Japan, that opens the writing forum each year where the students all over the world can exchange their writing about specific themes.

There were three main themes provided for the participants: School life, Culture and Social Issues. Even though the main themes were provided, the participants were free to choose the topic they preferred. Fifteen students of Suryakancana University voluntarily took part in this online writing forum for more than twelve weeks. Their participation in this forum was not part of formal writing class so their writing contribution in this forum did not contribute to their writing score in formal class.

The data were collected by observing the students' pre writing stage through what's up group where the participants interacted each other when they went on the whole writing process in Project Ibunka. Besides, students' interaction in Ibunka forum was also observed so their topic choices were easily recorded. Furthermore, interview was conducted to gain the data, especially the data on the rationales of their writing process in choosing the topics they preferred as well as their rationales.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Students' Topics Choices Published in Project Ibunka

The result of observation reveals the topics chosen and published in Ibunka forum by the participating students. The percentage of students who chose their preferred topics under the 'school life' theme is shown in the following table:

Table 1

Students' Choices on School Life Topics in Ibunka Forum

Provided Topics	Number of Students	Percentage
Activities at campus	9	60%
Friendship	7	46.7%
Achievement	4	26.7%
Hoby	2	13.33%
Special event(s) at campus	5	33.33%
Personal Experience	2	13.33%

The table shows that most of students (60%) preferred to write the topic about activities at campus. In this case, the students described their daily routines at campus such as their activities in the class and their involvement in the extracurricular activities. The next dominant topic preferred by the students (46.7%) is friendship. It is then followed by other chosen topics such as special event(s) at campus (33.33%), achievement (26.7%), hoby (13.33%) and personal experience (13.33%).

For cultural theme, there are five main topics provided and the chosen topics and their percentage are shown in the following table.

Table 2

Students' Choices on Cultural Topics in Ibunka Forum

Provided Topics	Number of Students	Percentage
Entertainment	7	46.7%
Events and spots	7	46.7%
Humanistic activities	1	6.7%
Education	0	0%

Family	0	0%

The table shows that topic 'entertainment' and 'events and spots' obtained the highest percentage. Both of them shared the similar percentage of 46.7% , followed by topic 'humanistic activities' with 6.7 %. It needs to be acknowledged that under topic 'entertainment' each student wrote different titles such as favorite music, traditional arts, volunteer activities and other topics. Meanwhile under topic 'events and spots', the students chose to write tourist spots such as tourists spots in Cianjur, *Kampung Inggris* and local foods such as *Cilung*, *Liwet* and *Cireng Banyur*.

Regarding social issues, eight general topics were provided including educational issues, health and diseases, crime, environmenal issues, other topics, war and conflicts, family and human issues, and economical and political issues. Among those topics, five topics were chosen and the percentage of students' preferences is shown in the following table:

Table 3

Students' Choices on Social Issues Topic in Ibunka Forum

Provided Topics	Number of Students	Percentage
Educational issues	7	46.7%
Health and Diseases	4	26.7%
Crime	2	13. 33%
Environmental Issues	1	6.7%
Other Topics	1	6.7%
War and conflicts	0	0%
Family and Human Issues	0	0%
Economical and Political Issues	0	0%

The table shows that majority of students (46.7%) preferred educational issues as their writing topic. The students wrote various titles under educational topics such as

cheating, school violence, suicide and bullying. Health and disseases was preferred by 26.7% students who wrote various titles under health and disseases issues such as drug abuse and smoking habit. Other topics that were preferred by the students included crime (13.33%), environmental issues (6.7%) and other topics (6.7%).

Students' Rationales of Their Choices on Topics Published in Project Ibunka

While the previous tables display the students' preferences on topics published in Project Ibunka, the following table shows the students' rationales on their topics choices. The displayed results were obtained from individual and group interview. The students' rationales were categorized into three main factors: the student prefered a topic because the topic was interesting for him/her, the student prefered a topic because the topic was familiar and the student preferred a topic because he/she thought that the topic was interesing for the readers/audience.

Table 4

Students' Rationales of Their Topic Choices

Students' Rationale of Topic Choice	School Life	Culture	Social Issues
The topic is interesting for the writer	40%	40%	26.6%
The topic is familiar	60%	26.6%	20%
The topic is interesting for the reader	0%	33.3%	53.3%

The table shows that each theme displays different dominant rationale. For school life theme, for instance, the majority (60%) preferred and chose certain topic because the topic was familiar and the rest (40%) were because of their interest on the topic. Regarding the topics under culture theme, many students (40%) preferred a topic because the topic was interesting. Other students (33.3%) stated that their reasons of preferring a topic was readers' oriented and the rest (26.6%) were due to its

familiarity. Meanwhile for social issues, the majority (53.3%) chose a topic because the topic was interseting for reader and some students (26.6%) selected a topic because of their interest and the others'topic selection (20%) were based on their familiarity on the topic.

DISCUSSION

The topic selection done by the participating students was facilitated by Project Ibunka by providing general theme so the students could choose more specific topics that enabled them, to what Jhonson (2008, p.180) suggests in his article, say what they want to say as well as support their writing fluency (Lubold et al, 2016). Comparing to common formal writing class that usually focuses on formal features of writing (Göçer, 2011; Temizkan, 2007; Ülper, 2012 in Bayat, 2014), Project Ibunka did not determine the features strictly, such as type of text that students should write, even though it still applied some rules such as minimum number of words and plagiarism awareness.

Students' choices of topics in prewriting phase that become one of subcomponent of writing stages (Bayat, 2014) and their rationales shows various results. Under school life theme, for instance, majority of students chose to write about activities at campus and friendship. Those two topics were chosen by more students than other topics such as hoby, special event and achievement. Under culture theme, entertainment (e.g. favorite music, traditional arts, volunteer activities) and events&spots (e.g. tourists spots in Cianjur, *Kampung Inggris* and local foods such as *Cilung, Liwet*, *Cireng Banyur*) were chosen by more students comparing to other topics such as humanistic activities, education and family. Meanwhile, under social issues theme, more students wrote about educational topics (cheating, school violence, suicide and bullying) than other topics such as Health and deseases, crime and environmental issues.

Those choices were influenced by the students' reasons that became the basis of their decision to choose or not to choose a topic. It is revealed that there are at least three students' rationales behind their choice on a topic: writers' interest on the topic,

familiarity on the topic and readers consideration. It is interesting to find that the dominant rationale behind different themes are also various. Under school life theme, for example, the dominant rationale behind students' choice on a topic was familiarity on the topic. In other words, the students tend to choose to write something that was familiar for them which was expressed by a student (RZ) in the interview:

Because the topic is the easiest to tell since it relates to my real life.
(Student RZ)

The excerpt shows a student's statement who chose topic related to friendship. She stated that she chose to write the topic because friendship was the easiest thing to write because it happened in her real life. The preference on choosing topics that relate to real life is supported by another research (Hseih, 2016) revealing that teenagers tend to prefer topics that convey their daily life such as activities, interpersonal life and network. In this study, topics such as activities at campus and friendship were more prefered by the students.

As for the second theme, cultural theme, the dominant rationale behind students' choice on a topic was students' interest on the topic. It means many students chose a topic under cultural theme because they were interested on the topic as displayed in the following excerpt:

Because it is interesting to write and it is unique, unusual thing... (student SM)
The excerpt shows a student's statement about her rationale of choosing a topic. The student chose to write topic about *Kampung Inggris* because she was interested on the topic and she thought *Kampung Inggris* was unique and unusual and those reasons led her to choose and write about the topic.

Regarding the dominant rationale for third theme, social issues, the readers or the audience orientation was stated by more than fifity percents of students. It means that the students chose a topic because they thought the topic was interesting for the readers. It was supported by a student's reply in the interview as shown in the following excerpt:

Because bullying occurs everywhere and people have to be aware that this issue got to be stopped. With my article, I hope readers more informed about this.
(Student LD)

The excerpt displays a student's rationale of choosing a topic about bullying in educational setting (at school). She chose the topic by considering the audience she wrote for. In that case, she wanted to make the audience aware of the dangers of bullying. The writer followed Harmer's (2004) suggestion to think about the audience before writers write as well as the purpose of the writing.

Furthermore, it can also be seen that the variety of dominant rationale behind topics choice was likely influenced by types of theme. As a case in point, topics under school life theme that focused on students' personal experience related to campus life, the students was inclined to share their own activities and experiences that were, of course, familiar and therefore, easier to write. As for topics under cultural theme that focused on exploring cultural aspects that appealed, attracted and drew the students' attention, the rationale of interest made sense. Meanwhile the topics of cultural issues that tend to be more abstract, explore wider aspect of life and have possibilities to relate to audiences' life may contribute to students' purpose of writing, not only to share personal experience and perspective but also to inform and influence the readers.

CONCLUSION

As students' choices on topics published in Project Ibunka and their rationales have been investigated, the conclusions are drawn in accordance with the findings and discussion previously presented. Under school life theme, topics of campus activities and friendship were chosen by majority of students. Regarding cultural theme, entertainment and events&spots were the top two topics while for social issue, educational issue was the topic with the highest percentage. There were at least three rationales behind the students' choices: students' familiarity on the topic, students' interest on the topic and orientation toward the audience/readers. In this case, dominant rationale for each theme shows various results: familiarity on topic was the dominant rationale for topics under school life theme, interest on topic was the dominant rationale for topics under cultural theme and audience orientation was the dominant rationale for topics under social issue theme. In this case, provided themes may contribute to students' choices on topics.

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