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The Effects of Topic Familiarity and Language Proficiency on EFL Learners' Writing Quality

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ABSTRACT

The Journal of Studies in Language 39.3, 335-347. This study aims to examine how topic familiarity and language proficiency impact the quality of English writing in EFL settings. For the study 64 college freshmen participated, and they were divided into two proficiency groups (high and intermediate). They were asked to write an argumentative essay for two topics each, followed by rating each topic's degree of familiarity of on a 10-point Likert scale. They were also asked to respond to a questionnaire with two open-ended questions. The results are as follows: 1) participants were more familiar with the driving topic than the smoking topic; however, the differences in their knowledge about these two topics are not likely to come from their different language proficiency; 2) their topical knowledge failed to demonstrate any differences in their writing quality depending upon their language proficiency; and 3) most participants reported that the smoking topic was more difficult to write about, and they believed that both topics would be easier to write about if they did so in their mother tongue. **(Chungnam National University · Korea Air Force Academy)**

Keywords: topic familiarity, topical knowledge, language proficiency, L2 writing, text quality

1. Introduction

Without a doubt, English writing is an essential means of communication since English has taken an important role as a lingua franca in the globalized world. Plus, with easier accessibility to digital, social networking service on the Internet across the globe than before, there has been a growing tendency for people to go online and express their thoughts and emotions in written form rather than in any other ways (Hubert, 2013). Besides, writing skills have been playing a crucial role in academic, professional, and personal domains, as well. In line with such trend, English writing has surely become a must-have skill as part of interacting with each other both in on and offline situations, regardless of whether they use English as L1 or L2.

However, writing proficiency varies among individuals, and many variables, including the writer's language proficiency, topic familiarity, and his/her motivation can lead to different quality of writing. Among the writing task variables, the topic issue has drawn researchers' attention as an important factor that determines the quality of written work (Indah, 2017; Kim, 2007; Lindemann and Anderson, 2001; Ruth and Murphy, 1988; Skehan, 1988, 2001). The factor, which is usually named as topic familiarity, refers to the writer's prior knowledge and understanding of the subject matter they are supposed to write about (Robinson, 2001; Skehan, 2001). In other words, it is particularly relevant for students who often have to write their essays and research papers on topics they are not familiar with. In such cases, students may struggle to find appropriate words to express their thoughts and ideas, and then their writing outcome might be less effective than expected.

For the past several decades, the impact of topic familiarity on writing quality has been one of the main interests of many researchers in ESL/EFL contexts. Some studies have suggested that writing about familiar topics can lead to better quality writing as students can draw upon their prior knowledge and experiences to create a coherent and engaging writing outcome. On the other hand, writing tasks that ask L2 learners to write about unfamiliar topics can be challenging and may result in lower quality writing since the students may have difficulty in using proper words, expressions, and structures to convey their ideas effectively (Carrell, 1983; Clapham, 1996; Hinkel, 2008; Kim and Ryoo, 2011; Kobayashi, 2009; Messick, 1989; Tedick, 1990; Winfield and Barnes-Felfeli, 1982).

Unlike these positive effects of topic familiarity on writers' performance, a study conducted by Yang and Kim (2020) reported mixed results, in which the higher level of topic familiarity produced increased lexical complexity, and yet no effects were detected for other measures such as fluency, accuracy, or syntactic complexity. Still other researchers reported that topic familiarity did not affect L2 learners' writing performance in any significant way, and an independent variable such as writer's language proficiency or strategic planning might play a significant role rather than topical knowledge in writing tests (Lee, 2004; Lee and Anderson, 2007; Salimi and Fatollahnejad, 2012). For example, Lee and Anderson (2007), who investigated the topic generality of a writing test with three subject-specific topics, found that the higher students' writing proficiency increases, the less probability they get the lowest scores for the test across the topics. This suggests that general language proficiency could be a more important factor in writing rather than topical knowledge.

Despite the considerable research in this area, there are still controversial findings. Therefore, it is of pressing necessity to investigate the effects of topic familiarity and language proficiency on the quality of English writing with varied subjects in EFL settings, which may help disentangle the thorny, yet crucial, issue for L2/EFL students' effective communication through writing. In order to fulfill this purpose of the present study, the research questions are posed as follows:

1) How do topics of the texts and EFL learners' language proficiency affect text familiarity they think?
2) How do topics of the texts and EFL learners' language proficiency affect their writing quality?
3) What are EFL learners' perception of their writing performance in accordance with topics of the texts they were asked to write about?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Topic Issues in Writing

A large number of researchers with great interest in English writing development have put a lot of time and efforts into studies on a variety of writing task variables such as genre, topic, test method, planning time, or time pressure, which can affect the quality of writing performance. Although they have constantly reported their research findings about those variables on the quality of writing, not enough attention has been given to the issue of writing topic. In particular, the topic issue in writing is commonly considered as a critical factor that influences learners' writing performance, causing a huge difference in writing quality. According to Alexander et al. (1991: 334), the knowledge of a topic is so crucial on "the interaction between one's prior knowledge and the content of a specific passage" that it is nearly impossible to assess learners' writing ability on a task requiring their cultural or topical knowledge and experience, if they do not have much.

In that regard, He and Shi (2012) corroborated the positive effect of topical knowledge on writing performance by reporting the findings that students across three proficiency levels (basic, intermediate, and advanced) produced much better quality of writing on the general topic than on the specific topic. The lack of topical knowledge on the specific task brought about poor organization and language in writing texts, such as weaker coherence and cohesion, shorter essays, more language errors, and less frequent use of academic words. Similarly to He and Shi's findings, Tedick (1990), who had compared students' essay writings on a general and a field-specific topics, showed that significantly better-quality writing was performed on the field-specific topic, which had been more familiar to the students, than on the general topic. He acknowledged the positive role of topical knowledge in the writing development in ESL context (Winfield and Barnes-Felfeli, 1982).

In contrast, Lee and Anderson's study (2007) showed a big difference from those of He and Shi (2012) and Tedick (1990). They measured ESL graduate students' topical knowledge based on their majors and explored how subject-specific topics affected their writing performance. As a result, they found that the students' subject-specific topical knowledge did not help them to produce good writing outcomes, eventually suggesting that learners' language proficiency could be a more important factor in writing performance rather than topical knowledge. Another researcher who supported Lee and Anderson' assertions is Lee (2004), who compared students' writing performance in accordance with a field-specific and a general topic in an ESL placement test. He presented that the knowledge of topics did not have a positive effect on the production of quality writing, concluding that the difficulty level of writing sources was a deciding factor in the students' writing quality.

When it comes to some empirical evidence from EFL settings, Yoon (2017) explored the validity of syntactic, lexical, and morphological complexity measures in examining topic and proficiency differences in L2 writing. He analyzed 1,198 argumentative essays on two different topics, written by Chinese college students. It was reported that the students with higher level of topic familiarity produced better writing complexity, especially in phrase-level measures. His findings represent his positive stance on strong topic effects on overall language complexity. In addition, Yang and Kim (2020), who also conducted a study in the similar design to Yoon (2017), found a little different findings, in which the students produced essays with much lower lexical complexity for the less familiar topic than for the familiar one. It

was finalized that there had been no significant effects on accuracy, fluency, and syntactic complexity in accordance with the degree of topic familiarity.

2.2 Topic Familiarity and Language Proficiency

According to Yang and Kim (2020: 79), "topic familiarity" can be defined as "whether writers are writing about a common, everyday subject matter in relation to themselves." Robinson (2001) and Skehan (2001) mentioned that the level of topic familiarity, which is how much knowledge and/or experience learners possess on a given topic, is closely associated with cognitive complexity dimensions based on the framework of Skehan's Trade-off Hypothesis. With Skehan's idea, it can also be assumed that increased cognitive complexity of tasks leads to competition among linguistic performance, with an increase in one area at the depletion of another. In other words, lower levels of language production, that is the linguistic complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF), may be predicted when learners write an essay on topics with which they have less familiarity. Thus, it has been constantly stressed that the choice of writing topic should be taken into careful account since the level of topic difficulty or familiarity could significantly affect writers' text quality.

On the basis of such reasoning, some studies have examined the effects of topic familiarity and language proficiency on writers' text quality. A study on the effects of the two variables on L2 writing performance was explored by He and Shi (2012), whose participants were 50 Canadian college students with three different English proficiency levels: basic, intermediate, and advanced. In timed-test situations, the participants took essay writing tests with two different topics: one general topic about university studies and the other for their specific knowledge related to federal politics. After reporting their results that the students across all proficiency levels produced much better quality outcomes from the general topic than they did from the specific one, they finally supported the positive effects of topic familiarity on writing performance, rejecting the argument that language proficiency could be a main factor to determine writers' text quality. Despite He and Shi's (2012) argument for the topic familiarity, they had no choice but to accept the fact that there was little influence of topic familiarity in the low-level students' writing performance (Tedick, 1990). They ended up suggesting that it might be possible for writers to effectively use their topical knowledge when they reach a certain level of language proficiency, which means that prior knowledge or familiar topic knowledge can play a part in constructing language proficiency.

Meanwhile, Lee and Anderson's study (2007) placed more emphasis on the role of language proficiency after conducting the study on topic generality of a writing performance test. With ESL graduate students who had been assumed to have topical knowledge on their majors, the researchers engaged the students in writing tests using three subject-specific topics. They gained the result that subject-specific topics did not favor the students with their majors, which suggests that there seems to be a decreasing probability of getting the lowest scores for the tests with the different topics as writers' proficiency levels increased. In addition, Kim (2020), who conducted a research with 106 South Korean high school students in an EFL context, also recognized the possibility of the roles of EFL writers' language proficiency on text quality with regard to topic familiarity. The findings suggest that both topic and language proficiency may exert an effect on the syntactic complexity of EFL high school students.

Despite a host of studies conducted on how topical knowledge and language proficiency influence on writing quality

in ESL/EFL contexts for several decades, such inconclusive findings give stimulus to further comprehensive studies over the topic and language proficiency issue in ESL/EFL writing.

3. Design

3.1 Participants

Sixty four college students participated in this study, consisting of 58 males (90.6%) and 6 females (9.4%). They were all first-year students who attended *K* college in Chungcheong Province, Korea. All of them came from both majors of liberal arts and natural sciences (they are generally required to choose their specific majors at the end of the first year), enrolling in a compulsory course, *College English* in the second semester in 2022. They were from four classes of the course, which were composed of 20, 19, 12, and 23 students each. Among the total of 74 participants, 10 students were ruled out due to their absence from class during the experiment period, so 64 students were left effective for the analysis of the study results. One of the researchers was in charge of the four classes as an English instructor, leading the experiment work.

For the purpose of the study, the students were divided into two groups based on their TOEIC scores: High group (n = 31; 48.4%) and Intermediate group (n = 33; 51.6%). High group students achieved above 700 of TOEIC scores, whereas their intermediate peers got below 700. The average of their TOEIC scores was 685.16 (*SD*: 133.40): High group - 807.24 (*SD*: 92.46) and Low group - 584.00 (*SD*: 52.76). Overall, the participants' English proficiency can be considered intermediate.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Writing samples

All the participants were asked to compose two different argumentative essays for two consecutive weeks. The two different topics for argumentative writing were adopted from Kessler et al. (2022): The first topic was "Cellphone use should/should not be banned while driving," and the second one was "E-cigarettes are/are not safer than regular cigarettes." They were also asked to rate the degree of familiarity of each topic on a 10-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly unfamiliar) to 10 (strongly familiar).

The participants were first guided to check topic familiarity using the index from 1- to 10-point scale before they start writing, and then they carried out their essay writing for 30 minutes for each topic, using their laptop computers. Later, they were requested to submit their outputs via e-mail as soon as completing it. The order of writing performance was designed in the counterbalanced way: Half of the participants wrote about one topic first, while the other half wrote about the other topic first. Any dictionaries or references were not permitted while they were engaged in writing. Finally, the total number of 128 essays were collected and analyzed to verify the research questions posed in the Introduction section.

3.2.2 Questionnaire

In order to obtain the participants' background information such as age, gender, TOEIC score, and writing ability, a questionnaire survey was implemented after finishing all the writing performance. Plus, two open-ended questions were presented to investigate their perception of topic familiarity associated with L2 writing for the two different topics as follows: Which topic was easier or more difficult when you wrote essays on? And can you feel the same way when you would write them in your first language?

3.3 Data Analysis

First, to measure the quality of the two texts the participants produced, the holistic scoring method was adopted using ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. They consists of 10 levels, and each level was scored as follows: Superior - 10, Advance High - 9, Advanced Mid - 8, Advanced Low - 7, Intermediate High - 6, Intermediate Mid - 5, Intermediate Low - 4, Novice High - 3, Novice Mid - 2, and Novice Low - 1. Based on the scoring rubric, the two authors of this study who have more than 15 years of English teaching experiences coded the students' 128 writing samples (64 for each topic) individually, and high interrater reliability was achieved (Cronbach alpha = .826).

Next, considering large variations among the students in familiarity ratings and text quality scores for the two topics, the relative ratios of the two variables was calculated: familiarity ratio ($FamiliarityRating_{driving}/FamiliarityRating_{smoking}$) and text quality ratio ($TextQuality_{driving}/TextQuality_{smoking}$). These ratios were used to explain the accountability of familiarity ratio and language proficiency to text quality ratio in the hierarchical regression analysis, in order to capture the individual-level variations in text familiarity and text quality for the two topics (Kessler et al., 2022).

Finally, the participants' responses to the two open-ended questions were classified based both on topic (driving, smoking, both) and on "easy" or "difficult"; and their responses were grouped according to the two categories. Then their responses for each category were tallied. Multiple responses for a question were treated as a separate response, and tallied each.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Analysis of Topic Familiarity and Text Quality by Language Proficiency

For the first two research questions (effects of topics and language proficiency on topic familiarity (Q1) and on writing text quality (Q2)) posed in Chapter 1, the information of descriptive statistics for the topic familiarity ratings the participants reported from 1 to 10 and the holistic scores of their writing samples from 1 to 10, by the two topics and the two language proficiency levels, is summarized in Table 1. As for topic familiarity, the participants reported that they were more familiar to the topic of driving than that of smoking, and the ratings were higher for high-level students than for low-level students. Such tendency was also found in the results of text quality in that the participants produced better quality of text when writing about driving than about smoking; and, understandably, high-level students outperformed their intermediate peers in the quality of their written texts.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for topic familiarity and text quality by language proficiency

Language proficiency (N)	Topic familiarity		Text quality	
	Driving *M (SD)*	Smoking *M (SD)*	Driving *M (SD)*	Smoking *M (SD)*
High (31)	6.65 (2.35)	3.00 (2.03)	8.29 (.86)	7.71 (.97)
Intermediate (33)	5.82 (1.51)	2.73 (1.44)	5.79 (.78)	4.76 (1.06)
Total	6.22 (1.99)	2.86 (1.75)	7.00 (1.50)	6.19 (1.80)

To ascertain the significance of the differences shown in Table 1, two-way ANOVAs were conducted as in Table 2. Concerning topic familiarity, the significant main effect of topic ($p = .050$, $\eta_p^2 = .993$ (very large)) was found, but the main effect of proficiency and the interaction effect of the two variables were not statistically significant ($p = .297$ for the proficiency effect, and $p = .401$ for the interaction effect). It seems that topic familiarity has nothing to do with the students' language proficiency. That is, the participants' different topical knowledge about the two topics is not attributable to their language proficiency probably because they share common background knowledge due to their similar educational, social contexts (Kessler et al., 2022). When it comes to text quality, the significant main effect was found in language proficiency ($p = .050$, $\eta_p^2 = .993$ (very large)), but not in topic ($p = .173$), without interaction effect ($p = .172$). The high-level students outperformed their intermediate peers in writing on both topics of argumentative essay. The results can be interpreted as that EFL college students share general background knowledge about the two topics no matter how good at writing they are, and that their writing proficiency resort not to their topical knowledge but to their language proficiency (Kessler et al., 2022).

Table 2. Two-way ANOVAs for topic familiarity and text quality by topic and language proficiency

Source	Topic familiarity			Text quality		
	F	*p*	η_p^2	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Intercept	7.150	.220	.873	21.921	.108	.950
Topic	147.706	.050[*]	.993	12.835	.173	.928
Proficiency	3.937	.297	.797	147.147	.050[*]	.993
Topic * Proficiency	.710	.401	.006	1.884	.172	.015

*$p > .05$

He and Shi (2012), who studied Canadian and ESL students from diverse cultural backgrounds, reported the contrasting results of the effects of topic familiarity on the students' writing performance. Kessler et al.'s (2022) study and the current study, however, failed to support He and Shi's (2012) results conceivably because the social, cultural contexts of the participants engaged in is conducive to the discrepancy in that the students in Kessler et al.'s (2022) study and ours were EFL learners who share the same L1 and similar educational, cultural, and social contexts, whereas the ESL learners in He and Shi's (2012) study might have varied cultural experiences.

Based on the ANOVA results, *t*-tests were carried out to concretely check from which language proficiency level or topic the significant differences came from in the dependent variables of both topic familiarity and text quality, as

shown in Table 3 and Table 4, respectively. As for topic familiarity, irrespective of the participants' language proficiency, they felt the driving topic more familiar than the smoking topic. As for text quality, high-level students yielded better essays than their intermediate peers, regardless of the topics they wrote about. Even though this study did not include learners with low levels of language proficiency, it is evident that differences in language proficiency have a significant impact on writing performance in English. Now it can be safely argued that EFL students' topical knowledge does not differ according to their language proficiency, and that their writing proficiency is not associated with their topical knowledge but with their language proficiency.

Table 3. *t*-tests for topic familiarity by topic according to language proficiency

Language proficiency	Topic	M (SD)	Topic familiarity		
			t	p	Cohen's d
High	Driving	6.65 (2.35)	42.744	< .001**	1.69
	Smoking	3.00 (2.03)			
Intermediate	Driving	5.82 (1.51)	72.344	< .001**	2.13
	Smoking	2.73 (1.44)			
Total	Driving	6.22 (1.99)	103.258	< .001**	1.83
	Smoking	2.86 (1.75)			

**p > .01

Table 4. *t*-tests for text quality by language proficiency according to topic

Topic	Language proficiency	M (SD)	Text quality		
			t	p	Cohen's d
Driving	High	8.29 (.86)	148.108	< .001**	3.10
	Intermediate	5.79 (.78)			
Smoking	High	7.71 (.97)	134.012	< .001**	2.95
	Intermediate	4.76 (1.06)			
Total	High	8.00 (.96)	232.091	< .001**	2.74
	Intermediate	5.27 (1.06)			

**p > .01

A regression analysis was performed to see which of the two variables (text familiarity ratio and language proficiency) exerts more accountability to the text quality ratio at an individual level, as in Table 5. Text familiarity ratio failed to show significance, whereas language proficiency turned out to be a significant predictor for the text quality ratio. The differences of individual students' text quality were not influenced by how they perceive one topic more (un)familiar than the other, but by how good command of language they had. These results are different from those of Kessler et al. (2022) that they reported the influence of topic familiarity as well as language proficiency on essay scores.

Table 5. Regression analysis for accountability of topic familiarity ratio and language proficiency to text quality ratio

Text quality ratio	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	p
	B	SE	β		
(Constant)	.918	.099		9.279	.000
Text familiarity ratio	.000	.015	-.003	-.027	.978
Language proficiency	.172	.053	.385	3.231	.002**

**p > .01

4.2 Analysis of Questionnaire Results

For more in-depth investigation on the participants' topic familiarity, they were asked to answer two open-ended questions: The first one was to write their opinions about which essays were easier or more difficult, and why they thought so; and the second one was to write their opinions about whether they would think the same if they were asked to write about the same topics in the Korean language, their mother tongue, and why.

The responses to the first question was tallied as in Table 6. As for the driving topic, the number of the participants who perceived the topic easy or difficult to write about were similar, and the reasons were mostly that the topic was (un)familiar and easy (or difficult) to provide evidence to support the argument they chose. On the other hand, a majority of the participants perceived the smoking topic difficult to write about, and they enumerated the reasons such as lack of background knowledge and personal experiences, unfamiliar topic, and even linguistic difficulty, vocabulary use in particular (Kessler et al., 2022). Opinions for both topics were also reported that for some the topics were easy to write about because they were familiar and realistic, but for others the topics were difficult to write about because of their lack of English writing proficiency.

Table 6. Perception of "easy" or "difficult" of the topics

Topic		Reasons (frequency)
Driving	Easy	familiar topic (4), easy to write reasons to support the argument (1), have an interest in the topic (1)
	Difficult	difficult to provide evidence to support the argument (5), unfamiliar topic (2)
Smoking	Easy	daily life topic (3), confidence in the argument (2), many smokers around the writer (1)
	Difficult	lack of background knowledge (8), lack of experience (8), unfamiliar topic (8), have no interest in the topic (4), use of unfamiliar vocabulary (2)
Both	Easy	familiar topic (2), realistic topic (1)
	Difficult	lack of writing proficiency regardless of topic (1)

The participants replied for the second question as in Table 7. Generally, the results were quite similar to those in the first question. For the driving topic, they mostly thought that the topic was familiar to write about, while it was difficult to provide evidence to support the argument they chose. When it comes to the smoking topic, they still perceived the topic difficult because of the reasons mentioned already for the first question in Table 6, even when they assumed they would write in their mother tongue. Comparing to the opinions on "Both" mentioned in Table 6, the category in Table 7 revealed the effectiveness of mother tongue use in writing. The students perceived both topics would be easy if they

write about them in their mother tongue thanks to their better command of language-related features as well as the nature of the topics (realistic and familiar).

Table 7. Perception of "easy" or "difficult" of the topics if they write about the topics in Korean

Topic		Reasons (frequency)
Driving	Easy	familiar topic (7), easy to write reasons to support the argument (2), possible to write more (1)
	Difficult	difficult to provide evidence to support the argument (5), unfamiliar topic (1)
Smoking	Easy	daily life topic (2), free from English vocabulary (1), many smokers around the writer (1)
	Difficult	lack of background knowledge (14),unfamiliar topic (7), lack of experience (5), difficult to write reasons to support the argument (1), still difficult to write logically (1)
Both	Easy	free from English expressions (4), possible to explain in details (2), realistic topic (2), familiar topic (1)

5. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to examine how topic familiarity and language proficiency impact the quality of English writing with varied subjects in EFL settings, in order to disentangle the thorny, yet crucial, issue for L2/EFL students' effective communication through written expression. To achieve this goal, three research questions were posed and the potential answers obtained from the findings of the study are addressed for each question.

The first research question was "How do topics of the texts and EFL learners' language proficiency affect text familiarity they think?" The participants of this study were more familiar with the driving topic compared to the smoking topic, which suggests that they had more knowledge or experience related to driving. The differences in their knowledge about these two topics, however, are not likely due to differences in their language proficiency. This implies that language skills or language barriers did not significantly affect their understanding of these topics. So topical knowledge and language proficiency of EFL writers cannot be associated with each other probably because of their common background knowledge, stemming from similar educational and social contexts they had experienced (Kessler et al., 2022).

As for the second research question, "How do topics of the texts and EFL learners' language proficiency affect their writing quality?" The high-level students performed better than the intermediate-level students in writing argumentative essays on both topics. Their topical knowledge failed to demonstrate any differences in their writing quality depending upon their language proficiency. It implies that the superior writing skills and ability for effective argument and persuasion might not come from whether they are familiar with the topic they wrote about but from how much proficient they are in language use. (Kessler et al., 2022). The regression analysis also corroborated this result that language proficiency was found to be a significant predictor of text quality, whereas text familiarity failed to do so. This outcome suggests that one's proficiency in language plays a more important role in determining the quality of the text they produced compared to how familiar they were with the topic or text itself (Lee, 2004; Lee and Anderson, 2007; Salimi and Fatollahnejad, 2012).

This result runs counter to the previous studies showing that whether the topic is familiar or not determines the quality of writing outcome (Carrell, 1983; Clapham, 1996; He and Shi, 2012; Hinkel, 2008; Kim and Ryoo, 2011;

Kobayashi, 2009; Messick, 1989; Tedick, 1990; Yoon, 2017; Winfield and Barnes-Felfeli, 1982). According to Robinson (2001) and Skehan (2001), increased cognitive complexity of tasks can lead to competition among the linguistic performance. This can potentially lead to lower level of writng quaility when learners are faced with more cognitively demanding or unfamiliar topics. To address this apparent contradiction with the results of the current study and gain a better understanding of the phenomenon, follow-up studies in other contexts are indeed necessary.

When it comes to the last question, "What are EFL learners' perception of their writing performance in accordance with topics of the texts they were asked to write about?" Most of them reported that the smoking topic was more difficult to write about than the driving topic. This difficulty in writing about the smoking topic could be attributed to lack of background knowledge, personal experiences, and writing proficiency, especially in terms of vocabulary use (Kessler et al., 2022). Furthermore, they believed that both topics would be easier to write about if they did so in their mother tongue. When writing in their mother tongue, they likely have a better command of the language, which can help them convey their thoughts and ideas easily and effectively. Here comes the role of translation in writing in a second/foreign language, considering the facilitative effect of thinking in L1 while carrying out L2 writing (Cumming, 1990; Friedlander, 1990; Huh, 2001; Scott, 1995).

Two pedagogical implications can be derived from the results of the current study. First, while it is often easier for EFL learners to write about familiar topics, the focus should indeed be on developing the learner's overall writing ability. To do this, starting with familiar topics can help build confidence and ease learners into the writing process. However, it's essential to gradually introduce more challenging and diverse topics to expand their vocabulary and range of expression. While the role of L1 translation in L2 writing instruction is complex and context-dependent, it still can be a helpful tool if it is used judiciously with the aim of gradually fostering independent L2 writing skills (Cohen and Brooks-Carson, 2001; Kobayashi and Rinnert, 1992; Prince, 1996). The ultimate goal is to strike a balance that promotes effective communication while also encouraging language growth in the target language.

This study is not without limitations, so based on the limitations we'd like to suggests some potential areas for further research. First, because the research participants' average level of English proficiency was intermediate high, it may be challenging to make accurate comparisons, especially when trying to draw conclusions about learners with lower proficiency levels. In addition, the participants need to be asked to write on a variety of topics beyond the two topics covered in the current study, which could help to draw clear conclusions about the impact of topic familiarity on L2 writing performance. Finally, considering that the current study chose to focus on argumentative writing to find answers of the three research questions, further research could consider varying the types of writing tasks assigned to participants, including narratives, reports, and creative writing, in order to assess how topic familiarty and language proficiency affects writing quality in different writing genres.

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