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## **An investigation into the effects of prompt selection on writing complexity, accuracy, and fluency: The case of Iranian learners at different proficiency levels**

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### **Abstracts**

Self-selecting of the material has been the arena of discussion by the researchers of L2 pedagogy. While some believe that it can be effective, others believe that it is detrimental to L2 learning. Hence, the purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of self-selected and teacher assigned writing prompts on the writing complexity, accuracy, and fluency of Iranian EFL learners at beginning, intermediate, and advanced proficiency levels. The theoretical aspects of the current research were founded based on Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and Choice Theory (Glasser, 1998). Given that, 52 Iranian EFL learners (beginning N = 19, intermediate N = 16, advanced N = 17) participated in this study. Each student was asked to write about two writing prompts: one selected by the students and the other by the teacher. Using relevant indexes, we measured writing complexity, accuracy and fluency with regard to the two writing prompts. The results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the writing complexity, accuracy, and fluency of L2 learners when they wrote about their own self-selected prompts and when they wrote about the teacher assigned ones. The results also revealed that L2 learners' writings were more complex, accurate, and fluent when they wrote about their self-selected prompts. The findings of this study can have some implications for L2 writing instructors and test designers.

**Keywords:** complexity, self-selected prompt, theory of reasoned action, writing quality

### **Introduction**

Second/foreign language writing has become a well-established field of inquiry within the realm of second language acquisition (SLA) with different defined manifestations such as journals, conferences, and professional organizations (Hyland, 2016). This might be due to the importance of writing skill, as a prerequisite for L2 profession; requiring L2 learners to develop their L2 writing (Baynham, 2000). Given the importance of writing skill in the process of acquiring

L2, the factors helping L2 learners to further their writing ability should be explored. That said, the factors can have debilitating or facilitative effects on the writing development of L2 learners among them is topic selection. To investigate the effect of topic selection, two theories can be called upon: The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) proposed by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) and the Choice Theory proposed by Glasser (1998).

Approaching chronologically, TRA focuses on the doer of an action and states that actions can be influenced by attitudes of doers (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). When selection of materials for SLA is at focus, TRA can be applied. Popham (2005) has declared that the perceptions and attitudes of L2 learners about subjects, methods, and approaches in SLA can have effects on the final triumph of L2 learners in learning the instructional materials. To put it in another way, L2 learners' positive attitudes with regard to context and methods may have effect on their being successful in acquiring an L2.

Choice Theory, proposed by Glasser (1998), points out that in the traditional context of learning, learners are forced to do whatever their teacher asks them. In this context of learning learners have no free will to do what they like to do. Consequently, much of their ability is devoted to quench their teacher expectations (Wang, 2010). However, as Buss (2000) acknowledges if Learners have their own choice of approaching the learning context their learning ability and their performing quality will improve qualitatively. If a context of learning with the characteristic of providing choice will be provided for the learners, their self-regulation will increase and they will enjoy doing the tasks since they have been motivated internally (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Self-selection of the materials by L2 learners can be discussed by referring to the above mentioned theories. In SLA, self-selection of the materials can be attached to different L2 skills such as reading and writing. Sewell (2003) and Kragler (2000) stated that allowing L2 learners to select their reading materials may lead to the enhancement of their motivation in learning the materials and involvement in the process of learning the materials. However, self-selecting materials for the purpose of learning L2 by the learners may open to proficiency level critiques. It can be stated that there may exist a threshold level determining when the L2 learners will be able to self-select their L2 learning materials. It will be a question for SLA educators whether L2 learners at each and every proficiency level can self-select the L2 materials. The case is even harder for writing skill. As a multifaceted skill, it is believed that writing skill needs different factors to conjoin to see development in L2 writing quality of the learners.

Writing quality should be differentiated from writing performance. The former proposed by Larsen-Freeman (1976), includes three indexes: Complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Lu (2011) believes that the indexes show language development in writing skill. The latter, however, refers to the writing components

such as grammar and mechanics. The idea of self-selecting or teacher-assigning writing prompts has to do with test fairness in general, and test performance, in particular. If L2 educators' purpose is to prepare L2 learners for the real life—“out there”—L2 learners can, more often than not, be considered as the ones who know which topics they need. Hence, assigning them topics that have nothing to do with their needs may cause problems. Moreover, L2 learners may not like teacher-assigned topics and this may demotivate them.

Consequently, in this study we investigated the effect of self-selected and teacher-assigned writing prompts on the writing quality of Iranian EFL learners. Our purpose was to investigate the issue within different language proficiency levels including beginning, intermediate and advanced levels. Consequently, this study was supposed to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there any statistically significant difference in the writing complexity of Iranian EFL learners when they self-select their writing prompt or when the teacher assigns topic?
2. Is there any statistically significant difference in the writing accuracy of Iranian EFL learners when they self-select their writing prompt or when the teacher assigns topic?
3. Is there any statistically significant difference in the writing fluency of Iranian EFL learners when they self-select their writing prompt or when the teacher assigns topic?

### **Literature review**

In this section, we review the literature to discuss the theories underpinning self-selection of L2 materials and the writing quality indexes.

#### ***Theory of Reasoned Action***

When for the first time TRA had been proposed, it focused on the behaviors which individuals could control on their own (Ajzen, 2012). TRA is a model, relatively conceptual, whose proposers' aim was to examine human behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). There are two main principles based on which TRA examines one's attitude in doing his/her behavior— including “principle of compatibility” and “behavioral intention”— making TRA a predictive model appropriate to be used in various fields of study such as education, technology, science (Mishra, Akman & Mishra, 2014) and recently SLA (Sewell, 2003).

The principle of compatibility states that there is a strong correlation between attitudes of individuals and the behaviors they do. This can be explained through the definition of behavioral criterion which includes four elements, among them are the action, the context, the target and the time (Ajzen, 2012). Given that, there are relationships among the four elements. As so, the target directs the action in a specific context which has especial time of occurrence. More often than not, the four elements can be used to define and evaluate attitudes. Human beings' attitude

to do something, as Ajzen (2012) believes, is targeted at a particular action in a context with specific time interval. The principle of compatibility is a predictive one which can evaluate whether an attitude leads to action or not (Ajzen, 1991). Consequently, three factors are involved: attitude toward the behavior (either positive or negative), social acceptance or rejection, and the ability to do the behavior (Ajzen, 2012).

The other principle of TRA, behavioral intention, is to some extent different from the principle of compatibility which pays less attention to the attitude. It recognizes attitude as a part of behavioral intention. According to Oni, Oni, Mbarika and Ayo (2017, p. xxx) "TRA proposes that individual behavior is influenced by the tendency towards that behavior (Behavioral Intention) whereby BI is formed through a combination of two variables: attitude towards behavior and Subjective Norm." Consequently, the combination of an attitude with the acceptance norms can change the behavioral intention of an individual. All in all, it should be stated that TRA, as a predictive theory, may not be able to predict the influence of identity on the behavioral intention of doing an action (Paquin & Keating, 2016).

### ***Choice Theory***

Choice theory, which has similar tenets to TRA, states that human beings' belief, attitude, and identity drive them to do an action (Boyd, Crowson & Geel, 1994). According to Glasser, (1998) individuals can fully control their own actions. It means that the choices we make during our life are directed from our inside and manifest our personal and psychological traits. According to the tenets of Choice Theory we cannot control others the same as we can control ourselves. All we can do with others is to provide information for them. One other principle of Choice theory is that the position we are in now is due to the choices we made previously in our life. Moreover, similar to TRA, Choice Theory mentions four components for a behavior including acting, thinking, feeling, and psychology which one can establish different relationships among them (Glasser, 1998).

### ***Applying TRA and Choice Theory in SLA***

The manifestation of TRA and Choice Theory in SLA can be traced out in self-selection of materials. Carroll (1997) believed that allowing students to self-select the materials in the classrooms increased their internal motivation for furthering their studying. Self-selecting materials had been investigated in relation to the language skills including reading, speaking, and writing.

With regard to reading skill, Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) sought to understand which factors can contribute to the increase in the motivation of the students to read L2 materials. They found out that students' desire to read had a positive relationship with their freedom in choosing their reading materials. The

results of the study by Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) have been verified by a qualitative study done by Threadkell (2010). In his study, Threadkell concluded that students had positive attitude with regard to the reading materials they themselves selected in comparison to what the teacher had assigned them. The findings of Threadkell's (2010) study also showed that self-selected reading materials would help students to better understand the materials.

Some studies have been done on the effect of self-selected materials on speaking performance of L2 learners. Ellis (1990) had investigated the effect of self-selected topics on the speaking ability of the L2 learners. He came to the conclusion that the acquisition of speaking ability of the L2 learners developed and improved when the students self-selected their topics. Later on, in 2013, Wolf investigated the perception of the students of the topics they discussed in the classroom assigned by the textbooks and those selected by the students themselves. The results of a 5-likert scale showed that the students perceived their own selected topics better while they discussed them.

A few studies have been done about self-selection of materials in writing instruction (Bonyadi, 2014). In a study conducted by Gradwohl and Scumacher (1989), the writing performance of learners regarding three topics including "want topic" desired by the learners, "do not want topics" not desired by the learners, and teacher assigned topics were investigated. The results of their study indicated that learners performed better on topics they themselves selected in comparison to those selected by the teachers or those they did not like to write about. Leblanc and Fujieda (2012) investigated the lexical variation of the writing of university students when they selected the topics by themselves. The results showed that the range of vocabulary knowledge could be understood through topic autonomy. Later on, Bonyadi (2014) conducted a study to investigate the effect of self-selected and teacher assigned topics on the writing performance of L2 learners. The findings of his study demonstrated that there was a significant difference between the writing performances of L2 learners on the two topics with better performance on the self-selected topics.

As shown through the above mentioned investigations, the tenets of TRA and Choice Theory have been used in various studies to see the effects of self-selected materials, as the manifestation of the two theories, in different skills. What has been ignored in these studies is the quality of different skills after allowing L2 learners to select their own topics and materials. The quality of a skill can be measured through the three indexes called complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) which is discussed in the next section.

### ***Complexity, accuracy, and fluency: A way to measure writing quality***

SLA researchers (e.g., Ahmadi & Meihami, 2017; Breiner-Sanders, Swender, & Terry, 2001; Lu, 2011; Meihami & Rashidi, 2018) believe that one should make a

distinction between writing proficiency of L2 learners and their writing quality. The former involves rating scale to measure the performance of L2 learners in different writing components, the latter involves in CAF. Lu (2011) states that CAF can deliver “a full of language development in L2 writing” (p. 38). CAF can be used to measure the developmental growth of writing quality.

Complexity in general and syntactic complexity in particular are mostly measured by using T-unit (Hunt, 1970), communication unit (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992), and speech unit (Foster, Tonkyn, & Wigglesworth, 2000). Ortega (2003) proposed five indexes to measure the writing complexity including sentence complexity, coordination, subordination, length of production, and particular structures. Sometimes, based on the proficiency levels of the L2 students different indexes can be used for measuring the writing complexity. According to the SLA researchers (e.g., Ortega, 2003; Norris & Ortega, 2009) to measure the writing complexity at the beginning level one can use coordination, then subordination for upper-intermediate students, and sub-causal for the advanced students.

With regard to the writing accuracy Lambert and Kormos (2014) pinpoint the importance of error free units. However, one may argue for the validity problems of such a measurement due to the ignored complexity of different discourses (Palloti, 2009). Nevertheless, based on the reasons such as the ease at which one can measure writing accuracy and the correlation existing between local and global errors, error free proportion production is an appropriate one (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). Consequently, according to Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) the accuracy of writing can be measured based on the proportion of error free clauses to all clauses.

The third index of CAF through which writing quality can be measured is fluency. The first factor based on which the fluency of writing is measured is how the written text is native like (Polio, 2001). Tarone et al. (1993) state that “nativeness, standardness, length, ease of reading, idomaticity” (p. 170) are the components of fluency. Given the nature of writing fluency, Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) proposed three measures for fluency including the number of words, the number of T-units, and the number of clauses in text.

### ***Rationale for this study***

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of self-selected writing prompts and the teacher assigned ones on the writing quality of Iranian EFL learners at different proficiency levels. First of all, this study benefited from the tenets of TRA and Choice Theory. Secondly, and most importantly, the previous studies investigated the effects of self-selected writing topics on the writing performance while in this study we investigated writing quality. Moreover, there is paucity of studies conducted in the EFL context. Consequently, in this study we

investigated the effect of self-selected writing prompts on the L2 learners' writing quality in an EFL context based on TRA and Choice Theory framework.

## Method

### Participants

A total number of 52 Iranian EFL learners, ranging in age from 19 to 23, in the three proficiency levels (19 beginning learners, 16 intermediate learners, and 17 advanced learners) participated in this study. According to Thomas (1994) there are different ways to assess language proficiency: institutional status, impressionistic judgment, specific research design test, and standardized tests. To select our participants, we went through two of the mentioned approaches. First of all, the institutional status of the students was the first criterion for us. Needless to say, this method is not that reliable since in each class there may be some students above and below the specific proficiency level called high achievers and low achievers. We used two standardized tests, one for obtaining true beginning and intermediate proficiency levels called Preliminary English Test (2014) (PET) and the other for obtaining true advanced learners called Module TOEFL (2014). Table 1 show characteristics of the participants of this study.

Tab. 1: *Participants' Characteristics*

Proficiency Level	Boy	Girl	Total	<i>M</i> in PET	<i>M</i> in Module TOEFL
Beginning	8	11	19	45.5	-
Intermediate	6	10	16	85	-
Advanced	9	8	17	-	68.5

(Note: Module TOEFL score was converted to 100.)

### Procedures

Since the theoretical foundations of our study were established based on the theories of TRA and Choice Theory, each session we allowed our participants to choose one topic by themselves and write about it. Moreover, to cover the teacher assigned prompts each session the teacher asked them to write about a topic which was provided by the teacher. It should be stated that the teacher provided corrective feedback on the two writings. During 9 sessions students wrote 18 essays; 9 based on their self-selected prompts and the other 9 according to what the teacher assigned to them. It should be stated that the writings were done by the students at home.

In the tenth session, the teacher asked the students to write about two prompts in the class. One of the prompts was introduced by the teacher and the other one

was self-selected by the students themselves, individually. Students had no more than 30 minutes to write about each topic. It should be stated that since our participants were at different language proficiency levels, the minimum writing length for beginning students was 120 words, for intermediate students was 200 words, and for advanced ones was 280 words.

### **Data analysis**

It should be stated that we analyzed the writings, both the teacher assigned and self-selected ones, written by a student together. Consequently, we run several paired sample t-test to obtain the results. Before that, to measure students' writing quality with regard to self-selected and teacher assigned topics we used different indexes for measuring complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Reviewing the related literature (e.g., Skehan & Foster, 1997; Tavakoli & Rezazadeh, 2014), we came to the conclusion that the appropriate indexes for measuring complexity would be the number of clauses in each T-unit and the percentage of dependent clauses to all clauses; for accuracy we calculated the number of error-free T-units (then we converted the results to percentage), and the number of error-free clauses (then we converted the results to percentage). Finally, with regard to the index for measuring fluency, we used the average number of words per text and the number of T-units per text.

According to Dunsmuir et al. (2014) care should be taken when assessing writing due to the subjective nature of assessing writing. Having this in mind, in this study 20% of the essays written by the students at different levels of proficiency were rated by another rater who was well-informed of the indexes we used in this study to measure students' writing complexity, accuracy, and fluency. The inter-rater reliability was calculated for each levels of proficiency and as a whole. Using SPSS 21, we calculated weighted Kappa index. Due to the briefing sessions the two raters had on the data analysis procedure we obtained rather high indexes for rating the writings belong each proficiency level (beginning  $r = .82$ ; intermediate  $r = .86$ ; advanced  $r = .88$ ) and as a whole ( $r = .84$ ).

### **Results**

The first research question of this study was to obtain information whether a statistically significant difference existed between the writing complexity of L2 learners at different levels of proficiency when they self-selected the writing prompt and when the teacher assigned the topic. As earlier stated we used two indexes to obtain the complexity of the students' writing: Clause per T-unit and dependent clause proportion to all clauses. We conducted a series of paired sample t-tests in order to compare the mentioned indexes of both writings. Table 2 shows the results.



Tab. 2: Complexity Measure of the Three Proficiency Levels: Self-selected and Teacher Assigned Prompts

Proficiency Levels	Indexes	Selection types	N	Mean	Std.	t	Sig.	Eta
<b>Beginning</b>	Clause per T-unit	Self-selected prompt	19	1.94	.84	2.13	.04	.11
		Teacher assigned prompt	19	1.42	.60			
	Dependent clause proportion	Self-selected prompt	19	3.89	3.76	3.79	.001	.28
		Teacher assigned prompt	19	1.92	2.18			
<b>Intermediate</b>	Clause per T-unit	Self-selected prompt	16	2.50	.81	3.50	.003	.29
		Teacher assigned prompt	16	1.75	.68			
	Dependent clause proportion	Self-selected prompt	16	28.31	4.74	2.60	.02	.18
		Teacher assigned prompt	16	23.43	6.98			
<b>Advanced</b>	Clause per T-unit	Self-selected prompt	17	3.29	.84	3.78	.002	.30
		Teacher assigned prompt	17	2.17	.80			
	Dependent clause proportion	Self-selected prompt	17	31.76	8.42	4.34	.000	.37
		Teacher assigned prompt	17	27.35	6.72			

As can be seen in Table 2, the mean scores for the self-selected prompts are higher for the three proficiency levels both regarding the clause per T-unit and dependent clause proportion. Moreover, the inferential statistics well demonstrates that there is statistically significant difference between the complexity of writings for which the students themselves selected topics and the ones for which the teacher selected topic.

As can be seen in Table 2, except for clause per T-unit in the beginning students' writings ( $\eta^2 = .11$  moderate effect) all other indexes of  $\eta^2$  of all levels showed that there existed a large effect of self-selection of the prompts on students' writing complexity.

The second research question aimed at investigating the accuracy measure of the students' writing quality when they self-selected their writing prompts and when the teacher assigned writing prompt for them. Table 3 indicates the results we obtained investigating error-free T-units and error-free clauses.

Table 3 indicates that students are more accurate at all proficiency levels when they themselves selected topics to write about. Moreover, the range of  $\eta^2$  squared (from .46 to .61) obtained indicated that the magnitude of difference was high. All in all, Table 3 shows that students at different proficiency levels tended to be more accurate when they self-selected their own writing prompts.

One other writing quality measure is fluency. The third research question was seeking to answer whether or not students at different proficiency levels could write more fluent while they selected their writing prompts. To answer this question, we calculated the number of words per text and T-units per text and then ran paired samples t-test to compare the two groups' writing fluency. Table 4 shows the results.

Table 4 shows that there was a significant difference between the writing fluency of L2 learners at different proficiency levels when they self-selected the writing prompts and when the teacher assigned the prompts. Moreover, the magnitudes of difference, except for words per text in advanced learners, are high according to Cohen (1988).

## Discussion

The current study was an attempt to investigate the role of self-selection and teacher assigned writing prompts on the writing complexity, accuracy, and fluency of Iranian EFL learners at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels. The results showed that with regard to the three indexes of writing quality and within the three proficiency levels when students self-selected their writing prompts their writings were more complex, more accurate, and more fluent (Tables 2, 3, and 4). Moreover, the results of this study indicated that having topical knowledge about the topic and being related to the already covered L2 materials were the factors leading L2 learners to select their writing prompts (Figure 1).

Tab. 3: The accuracy measure among the three proficiency levels: self-selected and teacher assigned prompts

Proficiency Levels	Indexes	Selection types	N	Mean	Std.	t	Sig.	Eta
<b>Beginning</b>	Error-free T-unit	Self-selected prompt	19	12.10	3.12	6.42	.001	.53
		Teacher assigned prompt	19	10.05	2.96			
	Error-free clauses	Self-selected prompt	19	13.63	3	6.35	.001	.51
		Teacher assigned prompt	19	10.57	1.95			
<b>Intermediate</b>	Error-free T-unit	Self-selected prompt	16	22.12	8.25	7.32	.001	.61
		Teacher assigned prompt	16	19.93	6.78			
	Error-free clauses	Self-selected prompt	16	21.68	9.67	7.32	.001	.61
		Teacher assigned prompt	16	18.50	7.45			
<b>Advanced</b>	Error-free T-unit	Self-selected prompt	17	37.64	5.25			.46
		Teacher assigned prompt	17	30.52	5.37			
	Error-free clauses	Self-selected prompt	17	43.52	6.58	6.96	.001	.46
		Teacher assigned prompt	17	36.82	5.41	9.36		

The results of the study with regard to the writing complexity showed that L2 learners at different proficiency levels tended to write more complex when they self-selected their prompts. This can be related to the notion of task complexity. According to Robinson (2007), task complexity refers to cognitive processing demands of a task. L2 learners are able to produce complex productions (either oral or written) out of the simple tasks (Jackson & Suethanaporkul, 2013). We can, hence, argue that the topics which are self-selected by L2 learners are less complex for them. Consequently, they would be able to produce more complex writing based on those prompts.

Tab. 4: The fluency measure among the three proficiency levels: self-selected and teacher assigned prompts

Proficiency Levels	Indexes	Selection types	N	Mean	Std.	t	Sig.	Eta
<b>Beginning</b>	Words per text	Self-selected prompt	19	135.73	27.33	4.57	.001	.36
		Teacher assigned prompt	19	101.21	25.71			
	T-units per text	Self-selected prompt	19	27.47	5.63	9.64	.001	.87
		Teacher assigned prompt	19	20.47	3.93			
<b>Intermediate</b>	Words per text	Self-selected prompt	16	181.81	43.69	4.23	.001	.37
		Teacher assigned prompt	16	170.50	44.87			
	T-units per text	Self-selected prompt	16	34.06	10.22	2.37	.03	.15
		Teacher assigned prompt	16	29.31	7.98			
<b>Advanced</b>	Words per text	Self-selected prompt	17	281.58	56.27	2.21	.04	.12
		Teacher assigned prompt	17	268.70	49.79			
	T-units per text	Self-selected prompt	17	54.29	7.67	2.98	.01	.20
		Teacher assigned prompt	17	49.58	6.94			

Topical knowledge can provide insights for other explanations for the the results of this study. Topical knowledge is “the interaction between one’s prior knowledge and the content of a specific passage” (Alexander, Schallert, & Hare, 1991, p. 334). The interaction with previous materials can lead L2 learners to be content-wise, meaning that they can approach a topic with higher competence. The interaction with complex content helps L2 learners to be able to write more complex, even at the lower levels such as the beginning level. We can also relate the ability to write more complex to Schmidt’s (1994) noticing hypothesis. L2

learners self-selected topics which they had topical knowledge about. Based on the noticing hypothesis, these topics had been already noticed for the learners and they could pay their attention to them. It is easier for them to produce complex writing out of these topics in comparison to those topics assigned by the teachers and the students might not have background information about them.

With regard to accuracy, the results of this study showed that when L2 learners at different proficiency levels self-selected their writing prompts they were more accurate in comparison to when the teacher assigned them a topic. There is an interaction between the writing prompts selected by the learners and their situations or the context. Nassaji and Tiam (2010) and Swain (1998) believe that different sorts of interactions can lead to improvement in language accuracy. One can argue that since the interactions which the students had in their daily life are more than that of the L2 learning contexts, especially in an EFL context, they can benefit from them in their writing accuracy. In another word, the daily interactions become a part of the students and the interaction topics, so. This can be a reason for better performance regarding writing performance when the learners selected their own topics to write.

From a cognitive point of view, when learners' attention is fully focused on one subject matter whose different aspects are clear for them they can have better performances in doing that task. This is what Ellis (2004) states as focused and unfocused tasks. Unfocused tasks might lead to higher accuracy while focused one might have a detrimental effect on L2 production accuracy. One difference between the two tasks is that unfocused tasks are wider in options, making them more difficult to deal with in comparison to focused tasks. Having this difference in mind, teachers who assigned the writing prompts might have different aspects and options leading to the prompts difficult for the L2 learners to write about them. Consequently, since L2 learners were allowed to select their own topics they selected the ones which they could have their full attention on.

Moreover, Xing and Lue (2015) state that when the task complexity of a text decreases the producers of that text commit less errors. In the current study we have noticed that task complexity of the writings of the L2 learners decreased at different levels of proficiency while they themselves selected their writing prompts. This can be seen in Table 4 that the lower proficiency level a student is, the less complex his or her writing is. This might be another reason for the fact that their writing accuracy also was higher when they self-selected their writing prompts.

Finally, the results of the current study showed that L2 learners at different proficiency levels wrote more fluent texts when they self-selected the writing prompts in comparison to when the teacher assigned the writing prompts. One reason for these results can be the fact that by self-selecting their own writing prompts, L2 learners selected the ones based on task pre-planning. According to

Yuan and Ellis (2003), task pre-planning can increase writing fluency. According to that, while learners preplan a task, they will become cognitively ready to produce output about the task either in written form or in oral one. Consequently, when the learners selected their own topics they were cognitively ready to write about it and could produce a more fluent writing output.

### **Conclusion and implications**

The current study investigated the effects of self-selected and teacher assigned writing prompt on the writing complexity, accuracy, and fluency of beginning, intermediate, and advanced learners. The results indicated that L2 learners at different proficiency levels wrote more complex, accurate, and fluent when they wrote about their self-selected writing prompts in comparison to the teacher assigned ones. The results are in line with that of Bonyadi (2014) and Wang (2010) in which they found a positive effect of self-selected materials on the writing performance of the students. The results, thus, supported the idea that proposed by TRA and Choice Theory in which the doer of an action does his/her best when he/she wants to do something selected by himself/herself. Moreover, in choosing writing prompts for their writing, the participants tended to have in mind the areas of their competency; when topical knowledge was involved.

The results of this study make us to be careful regarding the writing topics. First of all, if L2 programs aim to prepare L2 learners for the real life, and we know that the L2 learners study L2 languages for their education success, most often than not, why we should assess our students' writing based on non-relevant topics. This is the area He and Shi (2012) studied with regard to the effect of topical knowledge on the writing performance of ESL learners. The non-relevant topics might have effects on our participants' writing performance; consequently, we would not be able to obtain their true writing ability. Second of all, based on the principles of TRA and Choice Theory and the results of the current study, L2 learners would be more successful when they self-select the materials. This is related to the notion of learner-centeredness in L2 pedagogy (Hannafin et al., 2014). Self-selecting of the materials can help L2 learners to situate their learning and learn from their learning process.

The findings of this study have some pedagogical implications. By putting learning responsibility on the shoulders of L2 learners, it will be possible to involve them in the process of learning. Moreover, if L2 learners believe that their "voice" has a place in the process of learning they will be motivated to respond to the their learning. More particularly, in the writing instruction courses, one of the problems is selection of topic for writing. L2 teacher can have the opinions of L2 learners and select writing prompts out of different areas L2 learners selected.

Some further studies can be conducted as the follow up for the current one. First of all, this study can be replicated with more participants at different

proficiency levels. Furthermore, some studies may investigate the probable threshold level after which L2 learners' self-selection of materials can contribute more to their learning. Finally, it will be a valuable study if the effect of self-selection of materials on other L2 skills will be investigated.

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