



STRIKE A BALANCE ACT ON TOPIC FAMILIARITY AND CRITICAL THINKING FOR CURRICULUM OF FIRST-YEAR WRITING

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Abstract

The troubled Freshman EFL/ESL writing instruction needs a curricular framework to secure student transition and stabilize instruction to new learning of some writing knowledge in order for them to write with valuable ideas. Based on a longitudinal ethnographical case study of the classroom practice with a first-year English writing course, this article wrestles with the matter of topic familiarity and critical-thinking skills of argumentation. The discursive analysis of the instructional practice and the actual written texts from student writing assignments of paragraphs and short-essays recommends a freshman writing curriculum to act on critical classroom instruction with actual writing knowledge, yet to base it on topic familiarity. Because topic familiarity not only facilitates critical thinking of original facts or concrete evidence for new ideas in creating writing content, but also embraces students' new learning with genre perspectives on techniques of typographical structures with argumentation mechanisms. This study obliges writing educators to strike a balance act on freshmen's writing curriculum with topic familiarity and critical writing skills, not only to regulate instruction in preparing freshman students for writing penetrating essays, but also educating them to be critical future writers.

Keywords

Topic Familiarity, Critical Thinking, Argumentation, Typographical Structure, Freshman, Writing Curriculum

The Introduction to the Research Context

The first-year instruction and learning of writing in higher education has been drawn writing scholars and pedagogues' exertion over the past three decades (Hillocks, Jr, 2005; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Bastian, 2010; Graham, 2019). One of the main issues concerning the instruction of freshman writing in practice echoes the research endeavors addressing the problem that has often over centered on rhetorical forms, while the instruction has suffered from insufficient understanding of the students' background and the troubled curricula for effective start-up of learning to write (Degroff, 1987; Elbow, 2007; Bi & Qin 2012; Graham, 2019). Downs & Wardle (2007, p.552) have drawn our sights to the delinquency that university first-year writing courses perhaps have set the instruction unproductively when they have been striking to help students to write straightforwardly a "unified academic discourse", as they pointed out:

"More than twenty years of research and theory have repeatedly demonstrated that such a unified academic discourse does not exist and have seriously questioned what students can and do transfer from one context to another."

As there have been no stable curricula nor instructional program that can balance the actual writing activities and the necessary knowledge of writing for freshman learning (Hillocks, Jr, 2005; Elbow, 2007; Graham, 2019), instructional attentions are ineffectively often drawn to the matters of general textual forms, such as grammar and writing measures of length along rhetorical emphasis, without fully embracing that writing itself is a subject of study and critical field of practice (Hillocks, Jr, 2005; Downs & Wardle, 2007; McCann, 2010). Hillocks Jr's (2005, p.240) article -- *The Focus on Form vs Content in Teaching Writing*, has critiqued the instruction with only forms:

“Teachers of writing in the schools still appear to rely heavily on teaching the forms and devices of writing while neglecting how to work with the content.”

The basic knowledge of writing perspectives on content along with structural skills by genres and actual learning materials are all indeed in need simultaneously in the classroom when setting an actual writing course or a task (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Graham, Harris & Santangelo, 2015). The most basic writing concepts of content and format would provide not only the basic theoretical but also perspective support for instructions to eliminate the hindrances in the first few steps of students' learning of writing.

This is especially the case with teaching EFL/ESL (English as a Foreign and Second Language) freshman writing. An often-ignored fact prominent in various writing curricular and instructional development is that, writing cross cultures and languages complicates its instruction on multiple scales. In the EFL/ESL contexts, the content matters become several not only because of weak awareness, but also due to the fact that freshman students start to learn writing with little previous experience. In the non-English-speaking cultures, such as in the Confucian educational systems, when students are admitted to universities, their English is sufficiently fluent with almost 10 years' study of the language, but with zero writing experience with this language (e. g. Matalene, 1985; Bonyadi, 2014).

Furthermore, most EFL/ESL students' previous writing experience lies in their first language and literacy studies, which often turns out to be more hindering than helpful for their starting of English writing (Kaplan, 1966; Fan, 1989; Lovejoy, 2009; Bi & Qin, 2012), though their English is competent for them to write almost anything designated across curriculum. The first writing courses often require them and instructors not only to make a realistic start for English writing, but also to depart from the study of English as a mere language. Such start-up with multiple tasks in learning to write in fact confounds classroom teaching and discourse.

In light of the situation concerning first-year EFL/ESL writing, it is no exaggeration that the freshman English major students in China represent well the beginning writers for genuine English writing. When writing with little experience and across languages, numerous drawbacks with the EFL/ESL freshman writing are often discerned, such as lack of explicit techniques of content creation and unawareness of organizational endeavors with topic knowledge (Zhao & Coombs, 2012; Hillocks, Jr, 2005). Content creation and organization of topic knowledge has thus become the first set of objectives of teaching for students' adaptation to writing in English.

The instruction of writing in such contexts and situations is gradually working with issues fostered by different content perspectives, representational devices, and thought patterns (Kaplan, 1966; Matalene, 1985). Most writing instructors become equally anxious facing the challenges as to what to do for the beginning writers to make an effective turning point from the insufficiency or misassumptions of English writing toward a right starting point of learning for professional writing (Graham, 2019).

This paper examines how instructions with the perspectives of both content and format could facilitate content and topic knowledge to settle multiple needs facing freshmen's learning of writing. This content matter is also conceptualized as generating ideas for writing, which is widely applied to writing practice for freshmen in higher education as instructional setups (e. g. Miller, 2005; Bailey & Powell, 2008). Given the complex contexts of EFL/ESL freshman's first few steps of learning to write, instructional experience and empirical writing knowledge are surely important to be considered from curricular angles, to orient EFL/ESL student writers to create content for topic knowledge with communicative values (Elbows, 2007; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Proske & Kapp, 2013; Hill, 2016; Mays, 2017; Graham, 2019). Meanwhile, to that end, instructions have to temporarily activate the representation and argumentation knowledge.

This article focuses on two questions to crackle the content issues with topic choices concurring in the freshmen writing instruction. The first question concerns why choosing topics of familiarity makes better start-up with freshman students? As it is often perceived to be more difficult to generate new ideas with a more recognizable and familiar topic (Hidi & McLaren, 1991; Ikuta, Okamoto & Shibata, 2022); yet, the situation that it is equally important to get students' hands on writing with topics of familiarity, which appeals greatly to instructional choices (Bonyadi, 2014; Bastian, 2010). The dilemma that topics of familiarity easier to write does not necessarily guarantee students to write well or write with greater interest and motivation. How is this conflicting setting resolved? The seeking of answers to the second question perhaps will provide windows on why and how to strike the balance on topic familiarity in freshman's actual writing tasks with a new territory of learning to write.

The author investigates the two questions wrestled with writing instructors and scholars over the last three decades (e. g. Downs & Wardle, 2007; Elbow, 2007; Aitken & Graham, 2023). Through a case of more than a decade's ethnographical study in a freshman writing course, this work reports the classroom trials and feedbacks, but the evidence from student writing exercises and drafts of short essays were submitted to and have been restored on an online platform accompanied to the writing course from the outburst of Covid-19 up to the time of writing.

The Literature Review on Topic Knowledge and Topic Familiarity

The content of a written product is in part defined by a writer's topic knowledge (Proske & Kapp, 2013). This could not be better understood at the instruction of basic writing stage and courses (Degroff, 1987; Hidi, McLaren, 1991; Hillocks, Jr, 2005; Downs & and Wardle, 2007). That topic knowledge plays a critical role in producing coherent and meaningful content has been broadly affirmed in research of writing, teaching of writing (Ruth & Murphy, 1984; Hidi & McLaren, 1991; Boyadi, 2014; Ikuta, Okamoto & Shibata, 2022). So have claims been made about how the choice of topics affects content of student writing and their learning experience. Topic selection has become a critical research focus in recent two decades, as it plays critical roles in activating students' previous knowledge and motivation for writing (Degroff, 1987; Bi & Qin, 2012; Proske & Kapp, 2013; Aitken & Graham, 2023). What impact does the research literature say about topic selection on students' textual content, and how is it related to topic familiarity?

Research on writing topics and content creation has first been addressed through topic selection as student self-selected topics and teacher assigned-topics to examine how they differ in influencing on the written content. Most of the research outcomes have invigorated student self-selected topics and have elaborated on how it fosters student writing with more fluent content and lengthier texts compared to teacher-assigned topics (Lee, 1987; Hidi & McLaren, 1991; Bi & Qing, 2012; Bonyadi, 2014). Self-selection of topics in writing can activate better motivation and self-efficiency, and self-selected topics has been implemented in instructions for such reasons (Lee, 1987; Bonyadi, 2014). As Bonyadi's empirical research (2014, p.5) finding suggests:

“Providing EFL students with self-selected topics did have statistically significant effect on their writing performance.”

This may justify the instructional applications of journal writing or free writing to encourage self-directed writing activities to achieve greater fluency and stronger authorial voice for later writing tasks. According to Lovejoy's affirmation (2009, pp.81-84), student-selected topics incorporated with self-directed and free writing produce multiple and profound writing effects as listed below:

- to give students freedom to write about topics important to them
- to create continuous opportunities to writing
- To create community by sharing writing about topics that student's value
- To encourage students to write freely, in their natural voices, as well as to experiment with varieties of English and genres
- To extend students' views of language and literacy (and what constitutes 'good' writing')

Self-selected topics and self-directed writing undertakings are one of the most widely adopted instructional strategies with student writers for its association with students' previous knowledge and for self-directed learning, especially when topic knowledge is at stake in production and assessment, as writing tasks demand (DeGroff, 1987; Lee, 1987; Hidi & McLaren, 1991; Bonyadi, 2014; Aitken & Graham, 2023). It takes advantages of student writers' self-management of their cognitive base with motivation factors when they have to be more accountable for authority and their own voices in the written communication.

Though plenteous literature has addressed that self-selected writing topics and self-directed writing tasks lead to profound and qualitatively better writing content, research has also brought up perplexing situations. The term self-selected topics and self-directed tasks in classrooms are often adopted at a time or used with other instructional strategies, such as process writing, audience-based writing, and assigned-topic writing etc. (Lee, 1987; Lovejoy, 2009). As the variables further diversify, the research findings become less straightforward. The examination of literature finds that self-selected topics does not always mirror the topics of familiarity which are more liable to generate topic knowledge, although self-selected topics may reflect the topics of high interest to students (Hidi & McLaren, 1991; Ikuta, Okamoto & Shibata, 2022).

Research has also categorized writing topics for choices in writing classes to be topics of high-interest and low-interest (Degroff, 1987; Hidi & McLaren, 1991). In Hidi & McLaren's research (1991, p.189), they rated students selected topics into two categories. More exactly, two topics of "Space Travel" and "Living in the Future" are rated with greater interest by students, thus they regard such topics of high-interest but the ones of low-knowledge in students, compared to the two topics of "Land Travel" and "Live in a City", which are rated as the ones of low-interest but high-knowledge. Their research reveals:

“The results unexpectedly showed that low-interest topics supported by tutorials resulted in longer productions. In addition, high interest topics facilitated only better-quality ideas, but not qualitatively better content.”

In this research, topics of low-interest and high-knowledge are close to topics of familiarity that contains high previous and thus richer topic knowledge for writing. That is to say, students produce better overall content with topics of familiarity, but not necessarily at their best interest (Degroff, 1987; Hidi & McLaren, 1991; Ikuta, Okamoto & Shibata, 2022). This suggests that student self-selected topics may reflect students' high interest in the topics, not necessarily the high knowledge for their writing tasks.

Therefore, students may resist choosing familiar topics, regardless of their high-knowledge quality for writing tasks (e. g. Bastian, 2010; Ikuta, Okamoto & Shibata, 2022), or they might be demotivated by familiar topics due to the low-interest situation (e. g. Hidi & McLaren, 1991). At the risk of resistance, when writing instructors informed by the research outcomes often assign topics of formality to solicit topic knowledge for fluent and elaborative writing, but with other purposes that may induce new learning. This is confirmed by Degroff's (1987) research that has compared student writers of the high-knowledge and low-knowledge tasks for writing activities and conferencing outcomes. His finding correlates high-knowledge and better writing performance. In this case, topics of high-knowledge resonate topics of familiarity which relates closely to positive effects on writing fluency, elaboration and accuracy.

The above literature implies, students write better with familiar topics with sufficient topic knowledge. The topics of high-interest are likely selected by students themselves, yet, it does not guarantee best writing outcomes, due to that the low-knowledge situation occurs to content creation in writing. To sum up, it is self-selected but high-knowledge topics, i. e. topics of high familiarity that best facilitate students' previous knowledge to serve as topic knowledge in their producing of content. Yet it needs teacher-guidance for its effective implementation in teaching practice.

That is to say, informed selection of familiar topics does augment students writing performance on the content perspective (Degroff, 1987; Hidi & McLaren, 1991; Basin 2010; Ikuta, Okamoto & Shibata, 2022). Topics of familiarity with high-knowledge, but of low-interest, enable students to produce topic knowledge at length and elaborations. Because students are able to write with richer content and sufficient materials. Though literature justifies the idea that topics of writing act as a defining factor for generating topic knowledge in basic writing of short essays and other writing tasks, it also unwraps the unresolved cognitive and motivational conflict in administering writing instructions and curricular plans when taking advantages of topic familiarity. Topic familiarity sets students at ease to write, and with great topic knowledge. Informed by research, the question remains, how could topic familiarity be better administered with a balance act to meet students' writing motivation and interest in their startup learning of writing?

Thus far, the literature has provided informed understanding of the question why it is that familiar topics of high-knowledge yet potentially low-interest facilitate better writing content, while the question remains as to how it could be best administered for freshman's learning of writing competence. The literature review into the questions has legitimated my years of practice in relying on topic familiarity such as self-writing or autobiographical essays in support of freshman students' transition to numerous writing courses and academic writing tasks. In what follows, the author provides ethnographical materials to illustrate how the potential defect of topic familiarity has been resolved in the freshman writing course over a decade's classroom practice. The aim is to shed light on how instructions settle content matters through choices of familiar topics with new territory of learning for structural and generic knowledge about writing. This has been carried out with teacher-directed but student self-selected writing topics and tasks.

A Critical and Ethnographical Case Method

As literature has disclosed that topic familiarity usually is adopted with potential problems of low interest or motivation, though they inherit qualities of high topic knowledge. In the EFL/ESL context, topic familiarity became an instrumental choice for solving the contextual problems facing the first-year students caused by littler experience of actual English writing, and challenges of writing across languages and cultures. In this study, I have engaged instruction with ethnographical techniques since a decade ago for understanding the challenges and finding solutions in settling a reasonable instructional framework with curriculum assistance for the freshman writing course, started from the academic year of 2009. This ethnographical case bases on a Chinese university freshman writing course where I also first started writing instruction with first-year students of English majors in 2009. At the very beginning, the curricula were unsettled, which was the situation to most writing instructors in the EFL/ESL contexts, since the higher education has undertaken writing courses in recent years. Essay writing or short essay writing becomes the choice for the basic writing course to direct thinking for content and format matters. Meanwhile, the genre of essay writing suits as an important perspective to address how content is presented through essay forms.

The exemplar materials in this paper are chosen randomly from student assignments submitted to the online platform commenced at the outburst of Covid-19. The writing course has since blended the classroom instruction and the online course platform in the post Covid-19 era. The students were informed with the later use

of their writing assignments for research purposes at the beginning of the course over the past four years. Student writing assignments of different drafts have made the basic data source for this research endeavor.

My years of practice in instruction of the writing course reveals that the issues of insufficiency of English writing in both format and content in the EFL/ESL context, are much less personal but more structural. As has been pointed out in the introduction, EFL/ESL freshman students' proficiency normally lies in language learning, but not writing itself; and their writing experience is totally with their first language until they come to study in the university (e. g. Ikuta, Okamoto & Shibata, 2022). It has been a tough task for most writing instructors in the EFL/ESL contexts, as to where to start, how to go for the writing course (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Graham, 2019).

In addition to my first action upon topic familiarity, I meanwhile straightforwardly made introductions to some writing knowledge in my first few years of instruction. In order to cooperate with some writing knowledge, I critically informed students of how their writing experience rooted in Chinese conventions may hinder their English writing. I used to handout the research articles for their understanding. One of the powerful texts is Robert B. Kaplan's "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-cultural Education" published in 1966 on the *Journal of Language Learning*. The article has theorized the contrastive textual structure patterns originated in the oriental cultures as spiral and indirect, and the essay pattern in English convention as linear and direct with graphics. This text from research literature equivalates a few sessions of lectures for students to understand why their English writing is set with new learning of a different rhetorical style and structural pattern with also familiar topics. The applicative effect of research knowledge to pedagogical practice is especially illuminating while students carrying out writing tasks.

It was crucial to set up writing tasks with familiar topics, yet also begin straight with balance on the unknown perspectives of writing itself to entail critical writing experience among students. So, my first few years of instruction relied heavily on topic familiarity for topic knowledge to make up the writing experience for them to undertake more academic writing tasks demanded by their undergraduate degree study of English language and literature outside the writing course. Up to the time of writing this article, it has been the fifteenth year of reflection and ethnographical research on the first-year student learning of writing and the instruction itself.

A balance act on instruction to counterweigh topic familiarity was to involve basic writing knowledge for students to know what to do as a writer in writing but not just with topics (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Bastian, 2010), which has directly drawn students' attention to the subject of writers' role represented by personal references in and for writing. This instructional act on developing writer roles has advanced tolerance in students for topic familiarity and the teacher's critical feedbacks on content issues, while they are directed to understand why such tasks were assigned to them and what is it new expected beyond length and grammar matters. Topic familiarity does not seem to have triggered low motivation in the freshmen's first writing course over the years as long as they immediately understand the transformation and transition of the unmeaningful writing. On the contrary, the students write with feelings and pride of their experiences, friends and familiarly members at length and with fluency. Though the first assignment in the basic writing course has normally functioned as a placement writing exercise for me to locate where they would be in the writing instruction and curriculum, but not as a language learner anymore. My conceptualization of this stage of starting point of writing seems echoing the stance that the students have mastered the narrative scheme fine, but yet new to critical thinking that demands argumentation skills (see also, Crowhurst 1990).

The excitement of their new undertaking of the writing course at the entry to the university, meanwhile demands some serious creative endeavors at the departure from writing with mere linguistic excellence but weak content. Their first two drafts of writing a hobby or one unforgettable experience usually helped me find them with fluent and excellent language command, also some form of narrative scheme adopted, as shown by the following sample extract from a student writing:

“Actually, probably to your surprise, I am someone who really does bad in sports. I was among the few in my school who did not get full marks on PE in the Senior High School Entrance Examination. But at the same time, I ski, skating at regular basis.”

Fluency and plenty of materials do not always make good essays nor paragraphs, including the short ones. The teacher-directed familiar topics and tasks of writing at the beginning of the course also help students unearth their drafts with some weakness, such as lacking of a clear idea and without much structural organization on the whole product. The assigned familiar topics of self-writing does bring students to the writing task with plenty topic knowledge and genuine voices, as they write without barriers when they are demanded for materials from personal experiences (see also DeGroff, 1987; Zhao & Coombs, 2012; Lovejoy, 2009; Bi & Qin, 2012).

The written drafts from students under the suggested writing topics and tasks on the other hand, has urged the curricular and instructional acts for genre knowledge (Bastian, 2010), content and structural dimensions of writing. The pedagogy has to strike for balance to debunk the motivational issues related to topic familiarity, the new dimensions of writing knowledge of content and format has to be included for their aspirations. Otherwise, students would resist topic familiarity at a few drafts without being guided on how to progress for their writing

competence (Bastian, 2010). The new dimension of learning has thus made its way into the curricular space in recent years, including some cognitive exercises of differentiating ideas from facts.

The outcomes of the ethnographical trial and analysis with topic familiarity in the EFL/ESL freshman's writing course are discussed and reported here for the purpose of curricular advancement for writing instructors teaching on the first-year writing. In what follows, I mainly report and discuss the main findings with three points on both content and formatting issues.

Critical Thinking for Original Ideas with Topic Familiarity

The answer to the question why topic familiarity has become a strategic adoption and eventually liable to balance the unfamiliar territories of writing knowledge, such as the perspectives on content and format matters with generic thinking, is not only claimed for experienced instructors to resolve first-year EFL/ESL writing challenges, but for new instructors to start writing courses with some curricular security.

First of all, topic familiarity in EFL/ESL freshman writing dismisses the content challenges with its high-knowledge character. When students write across languages and cultures, their first obstacle is to create content for their short essays or paragraphs. The problem is not that they do not have content per se, but that they are not trained for writing purposes. The same with teachers, content has been difficult to be instructed for how it is created and to know how it is assessed. Sometimes, students become anxious about how fair their grades can be. Idea is one of the terminologies adopted to the class to communicate about the content of most written texts, and so is it used as a feedback language in the communication with students of their writing assignments. In the EFL/ESL contexts, topic familiarity is found to hold a firm foundation in freshman's writing course with critical thinking and presentation for original ideas. It is necessary for writers to handle the focus issues so that they can propose a new idea beyond commonsense, while sourcing sufficient sensible materials to persuade readers with rhetorical confidence and elaborative details. Yet, when this dimension of critical thinking for content in the curriculum is new to students, the basic writing course turns out to be unusually laborious in both instruction and feedback.

Idea is not a familiar concept nor experience with most freshman students in the EFL/ESL writing classroom, though they are constantly on demand to write with one main idea. According to Wilson (1999), ideas are sensory conception of matters, they are counterfactual as content. Though idea as a concept is widely used in the writing practice, for students to come up with critical ideas requires precarious thinking (Miller, 2005). How to write for ideas has been a challenging task for instruction and writing. Miller (2005, p.2) applied this concept to the writing classroom promened by the question: "What do you think?" to help generate ideas for essay writing with a topic. It has been a strong demand for students to write with ideas, not only with descriptive practice.

Secondly, topic familiarity allows some space for writing with ideas while they are informed by other writing pragmatics, such as the thesis statement of an essay or a topic sentence of a paragraph. Meanwhile, techniques of how to present an idea by the structural forms also complicate instruction on content creation. For example, the main idea of an essay is located in the introductory paragraph, but the main idea of a paragraph at the first sentence as a topic sentence (Bailey & Powell, 2008). To help students step into writing with these writing conceptual tools, they learn to generate a main idea and present it in rhetorical forms with such symbolic assistance. Some instructors may rely on reading materials to prepare students for ideas as topic knowledge (Miller, 2005; Proske & Kapp, 2013); I have depended on topic familiarity with both teacher-assigned guidance and student-selected focus related to students' own learning life and personal experience. The idea-based perspective on essay content proves no easy tasks for instructors, if they are not familiar with genre knowledge of essays in the academic contexts, which could be set as a first step for their later writing of academic content cross curriculum.

The instruction often directs student to understand that the content of an essay or an article promened a main idea evident in facts or factual information they can collect. When readers read an essay, he or she obtains the main idea and feels cognizant which is confirmed through the process of argumentation and reasoning, but not the individual sentences (Wilson, 1999). Because the main idea is supported by the related specific or factual information more evident as stimulus objects or concrete experiential incidents in the body of the essay (Morse, 2008). Essay is flexible with length yet as a particular genre, it becomes a good platform for the first-year writing course to understand the content as a main idea or a thesis statement. Morse (2008) filed a patent of the system of essay writing in 2008. Essay as an invented instrument of written communication is widely applied to media of magazines and news agency, or other cultural productions.

The creation of essay content is based on a well-chosen topic in order to generate both concrete and abstract types of information. The topic functions as an indicator responding to the question: What is written or discussed in the text, which is important to communicate about and write itself for content as ideas. The topic tool for content creation becomes explicitly important in commenting on students' early drafts of particular writing tasks. In this sense, a topic works for setting the scope of the content which helps set the boundary to center the selection of factual fabrics in evidencing an idea. It is normally difficult for the freshman students to fully understand the relations of the main idea to the rest elements of an essay as support materials.

Usually, the instruction goes at length in order to direct students to shape up a main idea with a chosen topic, as it needs to find a focus within the topic. The function of a focus plays the role as a standing point of gathering materials that base the main idea. A focus is interpreted in instruction repeatedly to be the viewpoint for writers to gather relevant information and for readers to see the connection of the main idea and selected materials. This at the same time provides a foundation to understand the general writing theories of cohesion and unity. As the cohesion of paragraphs and sentences is defined by the consistency of the idea and its concrete supportive materials; the topic focus then decides the relevancy among the concrete facts gathered for the essay. Both the topic and the focus are critical in forming the idea and selecting of materials. The topic of familiarity is strategic in soliciting elaborative details that is consistent to the main idea of the essay for cohesion and unity. Topic familiarity becomes the foundation for critical thinking for a sensible new idea that involves effortful identification of seemingly distinct occurrences. The instructive writing knowledge though has to follow soon after they produce drafts of a writing assignment.

As students have to develop original ideas from the familiar things, they have pondered around their experience to search for ideas beyond commonsense from their own thinking. With knowledge about ideas, students have come up with critical views on their study life, such as how physical punishment does not help discipline student behaviors, or block of electricity from university dormitory after 11 pm has been a limiting but not disciplining regulation to college students etc.

The suggestion of topic familiarity in instruction does not always demotivate student writing as other researchers have encountered in the classroom (Hidi & Maclaren, 1991; Bastian, 2010), instead, it directs students to observe life with greater attention in order to find writing ideas. The frustration though is often caused by trials for new ideas from the familiar topics, but not from the topic familiarity itself. With a specific task of a paragraph at the beginning, it often goes through at least three drafts to shape an idea through the one-paragraph essay exercises (Bailey & Powell, 2008). For example, one of the students chose the topic of “strolling”, and opens her one-paragraph essay beautifully with a well-developed idea:

“I enjoy strolling around the familiar neighborhood. Different from tours with vehicles, walking doesn't take us abruptly from A to B. Opposite to the journeys to new places, exploring the neighborhood means unearth ignored blessings in acquainted surroundings.”

The subtle selection of topic for writing the assignment usually flows the passage with great fluency and feelings, most of all, with original ideas. It often occurs to students that topic familiarity does potentially facilitate sufficient support materials, but the difficulty resides in defining a main idea for the writing task, such as of a paragraph

Topic familiarity is advisably balanced not only with instructional strategies for original ideas, but also necessarily with structural knowledge of essays and paragraphs. As structural layout does provide representational assistance for original ideas. Occasionally, students focus on similar focus, yet with different originally writing. For example, when practicing with paragraph structures, another student coincidentally selected the topic of “strolling” and easily suffices a paragraph structure with coherence and unity.

“Among all the leisure activities that can make me relax, strolling is what I like most. If there is only one hour left in the day, taking a walk after dinner is definitely the first choice. The evening breeze, which was scorched in the daytime and nowhere to hide, was in the evening. Walking in the streets and alleys, you can see people of all kinds: The old man who shakes the cattail fan to enjoy the cool evening, the old lady who dances in the square, the children who play in groups, the sweet and warm couple, and the delivery boy who is in a hurry.....Observing them is also my pleasure. When I meet people I know, I chat with them for a while, and when I meet strangers, I guess what they are talking about. My favorite thing is to take a slow walk on the street with my parents. When I was young, I could ask my mother to buy me roadside food. As I grew up, I spent less time with my parents. Sometimes, taking a walk is more simply about enjoying the time with my family. Taking a walk in the evening, watching the sunset gradually disappear, the moon hanging on the tree branches, the lanterns coming on, and the evening breeze blowing away the hustle and bustle, the city is the gentlest at this time. Finally, I hope no matter how old I am, someone will accompany me for a walk in the night, saying to me at the end of the road: ‘It's time for us to go home’.”

Typographically Structure the Information Units

Topic familiarity in creation of content is more than to settle a topic and discover a viewpoint for an idea. It contains the procedures of processing information of evidence and structuring it with consistent relation and connection. This new part of identifying and organizing evidence for the main idea in student learning should also takes curricula space and instructional energy.

Organizational demand often practices students cognitive experience with topic knowledge about ideas and how it differentiates them from facts. At least, writing has to process or sort out two or more levels of information units which categorically differ (Kratzer, 2002), including at least one level or layer of information unit that is more abstract or counterfactual, such as a new idea as the main prepositional claim for argument; and the contrastive level, more concrete or factual used in a support structure to explicate the preposition and new idea. The positioned information units actually portray a typographical structure by the essay genre (Bailey & Powell, 2008; Morse, 2008), implying “the normative rules” and conventions of composition by the established genre knowledge of essays (Hariss, 1954, p.147).

Feedbacks on student drafts are often discussed in class time with basic topic knowledge in addition to the general form of structure of five-paragraph essays and paragraphs provided by textbook materials (e. g. Bailey & Powell, 2008; Morse, 2008). Cognition on the relation of abstraction and specification is usually reinforced in both instructions and feedbacks. The information units are differentiated in structuring the topical knowledge that help present the prepositional idea and distribute evidence into a textual product. But for it to be successfully communicated, the writing has to create a network of interrelated statements and cultivate evident materials with logic for persuasive effect. Usually, for readers to resonate with the more abstract layer of content, they need to make sense of it with more evident and specific particulars to fully understand or comprehend a new idea (Wilson,1999; Susan & MacDonald, 1986). Especially when the proposed new idea for the essay is really new or different from the commonsense views or knowledge, the support process often goes to locate more concrete information instigated to support the idea prepositioned in the essay, which demands a great sense of authority from student writers, for which they need topic familiarity to gather and distribute the evidence with accurate understanding. This reflects the process and act of argumentation to be discussed later (Coirier & Golder, 1993; Susan & MacDonald, 1986). Essays are perceivably one of the writing genres used to present proposed new ideas and its connected specific facts to make topic knowledge. Most genres of texts compose with logical units by well-thought-out ideas and factual evidence. Different topics put different restrictions on relative occurrences (Harris, 1954).

The real difficulty the beginning EFL/ESL writers encounter in the dimension of organization and structure lies in the finding that ideas are difficult to be defined or conceptualized, and it is similarly unease for student writers to support them and present them through essay act. As Susan & MacDonald (1986, p.195) have identified that “many inexperienced writers have difficulty knowing when and how to use specifics”. The idea of structure can play part of the roles for distributing and layout techniques of evidence materials.

Writers state out their ideas to manifest them in observant and factual specifications to connect readers and promote persuasion. Like finding good ideas, identifying and locating the concrete factual type of information or occurrences also needs cognitive competence and maturity for its reliability and consistency. Topics familiar with writers provide not only sufficient materials as building blocks in illustrating the idea into typographical image or structured unity with elaboration, but also relevant ones so that they can back up the preposition with a solid net of support materials. Regardless of the topic familiarity, it is critical for student writers to distinguish the two categories of information in the abstract level as ideas, and in the concrete level as fact or evidence, in order for student writers to structure the information into an assembly of essay discourse, paragraphs with logical consistency for a coherent text (Bailey & Powell, 2008; Morse, 2008).

Without sufficient experience in writing or previous training in cognition, it is less likely for students to construct a reasonable and rational structure to support the idea (Coirier & Golder, 1993). The topic knowledge for instruction can help students ponder the structural complexity of the essay through specifications; thus, topic familiarity does not always simplify the writing task, on the contrary, it is necessary to make a valid argument through a penetrating complex structure with evidence distributed appropriately. The supporting process for a new idea contains a great part of writing, structuring the information units in a typography unity helps greatly with readability, which is often addressed in the feedbacks to the actual writing drafts of short essays.

The complication of teaching disclosed here is illustrated through a question: Is it rhetorical or cognitive task to differentiate and compose with the categorically diverse information units? For a long time, I have strived with this question until recently. I found it is topic familiarity that takes advantage of cognitive maturity for writing to create and organize the topic knowledge. In order to write with impact, one has to know what a new idea is and how it is not a commonsense fact etc. so the essay structure is filled with the precise types of information in the places of, such as the introduction and the middle of paragraphs. It is likewise prerequisite for student writers to know how the information in the topic sentence is categorically different from the information comes to support the topic sentence. More subtly, how the information in the topic sentences of the body paragraphs is different from the main prepositional idea in an essay. It often turns out to have at least three layers or levels of differentiation in a

basic essay typography, from the main prepositional idea as thesis, to the main arguments as topic sentences, and finally to the concrete foundation with facts. Paragraphs usually contain at least a structure typography of two layers of information at different degrees of abstraction and concreteness. Perhaps cognitive inexperience to distinguish the categorical information units poses the most unknown difficulty in teaching and learning to write. When the student essay draft is turned in without a clear typography stratum at least of three levels in a hierarchical order, the essay is hard to be read as a clear and original discourse. In this stage, students also need to rely on topic familiarity to deal with organizational appropriateness.

After students learned to pin down a focus in a self-selected topic, they have to learn to show their position of the focus in text with an argument before they further come up with more evident information. An example illuminating this point is, when a student has settled her topic to critique on an educational policy of ‘double reduction’ issued by the Ministry of Education of China -- reduction of homework and time spent in school, for her term essay, she stated her main idea in draft as: “In my opinion, reducing the amount of homework and time in school is beneficial to students' health.” It has the writer’s position stance expressed as an essay thesis statement. A major writing problem nevertheless occurs.

When a student puts their similar prepositional idea once more in one of the support structures such as in topic sentences in the middle paragraphs, or one of the topic sentences contain the same level of abstraction as the main idea does, in this case, the problem is identified as that the essay may appear to have two different main ideas in the macrostructure which will undermine the strength of the essay. The draft of her unfolding of the main idea comes as:

“It guarantees sufficient sleep for students, which makes them more energetic. And it enables them to have time to do enough physical exercise to make their body stronger. Furthermore, it encourages students to develop for multiple-intelligence.”

The last point of the main arguments does not seem to differ in abstraction from the main idea. The policy of ‘double reduction’ aims to promote student health as the main idea, and possibly multiple intelligence in the support argument seems to stand at the same layer of meaning by logic. After tutorial conferencing, the problem was pointed out by the instructor. Eventually, her final essay has solved the problem of the structure of thesis and the support argument ideas to some extent with the following revised version, each argument point will go to paragraph length with concrete details and factual specifications for a full length of an essay of about 1000-1200 words:

“It guarantees sufficient sleep for students, which makes them more energetic; and it enables them to have time to do enough physical exercise that make their body stronger; also, mental health can be improved not only by lightening homework load but also anxiety by allowing more time to play with their friends and family.”

This type of problem could never be resolved through a couple of essay exercises in one writing course. The hurdle to writing well even in the same genre lies in the reality that variant topics may demand students of different cognitive knowledge to organize the information into an elaborative structure differentiated by the levels of abstraction and concreteness with thorough comprehension. Even when the external structure of the essay genre well-known as the introduction, body and conclusion is mastery, the structural complexity of topic knowledge defined by the inner consistency of interrelated and connected statements does not have a universal model; it is specific to each central prepositional idea, which is explicated by the situation when two students choose the same focus topic as “strolling” as mentioned earlier, the distributional structure of materials with reasoning differs. Thus, each organization and representation of topic knowledge through essays possesses a unique supportive process and thus a structural typography. The general idea of an essay structure does not help in actual writing. The learning of writing is not one course for all variety of undertakings of all topics nor ideas. A basic writing course is basic but never covers the knowledge for all instances of all writing tasks (McCann, 2010; Aitken & Graham, 2023). Yet, the ‘gateways for learning of writing’ opens a system of thinking and the approach to processing different topics with structural exhibitions of evidence for ideas. Resistance however from the students is often not to the instruction but to the advice on the structure of topic knowledge. They can be annoyed when they are pushed to revise the structure of the topic knowledge with feedbacks at least on two drafts.

Whenever necessary, basic cognitive exercises to distinguish how to order information units of ideas and facts are supplied in the course, most importantly, for introducing to argumentation skills similarly required and assessed over students writing assignments.

The exercises with sorting factual information and conceptualizing them into a most related topic focus to produce relatedness and connection, urging students to search with specific materials to compose with related sentences for a paragraph from identified evidential occurrences, which should provide supportive solidarity for the

more abstraction level of conceptualization and understanding. One sample exercise of paragraph writing from a student with this purpose seems to be effective:

“The most fascinating one-day event held in my high school is Art Cultural Festival. Every December witness various artistic activity with tremendous enthusiasm around the campus. From the Q&A competition to the 90-minute drama, more than 20 activities comprise the festival, providing great opportunities for both students and teachers to enjoy themselves. Among all of these, it is undoubtedly the Festival Gala that arouses the greatest expectation and passion. With melody flowing through the crowds, cheer leaders lead the dragon dance parading around the campus. The wonderful day always ends with rapturous applause.

The actual activity items identified for the topic of one-day event poses layered differentiation of concreteness distributed as the paragraph content. For the external structure, the student knows where the sentence of topic idea is placed, how it should be related to the layer of concrete information units. The relation and connection of the topic idea and the actual items in parallel unit more factual are placed in order; it is not only recognized by linguistic literacy, but by cognitive experience for writing, best with the topic familiarity. This sourcing and typographically structuring supportive information units is critical to make the inner coherent and meaningful texts, and mostly persuasive writing with argumentation skills.

Argument Mechanism for New Ideas

Given the situation that topics of less familiarity need extra cognitive competence to find reliable materials or navigate for a focus due to the situation of low-knowledge or less previous knowledge (Degroff, 1987; McCann, 2010). Students often find it more difficult to judge on the relevancy of the supportive materials toward their ideas with unfamiliar topics. Thus, their new ideas are less likely logically supported. If the connection between the preposition idea and the evidence is not guaranteed, then it is the cohesion and unity of the idea and discourse at the price. This often reveals students' insufficient understanding of or training with argumentation. Finding the actual consistency between the main idea and its evident reasoning instances reflect the act of augmentation, which is critical when the idea is new or different, and so are the evidence less known, even in the realm of topic familiarity.

Argument knowledge is unavoidable in giving feedbacks and is often included in the explicit instruction when topic familiarity does critically and creatively generate new ideas. Students are guided to activate the argument mechanisms for new ideas. As Coirier & Golder (1993, p.171) speculated, a minimum argumentation mechanism is erected when “a position is stated and supported by one augment.” This echoes an argument act possibly placed at the thesis level in stating a new idea but not yet fully supported, or a paragraph topic sentence where a topical position is decided and the stance is also included in the statement. Coirier & Golder (ibid) proceed to provide a more elaborated model: “A position is stated and supported by two unrelated arguments.” This could be found in a paragraph that a topic sentence is supported by two individual occurrences or two independent discrete factual instances. In which, there are two levels of information units. One is the topic stance and the other is the support unit with two or more distinct evidences. In this perspective, finding and selecting evidences are part of the argumentation process so after the topic focus is decided upon. Whereas, when a position is stated with a main stance and supported by three related more actual arguments, it reflects a typography of the thesis statement and its manifesting arguments as blueprint for a typical five-paragraph essay.

Finding the evidence to give reasons for the main positional idea realizes the act of making argument which demands critical writing skills. Topics less familiar meanwhile pose different degrees of difficulty to persuade readers with the main propositional claim, which indeed demands greater endeavor with argumentation effort and topic knowledge. Writing activities with topics less familiar are arranged in the later phase of the course, the topic familiarity helps students make smooth start-ups while acquiring writing knowledge. Research does show topics of less familiarity may help students produce new ideas but not necessarily the most persuasive overall topic-knowledge representation as content (Hidi & McLaren, 1991; McCann, 2010). Practicing with topic familiarity helps students writing move on to topics less familiar or less personal. Self-selection of topics may often adventure into newer topics, where students may not be able to write with authority. Their learning of writing thus is to balance new writing perspectives and knowledge by familiar topics still.

Given the condition that student writers are learning and practicing defining and presenting the new idea on the chosen topic from their own thoughts for their writing projects, while their learning is focused on writing itself, the writing concepts of standing viewpoint and concrete evidence are part of their cognitive exercise for argumentation within the writing course. For instance, to know what makes a good topic and point requires their learning energy and training for argumentative experience, which is proven through their search for evidence. That is why in the later steps of writing I instruct on how students go to self-selected topics for term essays and yet keep topic familiarity on advice. Writing demands as much topic knowledge as argumentative knowledge.

Topic familiarity can be better legitimated for curricular purposes if it comes out with critical and augmentative thinking in writing for a coherent discourse to meet persuasive purposes. Because this is accomplished with argumentation to persuade readers. Thus, argumentation works toward persuasion, but as well with topic knowledge. The instruction often asks students to think from a reader perspective. They are encouraged to write with questions. familiar topics are not only easier to read, but also more possible for them to resonate with the text and to be influenced by newer ideas. Yet, similar to writers, it may pose motivation issues. Are readers also motivated by topic familiarity? They definitely need the topic to interest them to read, at the same time, they feel like to resonate with the topics of high-interest (Hidi & McLaren, 1991; Lee, 1987). That is to say, they like the topic to be interesting. It is getting clearer that topic familiarity is fine to connect readers which help essays make some argument in topic selection in real-life writing. Yet topic selection with familiarity has to meet the criteria of being interesting. Now, another question is, would topics of familiarity be possible to make essays of high-interest to readers? The answer to this question could be positive as long as it generates new ideas. When I teach with topic familiarity, I find it is new ideas that are not easy to obtain. It is writers' decisions though when they go for topic familiarity, they have to come up with interesting ideas for motivational solutions for readers.

From the argumentation perspective, topic familiarity works to connect readers with sufficiency and elaboration of details with structural complexity, but it has to produce with new ideas. Familiar topics and new ideas sound conflicting pursuits for topic considerations. To resolve the seemingly gap between the topics familiar and the need of a new idea an essay aspires to convey, writers dear to challenge familiarity for popularity or other critical academic values. For reading, topic familiarity and popularity work fine to connect readers, yet, it is the new ideas that produce impact which is achieved through the skills of persuasion. On the other hand, topic familiarity demand greater skills of argumentation in producing different ideas. It presents many more good reasons for student writers to write with argumentation and topic familiarity. The first would be it is easier for readers to recognize what is written; secondly, writers can address the issues that have shared interest and common ground with readers; thirdly, the writer can navigate the topic area with authority, to list but a few reasons. All of which depends on thinking for new ideas, yet no less argumentation knowledge. Usually when new writing instructors and students could not resolve this conflicting situation, they go for topics of high-interest while could be less able to attain the authorial strength nor knowledge.

Most importantly, it requires the writers to dig into the hidden points or the deep places for the accountability of novelty and originality, with also new materials to not only interest but also persuade readers. The critical thinking of and creative approaches to popular topics or a widely known social problem, is key for the writer to turning out with a particular viewpoint for the essay to argue for original and valuable ideas. Thus, to write familiar topics well, writers have to find particular viewpoints to obtain in-depth evidence to prove the idea original and new that not only connect but also move readers. Students are encouraged to contest existing values to inform readers' thinking, or orient their perceptions in the writing course. writing always has the argumentation element. From the choice of a topic to selection of the concrete evidence, all are work of argument presented through coherent texts.

The familiar topic with personal experience is instructed as to writing about a person, the effective way is to put the person in stories about what he/she does well. This kind of subject of writing solidarizes with topics of one's hobbies, such as various sports or arts the persons have engaged for some time, or simply anything one person enjoys doing. The effective settlement of the topic lies in the understanding that if a person has devoted himself to some things, it is easier to find stories, or concrete materials for pervasive purposes (Lee, 1987; Lovejoy, 2009). Best of all, the things often have produced feelings and plenty of ideas to communicate about, motivate students to make effective and persuasive argument. This exemplifies topics familiar producing both spiritual and concrete unity, with rhetorical techniques, I find it facilitates effective essays and reflective and critical thinking (Hidi & McLaren, 1991). Writing with topic familiarity does confront critical thinking, and it is always new ideas that we argue for through essays with exertion by rhetorical and cognitive vigor.

Implementation and Conclusion

Topics of familiarity such as topics embedded in personal experience and self-subjects does privilege students to reach evidence sufficiency with authority for writing with new ideas through essays. Essays as means of creation and of writing products with valuable ideas relies on the writers' cognitive maturity with topic knowledge. Essay writing represents a profession that lives on argumentative skills by challenging misperceptions, superficial or copious thinking. Most writers live on argumentations through essays to get their ideas through, and so are student writers taught to do in their first steps of learning to write.

Experienced writing instruction often encourages students to write with topic familiarity in order to entail structural accuracy with logical reasoning in delivering new ideas with concrete argument. This ethnographical case research on more than a decade's practice with a freshman writing course has based on such a setting. It has addressed the rationale of starting up freshman writing courses with topic familiarity, aiming for hand-on applications for new or inexperienced instructors. The main rationale resides in the stability

that topic familiarity gives basis for writing knowledge new to first-year EFL/ESL students who have little English writing experience. When instruction can strike a balance act on topic familiarity for idea creation and distributional typographical structure of argumentation, the first-year students can produce effective paragraphs and short essays, which lays important foundation and steps for students to move on to more academic writing tasks and topics of less familiarity in writing for their higher education and professional life.

For inexperienced writing instructors to solve the problems and resolve the challenges confronting the first-year students' learning of writing, this ethnographical analysis suggests both writing instruction and instructors should activate writing curricula to stabilize the balance between the new learning of writing knowledge with topic familiarity in developing student writers' authorial role and argumentative skills for their future writing. Relying on topic familiarity for student writers to make sense of content and format knowledge through writing short essays, proves to be a move forward for curricula to embrace explicit writing knowledge for students' writing perspectives.

Writing research and experienced practice has prepared for such curriculum movement to ease the anxiety and resistance caused by the uncertainty when freshman writing lacks of a comprehensive curricular guidance for writing instruction (Hillocks, Jr, 2005; Graham, 2019). This ethnographical research outcome on the EFL/ESL freshman writing offers a curricular idea that encourages instructors to take advantages of topic familiarity in order to balance it with unfamiliar territories of freshmen's learning of writing. The idea for the curricular act and classroom application will transform freshman writing, by taking place with genre and argumentation practice together with topic familiarity, to entail persuasive writing with critical thinking for new ideas in educating future writers.

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