

## **EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF FREE WRITING IN A COLLEGE LEVEL WRITING COURSE**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Freewriting, a popular method used to improve writing fluency, allows students to unleash their thoughts, and ideas flow onto the page without inhibition. However, few studies on freewriting have been conducted in ESL or EFL contexts (Brière, 1966; Cheshire, 1982; Hwang 2010; Potter 2008). Thus, the current study aims to explore learners' perceptions and attitude toward freewriting activities in an academic English writing course and their potential benefits to learners. In addition, this investigation attempts to illustrate if practicing guided freewriting helps improve students' confidence and motivation in English writing. Forty-two college-level students in Taiwan participated in this study. A survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics to investigate how students perceive freewriting in terms of their perception, confidence, motivation, and writing fluency in English writing. The findings showed that practicing guided freewriting for 16 weeks had a positive effect on English writing in general. Most students agreed that practicing guided freewriting had a positive effect on their confidence and motivation in English writing. The results provide pedagogical suggestions for future academic English writing course design.*

**KEYWORDS:** Writing fluency, writing anxiety, Freewriting, EFL writing, Writing motivation

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the field of teaching English to speakers of other language, writing reflects the linguistic competence of a language learner's grammatical concept, vocabulary knowledge, and idiom application (Ismail, 2011). These learners are usually required to produce a certain amount of writing examples with a certain level of grammatical and spelling accuracy. Writing courses aim to develop the students' composition with well-structured results in order to meet academic requirements. The majority of textbooks adopted for the academic English writing course of the Department of Applied English focus on grammar, sentence structure, and paragraph structure training.

One of the problems for such a curriculum design is that students often worry about grammatical correctness and format while they write. They either feel limited or struggle to express themselves in English writing. According to Liao and Wong (2010), Taiwanese students regard writing as drills in which they list correct sentences that they have memorized from books or articles. To increase writers' intrinsic motivation, Liao and Wong suggested that writers need the opportunity to freely express their feelings and opinions to empower them to gain ownership of their writing.

When EFL students encounter difficulties during their writing process, one of the strategies often used to help them improve their writing is to develop their writing fluency (MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1991). Hwang (2010) supported this idea by pointing out that it is also important to focus on developing English writing fluency rather than just promoting grammatical accuracy. Writing fluency refers to the composing rate in terms of the chunk of the sentences students can write during a certain period of time (Latiff, 2008). Brand & Brand (2006) explained that fluency involves completing writing effortlessly, without hesitation; writing examples are produced with certain level of grammatical accuracy and should be coherent.

Freewriting is a popular method used to improve writing fluency (Nguyen, Van, & Nguyet, 2011). In this method, students are guided to write about a certain topic regardless of grammatical or spelling accuracy. Freewriting focuses the process on finding the writers' value in the topics and their linguistic usage of phrases in expressing specific ideas (Latiff, 2008). According to Hwang (2010), guided freewriting is a good way to help students start a composition. With guidance from the instructor, students can develop a basic concept in paragraph organization and be guided to think critically for their argumentation. The process of guided freewriting could inspire learners to construct their writing in an organized format and to think thoroughly about their points of view. Overall, the freewriting activity in class provides an opportunity for students while shifting the lesson to be learner-centered, giving the learners absolute freedom to write down their ideas within a limited time frame.

The current study is based on the framework of guided freewriting in which students receive assigned topics and should jot down their thoughts. This investigation attempted to establish empirical data on the benefits of applying guided freewriting in class and to explore students' perceptions and attitudes toward freewriting activities. To this end, the researchers address the following research questions: 1)What are participants'

perceptions about the freewriting activity in the academic English writing course? ; and  
2) What are the participants' attitudes toward the freewriting activity in the academic English writing course?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Writing is considered an important skill for EFL/ESL learners because it reflects the learners' grammatical knowledge applied to their written ideas in their target language. Furthermore, writing skill ensures the students' academic success (Ismail, 2011). However, most EFL learners admit that writing is the most challenging language skill to learn (Erkan & Saban, 2011). Many learners are afraid of writing and worry about what to write in their target language. This writing apprehension often has a negative impact on the students and prevents them from producing more writing (Krause, 1994). In Erkan and Saban's (2011) study, writers' self-efficacy and writing performance were correlated with their self-confidence.

EFL learners' perceptions of writing activities could influence their writing production in a relative way (Ismail, 2011). By using guided freewriting, the instruction could develop a specific outline for learners to follow while writing tips could help reduce learners' anxiety. Alnufaie and Grenfell (2012) found that the freewriting process facilitates learners' expression and their ability to transform concepts into sentences. Freewriting does not focus on linear and organized paragraphs; rather, it emphasizes the students' creative process and their descriptive competence. This method is also called the process-oriented writing instruction, in which the learners' cognition and their development of writing fluency are the goals of teaching rather than formulated structure and linguistic accuracy.

A similar teaching strategy to the process-oriented method that facilitates EFL students' writing and reinforces their personality is blog writing (Wu, 2005). Wu conducted a study about using blogs in an EFL writing class. The results showed that the students gained not only more critical thinking, but also creativity. Although the findings also indicated a lack of improvement of participants' writing accuracy and their paragraph organization, Wu suggested that the frequent use of blogs could inspire learners to have stronger motivation in expressing their views, and blog writing could place students in a situation in which the use of a dictionary is necessary if their comments are intended to be understood.

Hwang (2010) investigated writing fluency and students' confidence, concluding that some students could misunderstand the purpose of freewriting despite doing well in the writing class. These students might have wanted specific feedback from the instructor on the accuracy of grammar and seemed dissatisfied on their questionnaire due to the lack of feedback. However, the analysis of Hwang's questionnaire showed that students' writing fluency was improved in the guided freewriting framework compared with participants' mean differences. The questionnaire also indicated that participants' confidence overall increased, although some students still acted as if they lacked confidence due to their needs for reassurances about grammar. According to Hwang, most participants showed improvement in writing fluency on their writing assignment. In light of these findings, it will be interesting to investigate how the participants in the current study perceived the influence of freewriting on their writing skill.

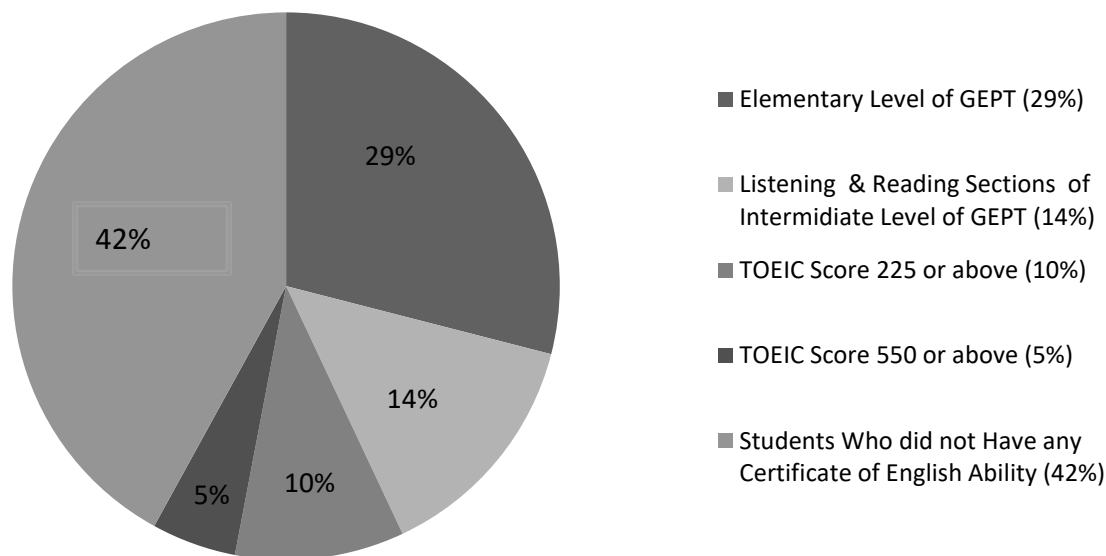
## **METHODOLOGY**

This study attempted to explore participants' conceptions of and attitudes toward the freewriting activity in an academic English writing course. This section introduces participants' background, the course design, the instrument, and the data analysis.

### **Research Setting and Participants**

The present study was conducted at a technological university in central Taiwan. Forty-two third-year students from the Department of Applied English were surveyed to investigate their perceptions and attitudes regarding the implementation of in-class freewriting activity. The respondents were selected from students who had completed the course Academic English Writing III, taught by the researcher.

Twelve of the participants had acquired elementary level on the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) administered by The Language Training & Testing Center (LTTC), and six had passed the listening and reading part of the intermediate level of GEPT. On the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) administered by the Educational Testing Service, four of the participants had reached the elementary level and two had reached the intermediate level. The other participants had no certificates of English ability.



**Figure 1. Participants' Certificates on English Proficiency Tests**

### Course Design

This course, which met for two hours each week, was aimed at enabling students to develop well-organized texts in different types of academic writing and to build strong academic writing skills. The curriculum focused primarily on details of language use, sentence structure, grammar, mechanics, and content and paragraph organization related to different genres of writings. Following Ong & Zhang's (2010) suggestion, the instructor tried to establish a learner-centered and less-threatening classroom context to reduce writing anxiety. Thus, a process-oriented teaching approach was applied, meaning the course focused more on the writing process than the results of writing; this approach can be helpful to relieve anxiety. The teaching method includes lectures, in-class activities, and one-to-one writing conferences. During writing conferences, the instructor gave the students a great deal of feedback on grammar, with detailed explanations for each student's writing assignments.

### Freewriting Activity

In addition, students were required to participate in a 10-minute in-class freewriting activity at the beginning of every class meeting. During the first class meeting of the course, the students received detailed explanations as to what guided freewriting is, how they should do it, and why it is beneficial for them to improve their English writing skills, including writing fluency. Moreover, students were told that each freewriting

activity would be graded and count for 1 point of their final grade. During every class meeting, the students were given 10 minutes to do freewriting on a given topic. Students were given a specific topic, followed by sub-questions to write about. Usually, a couple of pictures or photos related to the topic were also provided to help students visualize the assigned topics. Throughout the freewriting sessions over the 18 weeks, no feedback was given on either grammar or content; however, sometimes the class had a small conversation and follow-up activity about the topic after the freewriting activity. Students were required to compose at least 16 freewriting entries in order to ensure an adequate degree of immersion with this activity.

### **Instrument and Data Analysis**

The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire. The 22 items on the questionnaire were constructed based on the research questions of this study. The items were grouped in such a way so as to address the three areas of students' writing habits, perceptions of in-class freewriting activities, and attitudes toward it. The instrument was separated into four sections: Section A, Section B, Section C, and Section D. Section A included three items to understand the participants' general writing habit. Section B included 14 about participants' perceptions of the freewriting activity. Section C contained four items designed to survey their attitudes toward the freewriting activity. Finally, Section D included an open-ended question to access their suggestions about the freewriting activity. The study applied a 4-point Likert scale for items on Sections A, B, and C: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. The 4-point scale was used to eliminate the neutral point in order to elicit a definite decision; this approach provided a better measure of the intensity of participants' attitudes or opinions. The data collected were interpreted into percentages and means to describe students' perceptions and attitudes about participating in the in-class freewriting activity.

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The first part of the findings presents the writing habits of participants. The second part reports their perceptions about the freewriting activity. The next section highlights their attitudes toward the freewriting activity in the course. Finally, open-ended responses are discussed to illustrate their experience and suggestions for the freewriting activity.

### Students' Writing Habits

As indicated in Table 1, the majority of the participants (83%) often write in their native language, which is Chinese. Based on the second item, only 19% of the participants write in English for pleasure. Responses to item 3 are consistent with those to item 2: Most participants claimed that they do not write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English. The results from the analysis of the first section suggest that the majority of participants are not used to writing in English in addition to meeting the academic requirements.

**Table 1. Participants' Writing Habits**

Statement	Percentage (Frequency)			
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I often write in my native language.(Chinese/Mandarin)	2% (1)	15% (6)	57% (24)	26% (11)
2. I write in English for pleasure in my free time (e.g., Facebook posts, diary).	33% (14)	48% (20)	19% (8)	0% (0)
3. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	33% (14)	48% (20)	19% (8)	0% (0)

### Participants' Perceptions of the Freewriting Activity

Table 2 summarizes participants' reactions to the 14 statements related to their freewriting experience in the class in terms of 1) topics and topic arrangement, 2) writing fluency, 3) confidence, and 4) motivation.

#### *Topics and topic arrangement*

Based on the students' responses, 91% of the participants liked the variety of topics assigned in the freewriting activity. In addition, 93% of them thought the sub-topics helped/guided them to write more English sentences. Finally, 96% of them thought the photos and images provided in the freewriting activity helped them visualize the topics. Thus, it is obvious that the majority of participants liked the way the topics were presented.

#### *Writing fluency*

The data indicated that 90% of the participants thought the freewriting activity in this course was good practice for generating more ideas for writing and 91% of them

thought the freewriting activity was helpful for developing writing fluency.

### ***Confidence***

In terms of the difficulty of the topics, 24% of participants strongly agreed and 57% agreed that it was not difficult to write about the assigned freewriting topics. The remaining 19% disagreed with the statement. Regarding time management, 9% strongly agreed and 50% agreed that they were confident and able to complete the freewriting task within 10 minutes. The remaining 41% disagreed to with the statement. The data suggest that more time should be provided to participants to enable them to complete the task. However, 85% of the participants claimed that they felt free while doing the freewriting in class. The remaining 15% disagreed with the statement. Overall, in the confidence category of the perception questions, 85% of the participants thought they had more confidence in English writing after taking this course; only 15% disagreed with the statement. This can be validated by the last statement (item 13), which showed that 29% strongly agreed and 62% agreed that they can easily write more sentences after engaging in the freewriting activities during the semester. Only 9% of participants disagreed with this statement.

### ***Motivation***

The majority of the participants had positive responses to the motivation category. The data for the four question items were very consistent, with 91% percent of participants agreeing that they tried their best to write more, looked forward to the freewriting activity, enjoyed the freewriting topics, felt that they liked English writing after taking this course. Meanwhile, consistently 9% disagreed with these four statements.

As these results indicate, the majority of participants liked the topics and how they were arranged. Participants' writing fluency was improved by engaging in freewriting activities. The results about participants' confidence in the freewriting activities were mixed, but most participants were confident about their ability to complete the tasks. Regarding the motivation questions, the data suggest that the majority of participants were motivated when they engaged in the freewriting activities.



**Table 2. Participants' Perceptions about the Freewriting Activity**

Statement	Percentage (Frequency)			
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
4. I like the variety of topics the freewriting activity offered every class meeting.	0% (0)	9% (4)	76% (32)	15% (6)
5. The sub-topics of the freewriting activity guide/help me to write more.	0% (0)	7% (3)	41% (17)	52% (22)
6. The photos and images that are provided in the freewriting activity help me to visualize the topics.	0% (0)	4% (2)	48% (20)	48% (20)
7. I think the freewriting activity in this course is a good practice for generating more ideas for writing.	0% (0)	10% (4)	52% (22)	38% (16)
8. I think the freewriting activity helps me to develop writing fluency.	0% (0)	9% (4)	43% (18)	48% (20)
9. It is not difficult for me to write about the assigned freewriting topics.	0% (0)	19% (8)	57% (24)	24% (10)
10. I am confident that I am able to complete the freewriting activity within 10 minutes.	5% (2)	36% (15)	50% (21)	9% (4)
11. I feel free when I do the freewriting.	0% (0)	15% (6)	66% (28)	19% (8)
12. I feel that I have more confidence in English writing in general after taking this course.	0% (0)	15% (6)	61% (26)	24% (10)
13. I think I can easily write more sentences after engaging in the freewriting activity for a semester.	0% (0)	9% (4)	62% (26)	29% (12)
14. I try my best to write more when I do the freewriting activity.	0% (0)	9% (4)	67% (28)	24% (10)
15. I look forward to doing the freewriting before the class meeting starts.	0% (0)	9% (4)	76% (32)	15% (6)
16. I enjoy doing the freewriting activity for this English writing course.	0% (0)	9% (4)	76% (32)	15% (6)
17. I feel that I like English writing after taking this course.	0% (0)	9% (4)	67% (28)	24% (10)

**Table 3. Attitudes toward Freewriting Activity**

Statement	Percentage (Frequency)			
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
18. The freewriting activity can motivate me to write English composition.	0% (0)	5% (2)	76% (32)	19% (8)
19. The freewriting activity is an effective way of teaching English writing.	0% (0)	7% (3)	64% (27)	29% (12)
20. The freewriting activity helps to improve the quality of my academic English writing.	0% (0)	7% (3)	64% (27)	29% (12)
21. The freewriting activity helps to increase the quantity of my English writing.	0% (0)	7% (3)	69% (29)	24% (10)

### Attitudes toward Freewriting Activity

Based on the findings summarized in Table 3, most participants had a positive attitude toward freewriting. Indeed, 95% agreed that the freewriting activity motivated them to write English compositions. The data from the remaining three question items were very consistent. They all showed 93% of positive responses. In other words, most participants thought that the freewriting activity was an effective way to teach English writing. In addition, most believed that the freewriting activities helped improve the quality of their academic English writing and increased the quantity of their English writing. This finding suggests that freewriting should be incorporated into the teaching of writing in the classroom.

### Open-ended Question

Table 4 lists the participants' feedback for the open-ended question. Approximately half (N = 23; 55%) of participants provided feedback. The qualitative data indicated that participants enjoyed writing in a freewriting manner and they felt at ease when doing it. They liked the sub-topics, which supports the data in the perception category. It is also interesting to note that participants pointed out that they love to write about their stories and experiences so they liked topics related to them.

**Table 4. Summary of Responses for Open-ended Questions**

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**Questions:** 22. What do you like about freewriting activity? Any suggestions?

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**Student 1:** I can write different topics every class and I won't be judged for making any grammatical errors. I hope I have more time to write.

**Student 2:** I can write whatever I want. I hope I can write my own topic.

**Student 3:** I like this activity before I love the freedom and the comfortable atmosphere. No suggestion.

**Student 4:** I like freewriting because it makes us have more imagination. No suggestions.

**Student 5:** It improves my writing a lot. I need more time to do freewriting. I want different topics to write.

**Student 6:** like the sub-topics because it helps me to know what I can write. Perfect, no suggestion.

**Student 7:** I like this activity because I can practice my writing. Sometime I think I need more time to write. I can't do it for 10 minutes.

**Student 8:** I like freewriting because I can reflect my life.

**Student 9:** I love freewriting because I can learn to write more sentences. very good!

**Student 10:** I love the sub-topics, it guides me to write more and let me have more ideas to write.

**Student 11:** I love to write about our lives because it is interesting.

**Student 12:** It can train my writing skills.

**Student 13:** I like to write about my life. I don't feel any pressure when I do freewriting.

**Student 14:** Sometimes I want to write my own topic because sometime I don't have any idea.

**Student 15:** I love to sharing my experience or feeling with my teacher. It trains my English writing.

**Student 16:** I feel eased when I write the freewriting.

**Student 17:** I like to write freewriting in class because I write faster in class.

**Student 18:** I think the topic is very important. If I get an interesting topic, I can write a long article. Sometimes I feel happy when I do write freewriting.

**Student 19:** I prefer to write assigned topics because it gives me more ideas. I feel eased when I write it.

**Student 20:** I like assigned topics because I don't have to think about the topics. I can have many ideas in assigned topics.

**Student 21:** I like the different topics because it makes me more imagination.

**Student 22:** I think freewriting makes me write faster and easier. I

**Student 23:** It was very difficult for me to write before but now I can write easily. This is because of freewriting and writing course.

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## CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggested that the participants had positive perceptions about their freewriting experience in the class. They also indicated a positive attitude toward applying freewriting in the class. Obviously, the participants perceived freewriting as

an effective way to teach writing, which helped improve their writing and keep them motivated.

These results can be used to offer some suggestions for teaching. It would be beneficial for instructors to follow up freewriting with group sharing. The freewriting can range from traditional notebooks to online journals. The number of freewriting activities can be increased to three times a week to ensure that students have enough practice time. Finally, students will have more control if they can decide their own topics. Teachers should avoid feedback and error correction in order to create a free, nonthreatening atmosphere for students to write.

Due to the time constraints, this study might have some limitations, which are presented here. First, it would have been much more valuable to analyze participants' writings to determine their improvement in writing fluency. Second, although the results suggest that freewriting helped students gain confidence in their English writing, they are not sufficient for describing how freewriting helped increase their confidence. Therefore, conducting interviews would probably enhance the conclusions of this study.

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