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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER



To have or not to have Choice in Writing Topics and Positions

*Mehran Memari * Bahare Zamani*

Department of English Language Teaching, Farhangian University, Tehran, Iran

ABSTRACT

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choice, preference, Grounded Theory, thematic analysis, motivation, argumentative writing

Corresponding author:

memari_english001@yahoo.com

The prevailing assumption in education is that students should have the ability to choose their writing topics and positions. However, this belief lacks substantial empirical evidence. To investigate these further, Semi-structured interviews with 40 male students in the field of English Language Teaching in Farhangian University who had completed two argumentative writing assignments in a university course were conducted. One assignment allowed them to choose their writing position, while the other assignment had the position assigned to them. These students were in their second to third year of study and possessed above-average writing skills. Our interview protocol focused on exploring their evolving perspectives on choice as a motivating factor in this specific writing assignment. Applying a grounded theory approach to thematic analysis, it became evident that students believed they should be able to choose their writing topics because they were more likely to be interested in them and had a better understanding of the subject matter. They also perceived that choice enhanced their motivation and the quality of their writing, ultimately influencing their grades. While most students in the study expressed a preference for choice, they also recognized several advantages of not having choice. These included the opportunity to enhance their writing skills, develop new perspectives, and cultivate tenacity in their writing.

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1- Introduction

The ability to write well is essential for success in the classroom, at work, and in the community (e.g., social networks). In addition to demonstrating their acquired knowledge, students use writing to learn as a means of organizing, exploring, and processing new content (Graham, 2006; Klein, et al., 2016). Due to this, less proficient writers have a lower chance of success in the classroom and at work (Graham, 2006). Most students in the United States lack the ability to write proficiently, despite the importance of writing to many life outcomes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Also included are students who are headed for university, not just those in elementary or secondary schools. As a matter of fact, an increasing number of university students are unable to write at the collegiate level (College Board, 2017) for a number of reasons, including the fact that writing is a complex, difficult task that requires discipline, effort, knowledge, and skill (e.g., Graham, 2018; Hayes, 2012; Hayes & Flowers, 1980; Kellogg, 1986; Kellogg, 2008). In addition to students' declining interest in writing and a decline in their ability to focus while writing, writing difficulties can also contribute to negative feelings about writing and writing performance (Cleary, 1991; Wright et al., 2021). For this reason, motivational strategies are important for encouraging and supporting students to write (Graham, 2018). As writing is a challenging activity, it might be possible to motivate students by allowing them to choose their writing topic and position.

In addition to serving as a means of reflection on personal experiences, writing can also lead to a better understanding of one's evolving identity and new viewpoint. Writing an argumentative essay is one way to gain new perspectives (Neely, 2014). A better understanding of content can be obtained by considering alternative perspectives through argumentation (Ferretti & Fan, 2016). A key aspect of academic writing includes argumentative writing; it also improves conceptual understanding of the subject (Wiley & Voss, 1999). Furthermore, it is a method that is used to address controversial topics through mechanisms such as debating topics, persuading others of alternate viewpoints, and resolving conflicts (van Eemeren et al., 2014). As a result of writing argumentatively, students are able to evaluate competing ideas, evaluate the reasons and evidences for them, and develop rational conclusions based upon their evaluations (Klein et al., 2016).

1-1. Self-Determination Theory and Intrinsic Motivation

Based on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), choice provides a useful lens through which to describe intrinsic motivation. The theory of self-determination allows individuals to exercise their ability to decide what they want and need, enhancing their intrinsic motivation by providing opportunities to meet their needs and wants (Deci, 1980). It has been shown that increasing motivation is associated with heightened task persistence and improved performance across a variety of contexts, including the classroom (e.g., Fischer et al., 2019; Fishbach et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2012; Papaioannou et al., 2006). According to Howard and colleagues (2021), intrinsic motivation is associated with improved academic performance. Having intrinsic motivation to interact with the environment leads to learning, academic growth, and mastery (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Patall et al., 2008).

According to self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation and psychological fulfillment require autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In order to feel connected to members of the educational community, as well as to feel in control (autonomy) to successfully complete an assignment (competence), students should feel intrinsically motivated to learn and complete academic tasks because they are being able to fulfill their self-determination needs. In terms of self-determination psychological needs, autonomy is most closely tied to choice, as autonomy requires volitional action to fulfill (Patall, 2012). It has been shown that intrinsic motivation is enhanced when students feel autonomous and have control over their choices (Patall, et al., 2008). Thus, it should come as no surprise that choice enhances motivation in educational settings (Hall & Webb, 2014; Patall, et al., 2010), improves academic performance and feelings of competence (Aitken et al., 2022; Patall et al., 2010; Royer et al., 2017); and decreases problem behaviors (Hall & Webb, 2014; Lane et al., 2015; Royer et al., 2017; Vaughn & Horner, 1997). Students' perceptions of autonomy and intrinsic motivation were compared in Hall and Webb (2014). Physicists who support autonomy in their students (i.e., provide opportunities for independent decision-making) have higher academic performance, intrinsic motivation, and interest in physics (Hall & Webb, 2014). Patall and colleagues (2010) found that students who were randomly assigned to a no-choice condition performed better on related unit tests if they had the

choice between two similar homework assignments. This resulted in a positive impact on intrinsic motivation and feelings of competence when completing homework assignments.

1-2. Choice and Preference

As intrinsic motivation plays an important role in learning and literacy, educators should use methods to increase student motivation, such as choice (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Flowerday & Schraw, 2000; Patall, et al., 2008). It is important to note, however, that choice and motivation have complex relationships. In some research studies, there has been a challenge to the notion that choice is an effective tool for motivating positive behavior and other desired outcomes (e.g., Flowerday, et al., 2004). There is some evidence that choice has no impact on motivation, or even a negative impact, depending on the choice, situation, or individual (Patall, 2012). It has been shown that individuals who feel autonomous can make better choices than those who are pressured into making decisions (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). It is also important to consider the number of choices available when making a decision (Patall, 2012). Furthermore, individual factors (e.g., age, education) and the circumstances (for example, the scenario occurs in a realistic setting instead of a lab) can affect outcomes. It is also suggested that younger individuals (Patall et al., 2008) and those with lower educational levels may benefit more from choice (Snibbe & Markus, 2005).

Our understanding of choice is complicated by a related, but distinct construct called preference. According to choice literature, it is unclear whether the autonomy one experiences from choosing makes choice effective. The individual may benefit from choice if they get what they prefer. However, when studying the effects of choice on students, it is possible to receive one's preference without selecting. The random assignment of participants to a choice or no-choice condition is a common procedure in choice studies. Students in the choice condition are given the option of choosing their course of action (e.g., writing an essay in favor of or against a particular topic), whereas students in the control condition are "yoked" to the decision made by the student in the choice condition (i.e., write in favor of the topic). The control condition student who "preferred" to write favorably about the topic would be viewed as receiving their

preference without choice. So, choice refers to making a choice and preference refers to receiving a desired option.

In general, individuals are more likely to be autonomous and intrinsically motivated when their choices reflect their personal preferences, interests, and values (Cordova & Lepper, 1999; Katz & Assor, 2007; Patall, 2012; Tafarodi et al., 2002). One's choice, however, determines the person's preference, because when one chooses, they receive it. Choice effects have rarely been examined in terms of whether they follow from the act of choosing itself. They are instead a consequence of receiving one's preferences among the choices. It has been found in quantitative studies that situational interest may be more important than choice effect (Flowerday & Shell, 2015; Wilde et al., 2019), indicating that receiving one's preference is more important than choosing it. Educators need to understand how students perceive choice versus preference to provide optimal learning opportunities. However, no qualitative studies compare students' perceptions of choice versus preference. These phenomena were discussed with university students in the current study.

Most educators believe that giving students a choice of what they write is beneficial, especially for students who are less interested in writing (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000). The research literature supports a variety of results (Bonzo, 2008), including positive effects (Flowerday et al., 2004), negative effects (Flowerday et al., 2004), as well as both positive and null effects (Kim & Kim, 2016). There was little evidence in research that choice effects writing outcomes in most quantitative studies (Barry, et al., 1997; Carroll & Feng, 2010; Edwards & Juliebo, 1989; Flowerday & Schraw 2003; Gabrielson, et al., 1995; Myers, 2002; Schraw, et al., 1998). It is limited to one study on qualitative writing choice (Erwin, 2002), which compared two elementary school teachers' writing practices and found that unrestricted choice provides students with powerful opportunities to use writing to resolve difficult life situations (e.g., alcoholic parent, divorce).

University students' perceptions of choice in writing were investigated in this study when using writing to explore and understand controversial topics in a particular subject area (i.e., special education). Our research focused on understanding how students make

choices when completing such assignments. It was expected that students would express that they had multiple choices and were motivated to make choices. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) dictates that they will feel autonomous when they choose, which is more valuable than merely receiving their preferences. Furthermore, we anticipated that students would identify several reasons why deciding on a topic and position for writing is important, including the ability to choose topics and positions that interest them (Cordova & Lepper, 1996), as well as selecting topics and positions where they possess the necessary knowledge to generate ideas (Graham, 2006). As a result of this study, something unique has been done. According to our knowledge, this is the first study examining university students' views on writing choices and preferences. It also explores how and why they viewed these constructs as influencing their writing.

2- Methodology

2-1. Context

In two 75-minute lectures, two case studies were presented to explore controversial issues (e.g., helping an orphan student who has financial problems). The participants were given time to read through scenario. For the first assignment, half of the students were randomly assigned to choose a side of the topic to defend (e.g., writing a letter to convince his mother to accept financial support). Half of the students were told which side they should defend. In the second assignment, this was changed so that each student had a chance to choose a position once, and was assigned a position in the other time.

A timed, structured discussion activity was then conducted in three stages after students had chosen or been assigned their writing positions, as modified from Kuhn and Crowell (2011). To generate ideas, debate counterarguments, and plan essays, they worked in pairs and small groups. The writing prompt was presented to students after the discussion exercises. They had 25 minutes to write in class after which they were instructed to submit their essays online. Participation was the only basis for student grades. We did, however, score essays in two phases in order to determine holistic writing quality. According to the 12th-grade holistic scoring guidelines in persuasive writing, all papers were scored on a 1 to 6 point-Likert-type scale (Cooper, 1997; White,

1985; Williamson, 1993). During phase two, the raters reviewed all essays at each score value (e.g., 4) and assessed whether they were equal to the score (e.g., 3), slightly higher (e.g., 4+), or slightly lower (e.g., 4-). As a result, a scale of 18 points was developed (Penny et al., 2000). The essays were scored by the researcher and research assistants after they were trained. Phase one training reliability was 94.58%, and phase two training reliability was 91.28%. A total of 97.65% (phase one) and 95.23% (phase two) of essay scores were reliable.

Students were asked to indicate if they were interested in participating in an interview at the end of the in-class lectures and writing sessions. An informed consent form was sent via email to interest students, and they were encouraged to ask any questions before the interview.

2-2. Participants

The purpose of this study was to analyze how students' perceptions of choice influence their writing experience by interviewing a subset (n=40) of students who were present for writing sessions. Student-teachers interviewed were mostly male and had above-average writing quality scores from the first essay. More details can be found in Table 1. Using purposeful sampling (Singleton & Straits, 2005), interviewees were selected (a) across different course sections (b), based on whether they were in the choice condition in the first or second session, and (c) based on whether they received their preferred position during the no-choice condition. The interviewees were carefully selected based on their writing quality scores, however, students with lower scores were less likely to respond to e-mail invitations or keep their appointment.

Table 1.
Participant Characteristics

Participants	Writing Quality Score	Year	Participants	Writing Quality Score	Year
1	10	2	21	12	3
2	12	2	22	17	2
3	12	2	23	11	2
4	17	3	24	13	2
5	8	2	25	13	2
6	13	2	26	14	2
7	11	2	27	15	3
8	12	2	28	12	2
9	9	2	29	13	2
10	13	3	30	9	2
11	8	3	31	9	3
12	11	2	32	10	2
13	14	2	33	15	3
14	11	3	34	10	3
15	13	3	35	13	2
16	9	2	36	11	2
17	10	2	37	13	3
18	13	3	38	15	2
19	9	3	39	10	2
20	12	3	40	9	3

Note. Scores are out of 18, higher scores represent better writing.

2-3. Data Collection

A 30- to 40-minute, semi-structured, in-person interview was conducted by the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions of choice in writing and their experiences of having and not having choice. Table 2 shows the results. A professional transcription service recorded and transcribed all interviews verbatim. The accuracy of all transcripts was verified before coding.

Table 2.*Interview Conducting Protocol*

Research Items	Questions
What is the manner in which university students discuss the aspect of decision-making when it comes to writing assignments at the university level?	<p>What are your general sentiments regarding the opportunity to make choices?</p> <p>Additionally, could you please share your experiences with other assignments where you had some degree of choice? How did you feel about having the freedom to make choices in those instances?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> The ability to select which books to review, decide which questions to answer on a test, and choose research topics.</p>
When discussing the concept of choice in writing, how do university students differentiate between choice and preference?	<p>Could you share your experiences with other writing assignments in which you had the opportunity to exercise some degree of choice? How did you perceive or feel about having the freedom to make choices in those specific writing tasks?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> What was the significance or importance of having that freedom of choice?</p> <p>How does your perception of writing vary across different environments or settings?</p>
What are the primary reasons that students consider choices to be significant in the context of writing?	<p>In what ways do you believe that having the option to make choices influenced your overall experience with this particular writing activity?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> Writing quality, writing motivation</p> <p>Could you describe other writing assignments in which you had the opportunity to exercise some degree of choice? What were your thoughts and feelings about having that freedom to make choices in those specific writing tasks?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> Composition course</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> Quality, motivation</p>
In what manner do students converse about the advantages or positive aspects of having limitations on choice in writing?	<p>Do you enjoy having choices in your assignments? Can you provide some examples to illustrate your experiences?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> Quality? Motivation?</p>

After each interview, the researcher wrote memos to gain insights and assure trustworthy inferences within 24 hours of each to ensure analytic insights (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Maxwell, 2013; Tracy, 2013). The memos were re-evaluated after reading the transcripts, listening to the interviews, and throughout the analysis. By doing so, he was able to compare her initial impressions with his emerging views about the research aims, the data, and the interviewees. His writings, for example, describe one of the participants as immature and cocky, and she wonders if more students with low writing scores will believe that they are confident/good writers. As he contemplated the why of his anger, he wrote another memo. In the weeks following the interview, he

asked her thought partner (see Researcher Subjectivity and Validity) about his possible emotional state. Initially, it was suggested that that specific participant was acting oppositionally without a reason. Their response was to review these memos and listen to the interview with him when they pushed back on the contention. His oppositional nature was abandoned through the researcher's reflection on previous memoranda and other data.

2-4. Data Reduction and Analysis

A three-step process of primary coding, axial coding, and constant-comparative analysis was used (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The researcher coded at the primary level using mostly open, descriptive codes using in vivo coding methods (Saldaña, 2016; Tracy, 2013) as well as a priori codes for “quality” and “motivation.” After coding 20 of the 40 interviews, he alternated between linear and open coding, continuously comparing (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) the current coding structure and noting potential new codes and how the codes overlapped. The data were organized around axial codes, while additional codes emerged as needed when he fluctuated between open and axial coding.

According to Tracy (2013), he categorized 57 codes into the following hierarchical codes during axial coding: (a) five motivation codes (general motivation, interest, difficulty, knowledge, autonomy), four quality codes (general quality, interest, difficulty, knowledge), and three benefits of no choice (perseverance, better writing, new perceptions). In an iterative process, he compiled a codebook that included examples, code definitions, and primary codes. A total of 12 codes were included in the final codebook.

By using the constant-comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), he sorted, organized, and analyzed the data to make connections between other quotes, categories, and ideas. As part of this process, he wrote analytical memos to formulate higher-level analytical meanings based on the data (Miles et al., 2014).

2-5. Researcher Subjectivity and Validity

Having taught third-grade students at the university, the researcher was convinced that choice is an essential motivational and pedagogical tool. The more choices he offered his 2nd year students, the more control they felt, which led to a higher level of interest and motivation. His second assignment in the introductory special education course was to create the instructional procedure for this study. His previous university students provided positive feedback on pilot testing these procedures, but these experiences may have created a bias regarding the value of the in-class discussion and writing activities. The data collection, analysis, and interpretation may have been affected by this bias.

In order to ensure the findings were trustworthy and free of bias, several steps were taken. An initial step in the study was to record interviews and listen to the recordings throughout the data analysis to determine the meaning of tone and pauses. Secondly, he wrote memos documenting his reflexive interpretation of the data during the coding and analysis process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Maxwell, 2013; Tracy, 2013). Third, the researcher triangulated the data using multiple sources (i.e., recorded interviews, interview transcripts, codebook, memos) to establish credibility. As a fourth step in the data collection and data analysis process, trusted colleagues familiar with qualitative research procedures were frequently involved in discussions to guide data collection and data analysis. Fifth, the co-researcher, an expert in the field of writing, was provided with student statements and analytic inferences by the researcher. In this way, meaning could be made. In the sixth step, the researcher discussed almost all aspects of this study, including the collection of data, the analysis of data, inferences, and findings, with the co-researcher. In nearly every coding session, the researcher interviewed students and shared his observations and insights. When it was uncertain whether the researcher might be experiencing researcher drift, the co-researcher read excerpts from interviews. The steps taken were designed to guard against threats that could undermine the validity of the results (Maxwell, 2013).

3- Results

Students at university often experience a new level of freedom for the first time in their lives. First time in their lives, these students must make a multitude of decisions every day, including when to eat, where to go, and what to do. We live in a world full of choices! One of the participants shared anecdotes about how attending university has changed his opportunities for making choices and his life:

It's great to have choices (Laughter). You feel like you're constantly being moved from place to place in high school, middle school, and elementary school. As a kid, you are always told, “[at university] you will have so many more choices and stuff really, really.” Indeed, you do. This is nice to me. That's much better, in my opinion. It is definitely better to have a variety of choices.

With the freedom to choose, students may have developed a stronger sense of identity and expressed themselves more freely, which might have mirrored their newfound university freedom. Interviewees identified four primary reasons for why they found choice in writing important. The majority of students, however, described benefits associated with not selecting this type of assignment. Below is a more detailed exploration of these themes.

3-1. How Participants discuss Choice in writing

All the students agreed that having the option to choose was crucial not only for their writing tasks but also in various other situations. A majority of the students shared their experiences with writing assignments they had during their high school and university years. It is expected, considering that all of the 40 interviewees were either in their second or third year of university. For example, someone said:

In high school, our teachers would assign us creative writing tasks, but then they would impose restrictions on us. As a result, I couldn't fully enjoy the experience

because they were misleading us by calling it "creative writing" while limiting our choices. This negative experience affected my perception of writing. However, now that I'm in college, my English professor encourages more open and expressive writing, allowing us to incorporate our passions and opinions. This has helped me develop a stronger connection with writing.

Most of the participants viewed the restricted writing options they had in high school more unfavorably in contrast to the greater range of choices available to them in university. The increase in options not only provided them with a sense of freedom but also brought about a shift in their attitudes toward writing.

During an interview, the researcher asked one, a second-year university student, about his thoughts on having a writing assignment with an open choice. It became evident that his perception of writing assignments and his sense of autonomy were undergoing a transformation. He responded slowly, his tone reflecting uncertainty, saying, "I was kind of sitting there, like, I don't know what to do? I've never had this much power before?" He further expressed that in previous writing tasks, she seldom had the opportunity to make "minor decisions." Even during the interview, which took place months after the open-choice assignment, he still conveyed surprise at the prospect of being able to select any topic she desired.

Despite the predominantly positive views expressed by the students towards open-choice assignments, six individuals acknowledged that having an abundance of choices could lead to stress due to uncertainty about meeting the professor's expectations. Ten students specifically mentioned that prioritizing autonomy and writing about subjects that interested them outweighed their concerns about pleasing their professors. With regards to topic selection, all but two students discussed their process of seeking guidance from their professor or a peer. Through these consultations, they ultimately concluded that they preferred having the freedom of open choice over being restricted in their writing assignments. However, Two added that even with open choice, having too many options, such as 30 choices, could still be overwhelming.

As a component of the interview procedure, individuals being interviewed were

queried about their involvement in alternative writing tasks. The majority of respondents frequently recounted their experiences in one of the writing courses offered at the university, wherein they were granted the opportunity to explore a wide range of topics of their preference. Despite some assignments imposing certain restrictions, students conveyed a strong sense of autonomy within the presumed boundaries.

Despite the constraint imposed on the writing prompt, one regarded the option to select Maryam Mirzakhani as a subject of great significance. This choice allowed him to delve into the life of a scientific figure who captivated his interest, leading another participant to believe that it ultimately enhanced the overall quality of his essay.

Among the various accounts provided by students regarding their contrasting experiences in high school and university writing, one of the participants recounted a unique situation in his writing course. While expressing the significance of being able to write about a subject he feels passionately about, he briefly mentioned that in his writing class, writing prompts were assigned, limiting their topic choices to a few instances. He acknowledged that while the prompts allowed for choosing a stance on the issue, it technically constituted a form of topic selection. Intrigued by his remark, the researcher probed further into this aspect. He elaborated on the nature of the writing prompts, characterizing them as pre-determined topics already chosen for the students.

In this context, the writing prompts provided a specific topic that the students had to address. While they were given the opportunity to select their stance on the issue, the predetermined prompt required them to write about that particular topic. So, while there was technically a choice in selecting a side of the argument, the students did not have the freedom to select which aspect of the book they wanted to focus on.

The same participant perceived his position selection as lacking genuine significance, despite acknowledging that it technically constituted a choice. In his analysis, he juxtaposed the either-or nature of her writing course with the English courses at the university, where he enjoyed the liberty of selecting any topic he desired. In general, the students emphasized the importance of having choices in writing assignments. When

comparing their experiences in high school and university, most of them noted a significant increase in freedom when it came to choosing their writing topics in university courses. While some students were taken aback, almost all of them (n= 38) expressed positive sentiments about the freedom to choose across various disciplines. Lastly, the same participant perceived his stance on an argumentative writing topic as lacking genuine autonomy due to her inability to select the subject matter for the argumentative paper.

3-2. Choice vs. Preference

While the students initially conveyed their excitement about having the choice to choose their writing topics, a closer examination of the data revealed a more intricate understanding. It became apparent that some students conflated the notions of "choice" and personal "preference". In other words, although they may have stated that "choice" was significant, their remarks indicated that what truly mattered to them was obtaining their preferred side, irrespective of the act of choosing itself. For example, one mentioned that having the option to choose made the writing process more manageable. However, he also noted that if he had been assigned his preferred side, the task would have been easier for him.

Due to the nature of an argumentative paper, the availability of choice between the pros and cons makes the task easier. When I was not granted the opportunity to choose [emphasis added], I found the other side more appealing [emphasis added] because it provided me with more material to write about.

One's perspective offers insight into why certain students may use the term "choice" interchangeably with "preference." While vehemently expressing his aversion to being compelled to consume a popcorn flavor he didn't select, Nico drew a parallel by stating that in the realm of writing, it is beneficial to have the opportunity to choose. By doing so, he asserted that one can ensure they receive a topic of personal interest or, at the very least, a subject they believe they can effectively write about. Therefore, having the freedom to choose is crucial because it enables individuals to obtain what they desire.

In addition to the general confusion among students regarding the terms "choice" and preference," seven participants displayed inconsistencies when describing the significance of choice versus preference in their personal experiences. For example, one initially downplayed the importance of choice, stating that it didn't have a significant impact because he was assigned his preferred position. However, later in the interview, he expressed that making a choice made him more invested and emotionally connected to that particular side of the argument. As a result, he stated that he argued more passionately during the discussion phase and generated better ideas. Furthermore, twenty other students explicitly expressed whether choosing or receiving their preference held greater importance to them.

3-2-1. Preference

Four students expressed that receiving their preferred writing position held greater importance to them than the act of choosing. One of them, who was not assigned his preferred position in the non-choice scenario, strongly emphasized the significance of obtaining his preferred side. He stated that receiving his preferred position was the most important factor to him; because he had more ideas to support the position he was not initially assigned. Similarly, another clarified that:

It wasn't primarily about having the choice itself, but rather about the topic he would have to write about. He explained that he was generally fine with writing about anything as long as he knew the subject matter. Therefore, it was not solely the absence of choice that bothered him, but rather the fact that he didn't receive the specific position he desired.

3-2-2. Choice and Autonomy

However, five students expressed a desire to possess the "power" to make their own choices when it came to writing assignments. For them, the significance extended beyond simply receiving their preferred topic. The act of choosing held importance because it allowed them to exert autonomy and express their personal preferences, aligning with previous research on the topic (Aitken et al., 2022; Cordova & Lepper, 1999; Patall, 2012; Tafarodi et al., 2002). One of the participants responded with

enthusiasm when asked why he believed choice was important, stating, "Because it's empowering! You already have a bank of experiences and a bank of knowledge, and so you feel like you're setting yourself up for success." In a particularly insightful interview, one provided an analogy that:

Having a choice was undoubtedly helpful, particularly when it aligned with his personal interests. He compared it to listening to music, stating that if songs played randomly on shuffle, it could become monotonous. However, when one actively chooses the songs they want to listen to, it brings excitement and a sense of control. He further elaborated that having control over what one is doing with the music, such as skipping a song or playing another, enhances the overall experience.

Four of the participants shared a common understanding of the empowering aspect of autonomy. However, choice can also serve as a motivating factor because individuals desire to exert control or power over their writing. Eight interviewees emphasized the importance of having control over their writing topic or grades as an integral aspect of choice. When one was asked about his feelings before knowing his assigned topic, but after realizing he wouldn't have the opportunity to choose, he expressed disappointment and a lack of control. He described feeling scared because he didn't know what he would be required to write about. It is important to note that having a sense of control is a fundamental component of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). If individuals feel deprived of the opportunity to choose and lack a sense of control, their autonomy is compromised.

Regardless of whether students considered choice or preference as more important, fourteen students unanimously agreed that being obligated to write on a specific topic negatively affected their writing. One, for example, reiterated four times the detrimental impact of being "forced" to write on a topic, stating that it diminished his writing motivation and the quality of her work. He expressed that:

Writing becomes easier and improves when individuals are given a choice, whereas being compelled to write

about certain subjects often yields subpar results. Having the freedom to choose, in contrast, leads to more coherent and superior writing outcomes.

The students also expressed the significance of exercising their autonomy in positive ways, highlighting the importance of choice in enabling them to exercise personal freedom. One 3er year participant conveyed that although he wasn't particularly interested in the topic, having the freedom to choose allowed him to select a subject with scientific data, which made the writing process easier. He believed that this freedom allowed him to leverage his strengths. Similarly, another one emphasized that:

Having choices in writing assignments made it easier for students because it provided them with the freedom to be more creative and pursue their own interests. According to my classmate, when students have the opportunity to write about what they want, they tend to produce better work. Thus, having choices was seen as a favorable aspect.

However, it should be noted that none of them explicitly asserted that choice was more important than receiving their preference. While one initially mentioned that preference held greater importance, another one's subsequent remarks seemed to emphasize the significance of choice. However, one firmly stated that being able to write about his preferred position was more important to him. If we substitute the term "received preference" for "choice" in their statements within this paragraph, their expressions still maintain coherence. Although both of them employed language suggesting the importance of exercising autonomy (such as referring to freedom), it is important to recognize that their use of "freedom" primarily described the benefits of writing about a topic they had knowledge about, interest in, or data to support their essays, rather than emphasizing a sense of autonomy.

3-3. The Primary Reasons Why Students Perceive Choice in Writing

The primary reasons why students perceive choice in writing topics as important can be categorized into four interconnected themes: interest, knowledge, difficulty, and

autonomy (See Table 3). All participants mentioned interest as a crucial factor in choosing their writing topics. When students are genuinely interested in a topic, it results in (a) a greater wealth of knowledge and ideas, (b) heightened motivation to write, and (c) an increased likelihood of producing a higher quality essay. The second most frequently cited reason for the importance of choice pertained to students' prior knowledge. Since this is linked to idea generation (Graham, 2006), existing knowledge can significantly impact the written output. Some students described this in terms of having an abundance of knowledge, while others expressed the stress caused by a deficit of knowledge. Thirdly, some students expressed a desire to choose easier essay topics. Several participants associated the ease or difficulty of a topic with other reasons (such as knowledge) for having the freedom to choose their writing topics. For example, it is easier to write about a subject when students possess sufficient background knowledge. Lastly, students discussed how choice influenced their motivation, using vocabulary that emphasized autonomy-enhancing aspects (such as "freedom") as well as terms that highlighted the reduction of autonomy (such as being "forced to write").

Table 3.

Primary Factors Influencing the Importance of Choice

K	Theme	N	Advantages of Choice	Disadvantages of No Choice
75	Interest	40	"When I actually care about what I'm writing and have knowledge about the topic, I believe the essay turns out a lot better."	"If it's something you're super into or hyped about, you'll naturally come up with awesome work. But if it's something you're not into, you won't feel motivated to put any effort into it."
66	Knowledge	30	"You have the opportunity to evaluate your strengths and weaknesses regarding each subject, and then select the one in which you feel the most assured."	"Oh, and now I gotta come up with completely new ideas because when I have to write something without any ideas, I just freak out about it. I mean, I know it's gonna turn into a terrible paper and then I'll end up with a lousy grade."
60	Difficulty	28	"Facilitates the process of generating ideas, thereby assisting her in composing a more elaborate essay."	"I always despised it when we had to write about stuff that we didn't get to choose. It's such a pain because it's way tougher to write about something when you don't have the freedom to pick what you actually want."

49	Autonomy	30	<p>"It makes you feel powerful! When you already have a bunch of experiences and knowledge, you feel like you're setting yourself up for success."</p> <p>"It's all about having that freedom... it meant I could pick something with plenty of scientific data, which made the writing process a breeze. So, I believe that freedom allows you to focus on what you're good at."</p>	<p>"When you're not calling the shots, it's like being scared because you have no idea what surprises are coming your way."</p> <p>"Because you're being pushed into it, and usually the things you're pushed into are the ones you dislike. So it's like, 'I don't like it, that's why it's more challenging.'"</p> <p>"When they don't have an option, they're compelled to write things, and it doesn't always result in the best outcome."</p>
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Note. k = number of coding instances; n = number of participants

3-4. Advantages Associated with the Absence of Choice

During the experimental phase of the comprehensive study, students were randomly allocated to select one of the two sides of an argumentative essay. While each student had the freedom to choose a side for one essay, they were assigned a position for the other essay without any choice. A surprising theme emerged from this arrangement, highlighting the advantages associated with the absence of choice in this writing activity. Out of the 40 students, 23 acknowledged at least one benefit. Furthermore, almost all of the students (16 out of 20) who did not receive their preferred position during the no-choice condition emphasized the significance of not having a choice. According to the students, the benefits of not having a choice on this assignment encompassed (a) enhancing their perseverance, (b) improving their writing skills, and (c) gaining new perspectives.

3-4-1. Enhancing Perseverance

Some students emphasized that in practical terms, choices are not always readily available, and although they might experience disappointment, it is feasible to endure and overcome. One participant specifically mentioned this notion in the context of enhancing one's writing skills, while two other participants connected it to the ultimate advantage of gaining new perspectives. Notably, one strongly believed that this was a crucial experience for both himself and his peers.

Occasionally, one cannot always obtain what they desire. However, that is the nature of life itself - not always receiving one's preferred outcomes. Consequently, individuals must adapt and remain resilient in the face of adversity. Personally, I have always been an advocate of making the most out of the circumstances one is given. Although I wasn't dealt the cards I had hoped for, I will strive to maximize the potential of the situation. It seems that nowadays, if someone fails to attain their desires, it has a detrimental impact on everything. However, it is essential to recognize that life is not solely centered on oneself.

The students recognized the value of perseverance as a valuable experience, particularly in the 'real world,' such as future employment, where choices may be limited. Therefore, they believed it is important to cultivate the ability to adapt to unforeseen challenges. By persisting despite not receiving their preferred options, they may have had the opportunity to enhance their capacity for resilience and determination.

3-4-2. Improved Writing Skills

Ten students expressed their belief that being assigned a perspective different from their own could ultimately contribute to their growth as writers. They varied in their descriptions of how this process would enhance their writing abilities. For example, one believed that lacking a choice in the matter helped him acquire a deeper understanding, while the other participant saw it as an opportunity to adapt her writing style. Another one, on the other hand, shared his perspective by stating, "I believe that the act of choosing does impact your writing. However, not being able to choose what you desired actually makes you a better writer, as it compels you to confront and challenge your personal beliefs." He recollected a writing assignment from high school where he was not allowed to choose his topic and disagreed with it, but sought to please his teacher. Reflecting upon that experience, he concluded that although it was a

challenging task for her as a writer, it ultimately facilitated his growth because he ventured beyond his usual boundaries.

One possible explanation for how the absence of choice can contribute to the improvement of writing skills is that it may inspire students to invest more effort, consequently leading to better writing outcomes. One of the participants expressed his preference for having the freedom to choose for the first essay but acknowledged that for the second essay, the lack of choice compelled him to engage in deeper thinking. He mentioned that it made him consider the non-preferred position and evaluate it more critically. Similarly, although one initially felt frustrated by not receiving his preferred side, he recognized that this challenge pushed him to delve further into the research prompt. He explained that the absence of choice compelled him to search for various pieces of information that would fit together, ultimately enhancing his analysis.

These testimonies provided support for one's experience of not receiving his desired position while participating in a high school speech and debate team. He highlighted that:

There is a notable distinction in his writing depending on his level of interest in the topic. Additionally, he mentioned that feelings of anger could also play a role. In cases where he strongly disliked a particular topic, he would make an extra effort to excel in order to prove to him that he was capable, despite his aversion towards it. Particularly with the debate topic, he found himself arguing even harder for the side he despised, driven by a personal desire to demonstrate his abilities.

One participant's account, which may resonate with others as well, indicates that the more he disagrees with a certain perspective, the more diligently he works on a paper. Towards the end of the interview, he reaffirmed his determination and aspiration to become a superior writer. He expressed the belief that a good writer can argue on any topic, but a truly exceptional writer can find a way to genuinely care about any subject they write about. He aimed to reach that level of greatness, where he could find something to genuinely care about in every topic he tackles.

Overall, one's experience suggests that even when initially uninterested in or unconvinced by a topic, his drive to become an exceptional writer propelled him to channel intense emotions, such as anger, and put forth tremendous effort to produce a high-quality essay. However, it remains uncertain whether he would have written an even better paper had he been assigned his preferred position. His account represents an extreme reaction to not receiving one's preference, shedding light on the tenacity that students can exhibit when they are not granted the opportunity to choose their topic or viewpoint, particularly when they are motivated to enhance their writing skills.

3-4-3. New Insights

Another noteworthy finding in our research was the significance of not having the freedom of choice, particularly in the specific assignment discussed, as it facilitated a shift in students' perspectives. Eighteen students reflected on how assuming a non-preferred position allowed them to gain insights into alternative viewpoints, an experience they found enjoyable. They expressed this transformation using phrases such as "thinking outside the box," "expanding their mind," and "broadening their view."

One of them shared his personal journey towards developing an appreciation for being denied his preferred choice. Initially, he experienced disappointment and a sense of loss of control. When he was assigned a topic he did not desire, he described feeling increased stress due to a lack of initial ideas. However, he navigated through this discomfort by posing a question to herself: "If I were in this position, how would I perceive it?" By engaging in this introspective exercise, he gradually underwent a change in perspective. He remarked that this process allowed him to see the situation from an entirely new vantage point, leading to personal growth. He expressed that his mind expanded as a result, and he considered the experience to be undeniably positive.

During a later stage of the interview, one delved into a more detailed explanation of why experiencing a new point of view was meaningful to him:

Even though it was a bit uncomfortable, I did like not getting to choose. I believe that sometimes you have to embrace discomfort in order to truly experience life.

So, it seems like your feelings changed throughout the assignment process?

Yeah... In the beginning, I was happy to have the freedom to choose what I was comfortable with. But then, when I didn't have the option to choose in the second instance, I felt uncomfortable. However, that discomfort actually led to personal growth, as I mentioned earlier. It allowed me to think outside the box and consider a whole new perspective that I had never thought about before.

Four of the participants compared their experiences of having choice versus not having choice in their writing endeavors. However, one specifically described a transformative encounter in gaining a fresh perspective. It was not only important for him to understand an alternative point of view intellectually, but he also emphasized how the experience facilitated personal growth.

Several students emphasized the significance of not having the freedom to choose, as it enabled them to see different perspectives. During an interview with one of them, this aspect was discussed within the context of the specific assignment. Initially, he had expressed some ambivalence about the importance of choice versus non-choice in writing. When asked whether it was crucial to allow students to choose or assign topics in this particular assignment, he responded:

I advocate for not choosing because I believe it provides everyone with a better understanding of both points of view. However, personally, I do enjoy having the freedom to choose. Nevertheless, I would say that assigned groups are more helpful for comprehending a topic.

Intrigued, the interviewer returned to this topic towards the end of the interview and provided examples of situations in which it is more beneficial for students not to have the choice of writing topics. The same participant then shared his perspective:

When it's something content-based, like a book or an article, I prefer having the choice of a prompt. However, if it's a political issue or a topic with two opposing sides, I would argue that having the choice is unnecessary... In those cases, I believe it is more important to not have the

choice because it allows individuals to see both sides of the issue.

Throughout the interview, one participant displayed a desire to reach a definitive conclusion regarding whether providing students with choice in their writing topics was a beneficial pedagogical approach. Initially, he considered it potentially problematic for students to write an argumentative essay on a topic they do not personally believe in. However, he ultimately determined that denying students' choice was more significant, as it could compel them to consider multiple perspectives within an argument.

Among the university students interviewed, twenty three individuals recognized the advantages of not having the freedom to choose. In the closing portion of the interview, one eloquently summarized these benefits, which included exerting more effort, fostering enhanced critical thinking skills, gaining new perspectives, and developing resilience.

Was there anything positive about not being able to choose the assignment in class?

It made you delve deeper into your arguments, and it required thinking outside of the box, I believe. So...

Angelique: And is that a favorable aspect?

Yes, it is. Because in life, you will eventually encounter situations where you have to discuss or take a stance on something you may not want to talk about, such as in a job setting. So, you will have to face such situations eventually. You won't always have the privilege of doing what you want.

While some of the participants, 26 out of 40, admitted to personally enjoying the freedom to choose, they acknowledged that the benefits associated with not having that choice were more significant. These advantages encompassed the opportunity to develop resilience, enhance writing skills, and gain fresh perspectives.

4- Discussion and Conclusion

This study employed 40 semi-structured interviews to delve deeper into the

perceptions of university students regarding choice and writing. The primary objective was to gain insights into their perspectives on the motivational aspect of choice in relation to the writing assignments included in this study, as well as their experiences with writing in the university context. The students unanimously recognized the significance of choice in their writing assignments, but many also highlighted the benefits of not having choice, particularly in the context of this specific assignment.

The overarching goal of the study was to explore how students discussed their experiences with choice in university writing assignments. Students expressed having greater freedom to select topics that held personal importance to them compared to their experiences in high school. Even when their university writing assignments had certain limitations, students described a considerable degree of flexibility within those boundaries. The power to choose provided students with a stronger sense of autonomy, identity, and self-expression, aligning with previous research highlighting the role of choice in fostering feelings of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Maya, et al.,2022).

Fourteen students mentioned the stress associated with having an unlimited number of writing topics, which is consistent with findings from choice literature. Offering an excessive number of options can make the process of choosing overwhelming and diminish the perceived benefits (Patall, 2012). However, the students reported overcoming their concerns about choice and ultimately expressed a preference for having the opportunity to choose. Future research should investigate the optimal number of choice options for university students and explore strategies to support students in navigating open choice writing assignments.

The study also sought to investigate whether the act of choosing or receiving one's preferred writing topic held greater importance, but this question remained unresolved based on the current study. Some students used the terms "choice" and "preference" interchangeably, as they considered choosing as receiving their preferred option (Patall, 2012). Despite this confusion, a subgroup of students (n=20) emphasized the relative importance of either choice (n=9) or preference (n=11). Fifteen other students made statements indicating the importance of both choice and preference or expressed uncertainty, potentially reflecting confusion or an indecisive stance. Those who valued preference more highly cited having more ideas, knowledge, or finding it

easier to write about their preferred side. On the other hand, students who viewed choice as more significant highlighted its positive impact on their sense of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Furthermore, the primary reasons students attributed to the importance of having choice in their writing was investigated. The most frequently mentioned themes encompassed interest, knowledge, difficulty, and autonomy. Students emphasized that choice in writing allowed them to select topics that were more intriguing, easier to write about, and aligned with their existing knowledge and ideas. Additionally, they highlighted the role of autonomy, in line with self-determination theory, as a motivating factor. Students described the benefits of having the power to choose their writing topic and expressed negative effects when they were "forced" to write on a non-preferred topic. These reasons for choice were interconnected, with students having more ideas for topics they found interesting, ultimately making the writing experience smoother.

Notably, students also recognized the benefits of not having choice, which emerged as interesting and surprising findings. They perceived advantages in terms of increasing their tenacity, enhancing their writing skills, and gaining new perspectives. Students acknowledged that in real-life situations, choices are not always available, and while there might be initial disappointment, it is essential to persevere. Practicing this skill was considered valuable because there are instances where "you can't always get what you want." Although most students mentioned this benefit incidentally, one student strongly believed that all university students should experience it.

The second prominent theme was students' belief that being assigned a perspective different from their own could contribute to their development as better writers. They outlined various ways in which this growth could occur, such as deepening their understanding or reflection on the topic, practicing adaptability in their writing, or investing more effort into the assignment. In fact, not having choice and not receiving their preferred topic could elicit strong emotions that motivated students to push themselves and "knock it out of the park" to prove their capabilities. This level of determination stemmed from the aspiration to become a skilled writer who can effectively engage with and care about any topic, even if it does not align with their personal beliefs. Drawing from self-determination theory, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are foundational components of intrinsic motivation that influence behavior

(Deci & Ryan, 2000). While not having choice may limit students' autonomy, the opportunity to enhance their writing competence might offset potential decreases in self-determination and intrinsic motivation. Future research should consider how the absence of choice in writing assignments influences these three components of self-determination.

A third advantage of not having choice was the opportunity to gain a fresh perspective on a controversial issue. Several students emphasized the benefits of personal growth, thinking creatively, and being receptive to different viewpoints when they were not given the option to choose. Interestingly, although students expressed personal enjoyment in making choices, they recognized that there were more significant benefits associated with not choosing, particularly in terms of gaining new perspectives. This benefit may be specific to the act of making choices in writing, especially in argumentative writing, as writing serves as a means to organize, explore, process, and acquire new information (Ferretti & Fan, 2016; Graham, 2006). Therefore, it is important for future researchers to investigate the importance and impact of considering different perspectives in writing assignments.

Prior research has indicated that the effects of choice may vary based on age (Patall et al., 2008) and educational background (Snibbe & Markus, 2005). For university students, choice may hold less significance due to the social, educational, and personal development that takes place during the transition from high school to university. Nearly all the interviewees described the newfound freedoms, experiences, and concepts they were encountering at university. It is possible that developing new perspectives was more meaningful than a binary choice (as examined in this study) because generating fresh ideas is an integral part of the early adult, university experience. Similarly, young adults may have a greater appreciation for adaptability and resilience, recognizing the need to be prepared for real-world situations where they cannot always have their preferences fulfilled. These perceived benefits of not having choice in writing should be explored with students from different backgrounds (e.g., non-traditional university students) and educational levels (e.g., middle school, graduate students). Additionally, various factors, such as English learner status and sociocultural influences, can shape students' perceptions of choice in writing, which were not directly addressed in this study. This raises a potential limitation of this and other qualitative

studies, as the findings, while illustrative, may not be easily generalized to a larger population.

Another potential limitation is that the findings related to the benefits of not choosing are specific to a particular writing assignment. The writing tasks in this study were completed within 75-minute class sessions, whereas students described working on writing assignments for their other courses over several weeks. Five students mentioned that the importance of choice would be greater if they were given multiple weeks to research and write about a topic. However, since the writing assignment in this study was limited to a single class period, the significance of choice was diminished. This potentially important theme did not emerge in the findings, highlighting the need for future research in this area.

This study offers valuable insights for educators and researchers regarding the perspectives of university students on the use of choice in their writing assignments. In line with self-determination theory and previous studies on choice, the findings from interviews with 40 students indicate that choice in writing topics holds significance for them. They expressed higher motivation when they could select interesting and less challenging topics that aligned with their background knowledge. Additionally, choosing their writing topics facilitated a sense of autonomy, empowerment, and self-expression. Many students drew comparisons between the open choice they had in university and the more limited options they had in high school. Despite their positive views on choice, a majority of the students also recognized the benefits of not having the freedom to choose their writing topics. They identified advantages such as developing perseverance, enhancing writing skills, and gaining new perspectives. While these benefits associated with limited choice may be specific to university students or particular writing topics, these findings underscore the complex impact that choice can have in the classroom. It is crucial to continue conducting meaningful research and exploration in this area.

5- Implication

Although there is a common belief among educators that offering choice in writing is crucial (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000), the findings of this study suggest that choice may not universally enhance writing motivation. Particularly at the university

level, students may already expect a considerable degree of freedom in choosing their writing topics, given their experience in other university courses and their growing sense of autonomy. Conversely, providing a limited and binary choice may not be perceived as a genuine opportunity for choice and may therefore have limited benefits. While this may indicate that university instructors should always provide open choice, it is possible that moderate limitations on choice can still offer the motivational advantages of open choice. If educators decide to allow students to choose any topic, they should be prepared to offer guidance in narrowing down their focus, as open choice can be overwhelming for some students. Furthermore, if instructors opt for limited choice options, they should consider offering writing topics that align with students' interests and background knowledge to ensure that their choices reflect personal preferences.

In general, educators should grant students the freedom to choose their writing topics, as university students believe it can enhance motivation and improve the quality of their writing. Students are more likely to select a topic that they find interesting, less challenging, and have sufficient background knowledge about. When students can choose a topic they are knowledgeable about, they can generate more ideas and produce higher-quality essays (Graham, 2006). The ability to choose based on background knowledge becomes particularly significant for writing tasks where students are not expected to conduct specific research before writing, but rather demonstrate their existing knowledge, such as in an examination. For writing assignments that span several weeks or months, choice is also valuable because it allows students to select an engaging topic that motivates them to research, learn, and write effectively.

Lastly, educators should consider instances where assigning writing topics or positions may be beneficial. There may be pedagogical situations where the purpose of understanding different perspectives outweighs the potential benefits of choice. Assigning writing topics can also encourage students to explore new subjects or gain fresh perspectives, which they may not pursue if given the choice. Particularly in argumentative writing, having students argue a position they do not personally hold may initially pose challenges, but in the end, it can broaden their minds and prove to be a valuable experience. And after all, isn't expanding minds, despite the inherent difficulties of learning, why we chose to become educators in the first place?

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