# The Use of Prompts in Writing of Learners of English as a Foreign Language

## Abstract

The rapid globalization has infused Taiwan education with new expectations of students, especially at the college level, regarding English proficiency skills. Whereas language proficiency in four skills can not be equally developed, writing skill is the most challenging and difficult to acquire. For most students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), in particular, composing English is a difficult task that requires extra efforts, linguistically and cognitively, to formulate the contents. Despite the increasing number of college students in Taiwan taking writing tests to meet the requirements of either graduation benchmark or the needs of future career, the writing performance of college EFL students is still at stake. Some researchers believe a prompt can provide a context where the writers can elicit more complex language and thus facilitate writing of EFL learners. This study was conducted to explore the effects of prompts on college EFL learners' writing performance and their perception of the help of a prompt. College students of an EFL course were invited to participate in this study and compose two writing pieces each—one with a simple title, and the other with a prompt. All the participants used the same title and prompt, and the writing pieces were graded by two instructors independently. After writing the pi9eces   were collecedDuring the past several decades, only a small number of publications have addressed the influence of writing prompts on EFL writing and some have contradictory results (Koda, 1993; Jennings et al, 1999). Therefore, it is important to note that further evidence on this point can help establish curricular goals for EFL writing and provide solid basis for decisions with respect to EFL curriculum. A specific research question will be explored in this study: what is the extent to which EFL college learners perceive prompts as beneficial/detrimental effects on their writing performance?

Approximately 40 college students from a college Sophomore English class at an intermediate level were recruited to participate in this study. The two writing prompts, one simple topic and the frame prompt containing more detailed information, were provided to investigate whether students performed better on one prompt over the other. A follow-up questionnaire was administered immediately after the composing task to identify the related factors in terms of the participants' writing performance and learners' perspectives toward the prompts offered. The writing samples were done and collected. Each participant will be informed of the thirty-minute time limit and

will have no accommodations of any reference materials and resources to complete the task. The writing samples will be holistically rated by two experienced human scorers, one of whom is a native speaker of English, using an 8-point scale. Although there are other factors in the writing context (e.g., the total years of learning English as a foreign language or the academic background of the writers) mediating task effects on writing performance, this study attempts to observe the relationship between the prompts and writing performance. It was hypothesized that an appropriate prompt can move a writer toward his potential through exploring the given meaningful context and become more indicative of his ability to undertake writing tasks and the prompt–writers interactions can reflect on EFL learners' composing outcomes. However, this study shows that the prompts do not appropriately represent and reflect college EFL writers' abilities. A task that goes beyond the level of learners' English capability or a prompt devoid of realistic context seems to impede EFL learners' composing quality. The goal of this investigation is to study the predictors of success in writing English as a foreign language for students at the university level. An investigation of factors of success at this level is important if we are to provide students with the best preparation for the tasks. Once predictors are identified, their efficacy can be further tested and will help improve classroom instruction, enabling EFL learners to reach the goal of better written expressions.