

Exploring the Impact of Topic Interest on EFL Writing Quality and Writing Quantity: A Mixed-Methods Study

MARCO CANCINO*

MARIA RAYO

MARJORIE AVILA

Facultad de Educación y Humanidades, Universidad Andres Bello, Chile

*Corresponding author email: marco.cancino@unab.cl

Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 26 Mar 2025 Last revised: 17 Apr 2026 Accepted: 18 Apr 2026 Available online: 22 Apr 2026 Keywords: Topic interest Writing development Individual interest Situational interest Learners' perceptions	<i>This mixed-methods study aimed to assess the impact of topic interest on writing quality and writing quantity, as well as explore the perceptions of EFL learners toward topic interest in the writing process. Thirty-one secondary education EFL learners were asked to complete argumentative writing tasks under two topic interest conditions, namely, high topic interest and low topic interest. This was followed by semi-structured interviews conducted with six participants. Writing quality was assessed by means of an analytic rubric evaluating content, organization, language use, lexicon, and writing mechanics, while writing quantity was measured through the number of words written in the writing tasks. Results revealed that topic interest had an impact on overall rubric scores, the content component, and the number of words produced. Perceptions of learners toward their levels of interest in the topics for the writing tasks highlighted individual and situational components of topic interest, as well as the effect of prior knowledge in their writing. The results contribute to research emphasizing the integration of interesting topics in EFL classrooms to foster motivation, enhance learning outcomes, and support the development of EFL writing skills.</i>

INTRODUCTION

Nurturing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing development entails providing learners with sufficient opportunities for writing practice. However, this process is hindered by the lack of motivation resulting from writing tasks that may not match students' preferences. Promoting learners' interest emerges as a way of introducing more engaging writing activities that are appealing to learners. Interest is described as the increased attention and emotional connection that takes place when a person actively engages with a subject matter or task (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). More specifically, topic interest (TI) is interest that is manifested in relation to topics and is based on existing knowledge, personal experiences, and feelings (Flowerday & Shell, 2015). Furthermore, Alzubi and Nazim (2024) describe it as a reader's mental and emotional engagement with a topic. Incorporating topics that consider learners' interests can yield a gradual improvement in attitudes, motivation, and learning (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). As Tin (2016) notes, the development of strong and organized interests enables individuals to

enhance personal growth, knowledge, and skill building. In EFL settings, when learners engage in activities that are related to their interests, noticeable benefits have been reported in terms of reading comprehension (Lee, 2009) and vocabulary learning (Cancino, 2023; Lee & Pulido, 2017). More indirect links to interest have been made with respect to L2 writing (Cancino & Isami, 2025) and through research on choice (Bonzo, 2008; Eidswick & Asaba, 2018; Leblanc & Fujieda, 2012). However, most studies have not addressed the impact of TI on specific language development outcomes such as writing quality and writing quantity in high school education contexts. Moreover, a mixed-methods approach can add to the quantitative assessment of TI interest by providing a qualitative account of how EFL learners interact with topics of varying interests and how features of interest are perceived by them.

The study addressed two main objectives. The first objective was to measure the impact of TI on the writing quality (i.e., content, organization, language use, lexicon, and writing mechanics) and writing quantity (i.e., number of words written) of secondary education EFL learners. The second objective was to explore the perceptions of these learners regarding elements of TI (i.e., situational and individual features) on their writing performance. The study posed the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of TI on EFL learners' writing quality and writing quantity?
2. What are the perceptions of these EFL learners regarding TI in the writing process?

The study adopted a "learning to write" framework (Manchón, 2016). This perspective aims to equip learners with EFL writing skills that are applicable in diverse social, academic, and professional settings. It highlights various writing outcomes, including content creation, spelling, punctuation, word choice, sentence structure, and coherence (Kim, 2019). The approach also emphasizes the development of learners' metacognitive processes and genre knowledge (Hyland, 2011). However, in an EFL context where exposure to the L2 is limited, the focus on writing tends to emphasize correctness in grammar and surface structures such as language and mechanics (Huang & Zhang, 2019), disregarding content or meaning-related issues in learners' written texts. A focus on affective factors such as interest can help learners reduce anxiety and develop their writing skills in a way that not only promotes the completion of assigned tasks but also enhances students' behavioral and cognitive engagement, leading to better learning outcomes (Kahu et al., 2017).

The study was conducted in a Chilean secondary education setting. The last standardized measure of EFL administered to secondary education learners in Chile was the reading and listening SIMCE English test for 11th graders in 2017 (Ministerio de Educación Chile, 2018). The test revealed important gaps in relation to these learners' proficiency. Out of 7.340 students evaluated in 137 private, subsidized and public schools, only 32% reached or surpassed the elementary level (A2) according to the Common European Framework, while 68% achieved beginner level (A1). This indicates that seven out of ten students did not achieve the learning outcomes (A2 CEFR level) expected for 8th graders (Ministerio de Educación Chile, 2016). The results underscore the fact that the teaching of EFL in Chile continues to be a considerable challenge, highlighting the importance of implementing new methodologies to improve learning opportunities for these EFL learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interest and learning

Research on interest has defined the construct as the interaction between a person and an object (or topic), and the level of interest emerging of that interaction, which translates into a desire to explore and engage further with the object or subject matter (O’Keefe & Harackiewicz, 2017). Interest can be addressed as both a psychological state and a motivational variable (Ainley et al., 2002; Renninger & Hidi, 2016). From a psychological perspective, interest functions as a behavior modifier that influences various aspects of learning, such as increased attention, concentration, and affect during engagement. As a motivational variable, interest is typically divided into two main types: situational interest and individual interest. Individual interest refers to the long-term, personal preferences that reflect an individual’s enjoyment of an object or subject matter, which prompts them to engage and re-engage with it (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Thus, individual interest represents a blend of affective (emotional) and value-related (i.e., personal significance) components associated with an object (Silvia, 2006). These feelings and emotions trigger positive feelings such as enjoyment or excitement (O’Keefe & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014; Schiefele, 2009). In other words, students with a strong individual interest perceive their object of interest as meaningful and exciting to engage with, as well as valuable, a combination that sustains learning over time (Harackiewicz & Knogler, 2017).

On the other hand, situational interest is a more temporary disposition toward an object that is influenced by contextual factors such as the environment, the setting, or specific features of a text (Ainley et al., 2002). This type of interest is more transitory and prone to dissipate easily (Schraw & Lehman, 2001). In educational contexts, situational interest arises from the interaction between the context (such as the teaching method, features of the materials, or classroom setting) and the student’s response to it (Kahu et al., 2017; Renninger & Hidi, 2016). When the learner is exposed to these situational features, their attention and emotional involvement are heightened, making them more likely to engage in the learning activity (Tin, 2016). According to Silvia (2006), these factors in the environment influencing an individual’s level of situational interest are labelled “collative variables”. They include complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty, and novelty. For example, when a task is challenging and novel, it may encourage exploration, stimulate engagement and nurture attention during its completion. In addition, Ainley and Patrick (2006) point out that situational interest can also be sparked through learning tasks when the information flow occurs at a steady rate and maintains the initial level of activation. Moreover, the authors argue that situational interest can further increase when the relevant information provided for a task includes unexpected twists and engaging elements that capture learners’ curiosity. These descriptions suggest that interest is not a fixed trait but a dynamic construct that is affected by contextual features.

TI and EFL writing

An earlier conceptualization of TI defined as “the relatively long-term orientation of an individual toward a certain topic, or a domain of knowledge” (Schiefele & Krapp, 1996, p. 143), a description that associated it with the development of individual interest. However, more

recent research has highlighted that the concept includes both individual and situational aspects, as the interest displayed by individuals engaging in cognitive processes through a topic can emerge out of personal interest or from situational features (Catrysse et al., 2022; Hammann et al., 2020; Renninger & Hidi, 2016). Thus, TI is said to be influenced by both types of interest since it reflects the interplay of a person's pre-existing preferences and the immediate context in which the topic is presented (Soemer & Schiefele, 2019). From a developmental perspective, it is possible for situational interest to evolve into an individual interest in a particular topic, leading students to seek autonomous instances where they can re-engage with the object of interest (Harackiewicz et al., 2016). TI is strongly connected to writing, as it directly influences learners' motivation, engagement, and cognition in the process (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006). It is also important to address the nature of writing for learning. Writing is regarded as a complex and multi-layered skill that allows individuals to access personal growth, establish social connections, and acquire knowledge (Graham et al., 2012). Writing encourages learners to explore their creativity and empowers them to shape others' opinions. Although writing can boost other skills such as reading (Graham et al., 2012), writing in the L2 presents additional challenges for learners that are related to content organization, grammar, and style (Umamah et al., 2022). In addition, Saha (2013) underscores the difficulties faced by learners when planning, formulating, and monitoring ideas in the L2 linguistic system. The author goes on to argue that a writing topic interacts with a learner's current knowledge, their beliefs, and their cultural background, which can be challenging for the learner if the topic contains unfamiliar cultural schemata or abstract notions. Thus, writing is regarded as a complex and time-consuming activity that demands concentration, effort, and persistence (Huang & Zhang, 2019). Boosting self-efficacy and nurturing interest in writing topics may help L2 learners' writing development and strategic approach, as the demanding nature of L2 writing can be mediated by motivational factors (Chae, 2013).

Research has revealed that students who are interested in their writing topics exhibit greater persistence, improved learning outcomes, and enhanced writing skills (Eidswick & Asaba, 2018; Hidi & Boscolo, 2006). It has been argued that while TI plays a critical role in motivating students and enhancing their engagement with writing tasks, its effectiveness is also influenced by factors such as prior knowledge (Hidi & McLaren, 1991). Prior knowledge has been found to correlate with TI (Silvia, 2006), and to impact learners' higher-order cognitive skills (Hailikari et al., 2008). As Roure et al. (2021) pointed out, students with an individual interest have more knowledge for their subject matter of interest compared to other contents or activities in which they engage. Nonetheless, the learning outcomes attributed to interest seem to be unaffected by a text's difficulty, a learner's reading ability, or the prior knowledge reported by learners when exposed to a text topic (Schiefele, 2009).

Empirical studies on TI and EFL learning

Empirical research investigating the impact of interest on specific learning outcomes in EFL settings is scarce (Tin, 2016). Most studies in these contexts have addressed the positive impact of TI on reading comprehension (Asgari et al., 2019; Lee, 2009) and vocabulary learning (Cancino, 2023; Lee & Pulido, 2017). As regards reading comprehension, Asgari et al. (2019) explored the impact of interest-based language teaching on the interest levels and L2

reading comprehension of 60 Persian nursing university students. The students were divided into two groups: an experimental group that received personalized interest-based instruction based on their preferred topic (health) and a control group that followed regular textbook classes. Using a language achievement test, a reading interest survey, and a learner empowerment scale, results showed that the interest-based approach to teaching significantly enhanced learners' situational interest and reading comprehension in the experimental group compared to the control group. The study highlights the critical role of TI in fostering motivation, engagement, and positive learning attitudes, which in turn improve academic outcomes. With a focus on L2 vocabulary learning and retention, Cancino (2023) asked 96 Chilean adult EFL learners to complete reading tasks under high-interest and low-interest conditions and then administered vocabulary tests assessing target word gains. Findings indicated that learners in the high interest condition were able to learn and retain more target words when compared to the low-interest condition. The author also found that learners remembered more words looked up in an online dictionary when those words belonged to the high-interest text. These results underscore the cognitive and emotional connection that interest generates, which enhances learners' ability to retain new information (Schiefele & Krapp, 1996; Schroeder, 2013).

Most studies addressing interest and L2 writing have focused on the provision of choice, which has been related to increased interest. For example, Eidswick and Asaba (2018) sought to investigate the impact of choice and interest on L2 writing outcomes. They asked 88 first-year students in an intensive English program at a Japanese private university to write weekly journal entries in four experimental conditions that involved choice of writing topic (the teacher's or the learner's) and interest (high or low). The journal entries were analyzed for word count, grammatical accuracy and lexical sophistication. Results showed that aligning topics with students' interests and choice had a measurable impact on L2 word count and grammatical accuracy. The authors also reported that learners wrote longer texts with a higher grammatical accuracy when they displayed a high interest on the topic, concluding that both choice and interest can increase intrinsic motivation and improve writing development. Also with a focus on topic selection, Bonzo (2008) investigated how teacher-assigned and self-selected topics affected the writing fluency of 81 learners of German as L2. The study revealed that when learners chose their own topics, they achieved greater overall fluency—evaluated via a general fluency index—and displayed a wider vocabulary range. In contrast, the level of grammatical complexity, determined by counting clauses deviating from the basic subject-verb-object format, did not show a similar improvement. These findings in writing fluency were confirmed in a replication study carried out by Lubold et al. (2016) with 109 Japanese EFL learners. Finally, Leblanc and Fujieda (2012) assessed lexical variation among Japanese university-level EFL students' writing. The authors employed a quasi-experimental design with participants completing writing tasks with self-selected topics and topics selected by the teacher. Lexical variation was assessed by means of a token-type ratio. Findings showed that learners who self-selected their topics exhibited higher lexical diversity in their writing than when they wrote about teacher-selected topics. The authors conclude that topic autonomy can help learners expand their vocabulary size as they produce language. More recently, Cancino and Isami (2025) conducted a study assessing the impact of TI on specific writing quantity (namely, word count) and quality measures (namely, syntactic complexity, and

accuracy), as well as Google Translate use. They asked sixty Chilean university EFL students to complete argumentative writing tasks on both high-interest and low-interest topics. Results showed that TI yielded significant differences for syntactic complexity measures but did not significantly impact writing quantity or accuracy. Cancino and Isami conclude that while high-interest topics can increase syntactic complexity, low-interest topics may drive learners to rely more on translation tools, thus increasing their word count and accuracy but without critical appraisal of the writing. To sum up, these studies have provided insights on how TI can significantly increase reading comprehension and lexical gains, underscoring the relationship between motivational and cognitive aspects in language development. A higher level of interest in a topic naturally directs attention, promotes deeper information processing, and optimizes cognitive resources, which in turn benefits learning. With the exception of Cancino and Isami (2025), the studies reviewed have mainly focused on the indirect impact of TI on writing, which underscores the need for eliciting stronger links between interest and learning outcomes (e.g., writing quality, writing quantity) in the language classroom. In addition, these studies have been conducted in tertiary education settings, disregarding the effect that TI can have on younger learners with less developed linguistic repertoires. Thus, the literature review warrants more in-depth investigation into how high-school students' written outcomes are influenced by TI as well as how they perceive TI features in writing tasks.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

In order to gain a deeper understanding of TI and its impact on writing in a EFL context, this study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Guetterman, 2024). The design allows for a comprehensive understanding of the research problem by using qualitative data to explain quantitative findings. It equips researchers with the tools to analyze quantitative data that may require further explanation or clarification, and to triangulate findings to answer the research questions. The present study adopted this design, as it seeks to assess linguistic outcomes and explore perceptions toward the construct of TI. Quantitative instruments included TI rating scales to gauge interest and rubrics to assess argumentative writing tasks, while qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to elicit opinions and attitudes toward TI. To assess the impact of TI on EFL learners' writing quality and writing quantity, the argumentative writing tasks were completed under two varying interest conditions i.e., high TI and low TI. A within-subjects design was employed, where all the participants completed the writing tasks under the two TI conditions. This design allows participants to be their own controls, which enhances the assessment of the impact that a treatment can have on a particular outcome and increases statistical power through minimizing error variance (Larson-Hall, 2015). Then, gathering the perceptions of these EFL learners regarding TI involved collecting semi-structured interview data that was examined through thematic analysis.

Participants

The study was conducted in a government-subsidized private school in Chile. Thirty-one secondary education students in 9th grade aged between 14 and 15 years old participated in the study. Their L1 was Spanish, and their EFL proficiency level was A2-B1 (Common European Framework of Reference) according to a placement test taken at the beginning of the school year. Chilean secondary education EFL learners have limited opportunities to interact with the L2 outside the classroom environment. The school bases its curriculum on national guidelines, organizing learning activities around the textbook to develop language. Thus, L2 writing is not a skill that is often developed or encouraged in this context. When students do write, the skill typically accompanies grammar exercises, and the topic is assigned by the teacher and based on the textbook, which limits learners' TI.

Instruments and materials

TI scale

In order to identify high topics interest (HTI) and low topics interest (LTI) for participants, a TI scale was adapted following Cancino (2023) and Soemer and Schiefele (2019). The instrument required participants to rate eight topics that addressed themes connected to the context of learners, including sports, video games, and social media. Each topic was rated by means of a Likert scale including two statements addressing situational interest ("If I were to write about this topic, I think I would find it interesting", and "If I were to write about this topic, I think I would find it stimulating") and one statement addressing individual interest ("I like to read/write about this topic"). The four-point scale ranged from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". Additionally, an option was given for students to supply an interesting topic if none of the suggested topics were appealing to them. The TI scales were administered through Google Forms and were translated into the participants' L1 (Spanish) to mitigate potential comprehension issues. An experienced EFL teacher checked the translated items and instructions for clarity. A paired sample *t*-test was used to confirm that the HTI scale ($M = 4.13$; $SD = 0.66$) and the LTI scale ($M = 1.43$; $SD = 0.5$) mean scores were significantly different. Results ($t(30) = 16.713$, $p < .001$) confirmed the difference in TI for both conditions.

Argumentative writing tasks

Argumentative writing is generally considered more cognitively demanding when compared with narrative writing (Pu & Cao, 2022; Yoon & Polio, 2016). This complexity arises because argumentative tasks require students to formulate and defend a position on a debatable issue, requiring critical thinking, logical reasoning, and the use of evidence to support claims. In contrast, narrative writing focuses on storytelling through simpler sentence structures and involves describing events and characters without the same level of analytical reasoning (Yoon & Polio, 2016). Therefore, argumentative writing tasks provide an opportunity to observe how TI drives persistence, effort, and willingness to tackle complex tasks. Participants were required to produce two argumentative writing tasks, one for each TI condition. Each task prompt comprised a title summarizing the topic, a brief introduction to the topic, and a question that

provided a guiding framework for students to initiate their argumentative essay (e.g., Do you think that switching from printed books to e-books and audiobooks has changed the way we read and understand things? Has this change made reading better or worse?). They were asked to write at least 200 words for each argumentative writing task. All instructions and prompts were written in the participants' L1.

Analytic rubric

An analytic writing rubric adapted from Jacobs et al.'s (1981) writing scale. This instrument has been used in recent research to assess participants' writing (Chang et al., 2023; Fathi & Rahimi, 2024). The instrument evaluates participants' writing output in the HTI and LTI conditions in five components: Content, organization, language use, lexicon, and writing mechanics. The content component mainly assesses the relevance of the writing through the consistency of the arguments and how well the thesis statement is developed. Organization evaluates the clarity and structure of ideas, including how well the information is presented and organized logically. Language use focuses on grammatical range and accuracy, as well as the ability to use complex sentence structures. Lexicon addresses the vocabulary range used in relation to the level of proficiency learners have, and how it is delivered through an appropriate register. Finally, the writing mechanics component evaluates the correct use of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing. The evaluation criteria in the rubric comprises four performance categories ranging from "excellent" to "very poor". Each component was assigned a maximum score of twenty-five points and a minimum score of zero. To adapt the rubric for 8th graders at an A2 CEFR level, simpler and clearer descriptors were used to reflect what A2 learners are expected to produce in a writing task. In the content component, descriptors were adapted to focus on the inclusion of relevant details while acknowledging that ideas may not be fully developed. Likewise, descriptors in the organization component were rewritten to emphasize basic but logical development of ideas. Language use, lexicon, and writing mechanics were also modified to reflect basic grammatical structures, a more limited lexical range, and common spelling and punctuation errors at the A2 level, while maintaining a focus on clarity.

Google Translate

Participants completed the argumentative writing tasks with access to Google Translate (GT), an online tool that performs translations between two or more languages (Cancino & Panes, 2021). Prior to completing the argumentative writing tasks, participants took part in a 40-minute GT training session where they were presented with information on the website's interface and several strategies for effective use of the tool, such as translating brief texts, phrases, and individual words, as well as reviewing alternative translation options and performing reverse translations (Cancino & Panes, 2021). Participants were told that they could use GT to complete the argumentative writing tasks in order to complement their L2 writing when necessary, and to reduce anxiety levels experienced during the writing tasks, which have been found to hinder learners' engagement (Erkan & Saban, 2011; Sabti et al., 2019). Moreover, GT can help learners reduce the frustration of making mistakes while they write (Tsai, 2019). Indeed, even if learners are interested in a topic, an excessive degree of challenge may increase anxiety and

prompt them to desist from engaging with a task (Fulmer & Frijters, 2011). The use of GT also increased ecological validity, as participants had previously used the tool in learning tasks and it was freely available to them.

Qualitative interviews

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants to elicit their opinions and attitudes toward TI and their experiences when producing two pieces of writing under varying interest conditions. Interviews can provide “rich and detailed data about individual experiences and perspectives” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 80). The interview protocol involved general questions addressing TI, including features of individual and situational interest discussed in the literature (Harackiewicz & Knogler, 2017; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Silvia, 2006). For instance, the participants were asked about their perceptions in relation to their HTI and LTI topics, delving into their previous experiences and engagement with them, and how these individual interest aspects influenced their performance. Questions regarding situational interest were primarily focused on how contextual aspects of the topic and the writing task (e.g., novelty, surprisingness, degree of challenge,) influenced their engagement with writing and the quality of writing itself. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ L1 to ensure comprehension and elicit more complete and valid responses that are not hindered by L2 performance.

Procedures

Participants were asked to complete an assent form, while the parents or guardians read and signed a consent form. They were informed about the study procedures and were told that their personal information and data would not be shared, would be safely stored, and would only be used for academic purposes. Once access and participants’ consent were secured, data collection was completed in four sessions. The first session was carried out in the school’s laboratory. Participants completed the TI scale through Google Forms, which was followed by the GT training session. Once the TI profiles of the participants were identified for HTI and LTI topics, this information was used to create the argumentative writing tasks under the two conditions. Session 2 took place two weeks after session 1 and was devoted to the completion of the first argumentative writing task. To reduce order effects and increase the validity of the within-subjects design, the argumentative writing tasks were completed in a counterbalanced manner. That is, half of the participants started with the HTI writing task, and the other half started with the LTI writing task. They were given 60 minutes to complete the task in Google Forms. Session 3 was completed one week after session 2. Students completed the argumentative writing task under the other condition (either HTI or LTI). Finally, two weeks after session 3, session 4 was held to conduct the face-to face semi-structured interviews. Figure 1 summarizes the procedures conducted in the study.

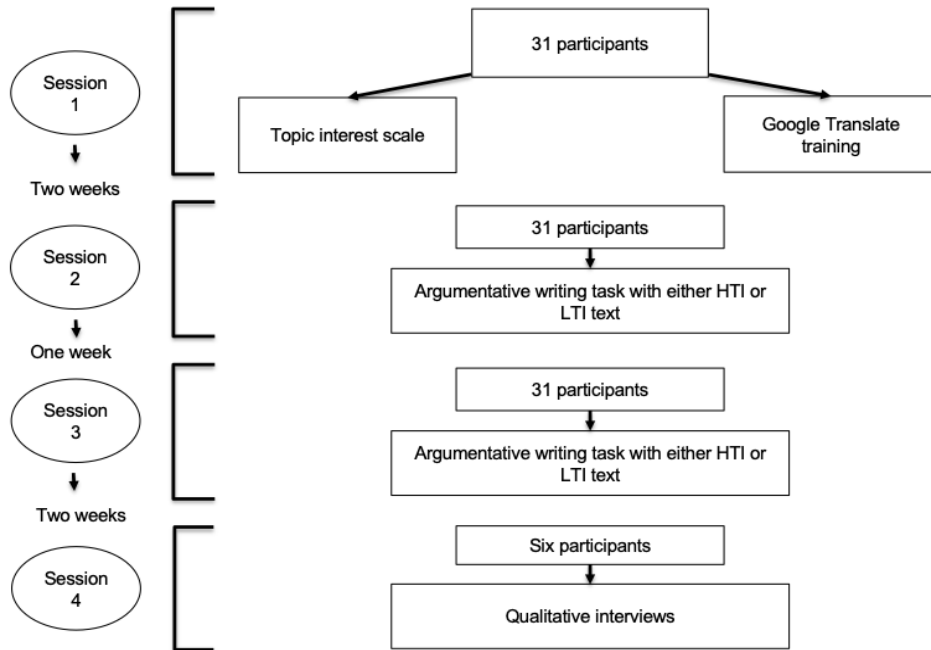


Figure 1 Summary of procedures

Method of analysis

Writing quality was assessed through the analytic rubric adapted from Jacobs et al. (1981). The main researcher provided scores for the rubrics and the components (content, organization, language use, lexicon, and writing mechanics). Each component had the same weight in the ratings provided. Inter-rater reliability was addressed by having a trained research assistant complete the scoring process and then calculating intraclass correlation coefficients. The coefficients were found to be over .95 across all components, which suggested high consistency in the rubric scores provided. In addition, writing quantity was operationalized as the number of words written in the argumentative writing tasks in both the HTI and LTI conditions, an approach that is in line with current research (Cancino & Isami, 2025; Tsai, 2019; Wen & Walters, 2022). Paired sample *t*-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores for rubric components and for number of words written in the HTI and the LTI conditions. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was employed to analyze interview data. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, which was followed by a process of coding relevant data arising from patterns presented in the answers. Themes emerging from the data were identified and discussed.

RESULTS

Quantitative results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for rubric component scores (writing quality) and the number of words written (writing quantity) in both HTI and LTI conditions.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics

Condition	Measure	Mean	Std. Deviation
High topic interest (HTI)	Content	23.39	2.78
	Organization	22.19	3.51
	Language use	21.94	3.55
	Lexicon	22.52	2.99
	Writing mechanics	20.35	3.63
	Total rubric score	110.39	14.18
	<i>n</i> words written	234.45	58.20
Low topic interest (LTI)	Content	21.39	3.58
	Organization	21.23	3.47
	Language use	21.19	2.97
	Lexicon	21.42	3.67
	Writing mechanics	19.16	3.41
	Total rubric score	104.26	14.38
	<i>n</i> words written	204.00	57.7

The data presented showed higher scores for the HTI means compared with LTI means across all measures. The most prominent difference was found between the number of words written for the HTI condition ($M = 234.45$, $SD = 58.20$) and the LTI condition ($M = 204.00$, $SD = 57.70$). As for the components in the analytic rubric, content in the HTI condition ($M = 23.39$, $SD = 2.78$) displayed the highest difference in relation to the LTI condition ($M = 21.39$, $SD = 3.58$). The overall writing rubric score for the HTI condition ($M = 110.39$, $SD = 14.18$) was higher than the overall writing rubric score for the LTI condition ($M = 104.26$, $SD = 14.38$).

Inferential statistics

Paired sample *t*-tests (Table 2) were run to compare the mean scores for all the measures under HTI and LTI conditions. Since a correction for multiple testing was necessary, the Bonferroni-Holm formula was applied (Menyhart et al., 2021), which yielded an adjusted *p* value of 0.009. Results for writing quality indicated significant differences for content ($t(30) = 3.754$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.67$) and overall rubric score ($t(30) = 3.098$, $p = .004$, $d = 0.56$) with moderate effect sizes. This suggests that when participants wrote about interesting topics, the depth, relevance, and detail of the content produced was significantly higher in the HTI condition than the LTI condition, and that this meaningful difference was maintained for the overall rubric score. Regarding the number of words written, a significant difference was observed between conditions ($t(30) = 2.786$, $p = .009$, $d = 0.50$) with a moderate effect size, indicating that participants wrote more words in the HTI condition than in the LTI condition.

Table 2
Paired sample t-test results for all measures under HTI and LTI conditions

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% CI				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Content HTI - Content LTI	2	2.97	.533	.91	3.09	3.754	30	.001*
Pair 2	Organization HTI - Organization LTI	.968	3.07	.552	-.16	2.09	1.754	30	.090
Pair 3	Language use HTI - Language use LTI	.742	2.49	.447	-.17	1.66	1.659	30	.107
Pair 4	Lexicon HTI - Lexicon LTI	1.097	3.48	.625	-.18	2.37	1.756	30	.089
Pair 5	Writing mechanics HTI - Writing mechanics LTI	1.194	3.25	.584	.00	2.39	2.045	30	.050
Pair 6	Rubric score HTI - Rubric score LTI	6.129	11.01	1.978	2.09	10.17	3.098	30	.004*
Pair 7	n words written HTI - n words written LTI	30.452	60.85	10.930	8.13	52.77	2.786	30	.009*

*Significant *p* values after Bonferroni-Holm correction.

Qualitative results

Table 3 presents demographic information of the six participants interviewed as well as their TI profiles. Pseudonyms were used to ensure participants' anonymity.

Table 3
Interview participants

Name	Age	Gender	English Level	HTI	LTI
Giselle	15	Female	A2	Athletic training	Video Games
Cristian	15	Male	B1	Reading through the years	Volleyball and health
Beatriz	15	Female	A2	Food and health	Video Games
Mateo	15	Male	B1	Discipline in sports	Volleyball and health
Andrés	15	Male	A2	Social media and pop culture	Reading through the years
María	15	Female	B1	Volleyball and health	Chilean laws on climate change

Relevant themes were identified in the interview data: Individual interest features, Situational interest features, and Prior knowledge and TI.

Individual interest features

Participants were asked about individual interest features in the topics for the argumentative writing tasks. Cristian commented that completing the HTI writing task was not difficult to accomplish as the topic matched his preferences, and he was able to develop an argument:

[The HTI writing task] was not difficult for me. I came up with an idea just after reading the question (...) The ideas came to me very quickly. For example, what I was going to write about, and arguments that I could use to defend the idea (...) It was not difficult for me to create something.

When participants were asked how their individual interests influenced their writing process, they felt connected to the high interest topic, which made their experience much more fruitful. For example, Giselle addressed her preference for the topic in the HTI condition, and that she did her best in order to write a good piece of writing:

There are topics that interest me, and I have a certain fondness toward them, so to speak. I think that I would put in the effort that is needed (...) I gave it my all [in the HTI writing task] to make it work (...) I related to the subject so much that it was like... (The ideas) just came naturally. It was difficult, but I liked it. I finally felt like it was of some use to me.

The relevance of individual interest features was also highlighted by María, who stated that writing about a topic that interested her was not only easier, but was also more engaging, which motivated her to write: “[The topic in the HTI writing task] was more entertaining and easier. It was easier for me (...) And I also think that because I liked it ... I had more motivation to write”. Likewise, Mateo expressed that the writing process felt smoother, and his ideas were more accurate, as he felt connected to the topic:

[The high interest topic] kind of excited me. I mean, I am excited to know more about it and talk about my opinion or something like that (...) My writing was also smoother. Like I had more precise ideas (...) I struggled a lot less. When you get a topic that you like more, you feel more guided in what to do... Or like, you know more about what to do.

These statements illustrate the idea that the participants’ individual interest in relation to the HTI writing task fostered motivation and enjoyment, which helped them develop their ideas particularly in terms of the content that was created. In contrast, participants expressed that it was more difficult for them to write in the LTI condition. Cristian affirmed that the use of English and organization was difficult for him while completing the LTI task: “[The low interest topic task] was difficult. Choosing the words and organizing myself properly”. This is in line with what Andrés said regarding the differences between both conditions:

At first, I didn’t know what to write, but then I realized that I had to think more with [the LTI writing task] than with the [HTI writing] task. It was different. In the [HTI writing task] I wrote specific information, but the [LTI writing task] was more general because, when I saw the [LTI] writing topic I was wondering about it, but I didn’t know how to answer the question well.

Participants perceived that the information they provided in the LTI writing task was superficial and the arguments provided by them were not as detailed as in the HTI writing

task, even though they were given the same amount of time to complete each task. Mateo asserted: “I was running out of time, so I completed [the LTI writing task] in a much more hurried way, with more general ideas. I completed the [HTI writing task] in a more focused way, I spent time on it”.

Participants expressed that the LTI task was less engaging compared to the HTI task. Andres remarked: “This [LTI writing task] was more boring than the [HTI writing task]” Likewise, Mateo affirmed: “I did [the LTI writing task] just because I had to do it”. These statements agree with the quantitative results highlighting significant differences for the content component, as learners engaged more with the HTI writing task and conveyed more ideas that were aligned with their personal interest.

Situational interest features

Situational interest was manifested in various ways. The approachable instructions, along with the perception of an adequate level of challenge, played a supporting role in maintaining situational interest even in the LTI task. These elements made the task more manageable and increased engagement with the writing tasks:

Mateo: When I saw the (LTI) question it helped me a lot (...) It encouraged me much more and it made it easier for me to complete the task.

Cristian: The introductory text helped me, so I got information from there, yes. (...) It helped me organize the ideas that I had with the information in the text.

Furthermore, some participants affirmed that they found the topics to be more interesting as they were presented in context. Cristian stated: “In general, I was surprised that the topics presented some arguments to write the essays, so they were quite interesting. [The questions] helped me to direct the objective of the arguments”. Similarly, Mateo stated that the prompt question helped him develop his HTI writing task:

What interested me [regarding the HTI writing task] is the question that was asked (...) I already understand the importance of discipline in sport. But the question seemed to me like a very good one because it asked me whether discipline or talent was better in sports. So, the question itself helped me complete the task.

In addition, Beatriz revealed that even though she had to write about something she did not like in the LTI writing task, she was interested in the activity as it presented ideas that were unfamiliar to her: “Yeah, I mean, it is interesting because I didn’t know that there were players who could make money by playing tournaments”. Despite her lack of familiarity with specific aspects of the low-interest topic, it contained situational interest features, such as novelty. In this case, the novelty of the topic captured her interest and contributed toward completing the task. This, in turn, influenced her motivation to accomplish a writing task that initially did not appeal to her. These perceptions suggest that clear and engaging instructions and prompts can increase situational interest in a writing task, leading learners to increase their commitment with the writing task.

Prior knowledge and TI

The study addressed the significant difference in writing engagement by asking participants whether their prior knowledge of the topics in the HTI and LTI writing tasks influenced their production. Mateo alluded to a sense of effortlessness when writing about a topic for which he had more information and was connected to his interests: “If one has a notion of what something is about, or knowledge about that particular topic, it is much easier to talk about it or try to explain it”. He connected his previous experiences with the topic with his performance in the HTI writing task:

I train for basketball, and I frequently participate in competitions (...) I had already researched this. For example, basketball players who have very rigorous routines. (...) so I already knew more or less what it was like (...) So... I already had a notion of what to talk about.

In connection with Mateo’s observation, Andrés also highlighted the differences in prior knowledge when writing about high and low interest topics, noting that his ideas came across more easily in the HTI writing task due to his familiarity with the topic:

The ideas flowed less [in the LTI writing task] because, for example, I got stuck trying to think of what to write. Instead, [in the HTI writing task] I read the prompt and said, okay, I know about this topic (...) My ideas on that topic flowed quite well (...) I can write a lot about topics that I do like, since I have a lot of knowledge about them.

Participants related their individual interest toward a topic with the amount of prior knowledge they had about that topic. Giselle acknowledged the relationship between the constructs: “I would say both aspects are related. I know about a topic because it interests me”. This is in line with Cristian’s perception, who stated that he was interested in the HTI topic due to his knowledge about the subject, which helped him develop his ideas:

I think that I developed the arguments more clearly [in the HTI writing task]. They are more extensive. I feel that I was more interested in the topic because I already had knowledge about it. [Prior knowledge] allowed me to develop the idea that I wanted to write about more quickly. Knowledge, in the end, helps develop an opinion.

In contrast, his comments provided in regard to the LTI writing task reflected a sense of frustration: “It was difficult, creating the words, organizing myself properly and everything... It made me angry because I had to get into a world that I’m not normally involved in”. María also considered prior knowledge as an influential factor in her writing development: “I didn’t know much and that’s why it took me a while to write [in the LTI writing task]”. Interestingly, Beatriz explained that while individuals with a high level of prior knowledge in a topic can allow one to produce more language, a high interest will positively impact the quality of the arguments and ideas presented:

You could just as easily write a lot just as if you had the knowledge, even if you don't like it (...) However, if you are interested I feel that you can write more, like... like giving more details and organizing the information better.

In line with María, Beatriz also connected her interest in the HTI writing task with her prior knowledge of the topic:

I have more arguments to put forward because I already know about the topic. It is easier to come up with more ideas for those arguments that you already have in your mind (...) My mom also likes the topic of food and health, and she also tells me things about that topic so I kind of liked it too.

In contrast, Beatriz explained that due to her low interest and lack of understanding in the LTI writing task, she simply wrote down ideas without much processing: "I didn't like the [low interest] topic, so I didn't understand it (...) I wrote what came to my mind. I did not have information about it. I wrote what I believed, what I heard about it". Giselle, whose HTI writing task had 404 words compared to 221 words in her LTI writing, expressed that writing about her HTI topic influenced her production. She noted that it prompted a stronger focus on content that was driven by her prior knowledge: "What I wrote wasn't so new to me, I told myself. I kept going and going and going". In line with this, Beatriz concluded that in her HTI writing task she wrote more than in her LTI writing task and was able to put forward more arguments: "I know the topic. It is easier for me to come up with more ideas about those arguments that you have already written somewhere else. So, it seems that more ideas come to you, and you write more".

DISCUSSION

Impact of TI on EFL learners' writing development

The first research question addressed the impact of TI on writing quality (as measured by an analytic rubric) and writing quantity (as measured by the number of words written). Results revealed that learners wrote significantly more words in the HTI writing task and that the differences in overall rubric scores and in the content component for both conditions were significant. As regards writing quality, the significant difference for content can be explained in terms of learners being willing to develop their ideas to a greater extent when they were interested in the topic (Cancino & Isami, 2025; Hidi et al., 2006). This behavior triggers motivation, engagement, and attention toward a task (O'Keefe & Harackiewicz, 2017). The results are in agreement with the findings reported by De Bernardi and Antolini (2006) and Eidswick and Asaba (2018) suggesting that the provision of interesting topics for students, together with choice could influence several aspects of L2 writing, including word production, grammatical accuracy, lexical sophistication, and intrinsic motivation. Although the present study did not include choice as a variable for the writing tasks, the argument can be made that topic selection is closely related to interest in that it is a motivational variable that increases task engagement and fluency (Bonzo, 2008). The absence of significant differences regarding

grammatical complexity in Bonzo's study could be to some extent explained by the absence of interest as a variable that is manipulated in the design. Overall, offering students meaningful choices in L2 writing tasks can lead to better outcomes in performance. Turning to writing quantity, results suggest that TI had a positive impact on EFL learners' intrinsic motivation to write, which encouraged writing production and writing development. This should not imply that learners will only produce more words when they display individual interest in a topic. Topics that trigger situational interest such as relevant classroom or school life factors may also increase written output. As Kahu et al. (2017) and Renninger and Hidi (2016) state, situational interest emerges in educational settings from the interaction between the context and the student's response to it. Thus, situational features of a text or an environment may interact with individual features and together drive intrinsically motivated actions (Tin, 2016).

The differences between the scores in the other rubric components (organization, language use, lexicon) did not reach significance. The meaningful difference between the writing mechanics scores in both conditions was rendered not significant after applying a statistical correction for multiple testing. This suggests that participants in the HTI task may have prioritized content over linguistic accuracy and language use. Although Chilean national curriculum guidelines address content, organization, language use, lexicon, and writing mechanics at the A2 CEFR level (Ministerio de Educación Chile, 2016), participants appeared to allocate more attention to generating a greater number of ideas when they were interested in the topic. In addition, access to GT may have prompted learners in the LTI condition to rely more on the tool (Cancino & Isami, 2025; Cancino & Panes, 2021; Mirzaeian & Oskoui, 2023) and generate sentences that are grammatically accurate but are not critically appraised before submission. In contrast, participants in the HTI may have focused more on the quality of their ideas, and less on grammatical accuracy or writing mechanics, which is typical of a shift of focus from form to content (Lo & Hyland, 2007). The absence of significant differences regarding organization also indicates that TI may not have a major impact on the logical sequencing of ideas, which might also be explained by the lower-level proficiency of these secondary education learners. Overall, results suggest that TI functions as a motivational variable, enhancing cognitive performance in the provision of content and engagement with writing.

Learners' perceptions regarding the HTI and LTI writing tasks

The second research question addressed the perceptions of these EFL learners toward TI in the HTI and LTI argumentative writing tasks they completed. Analysis of interview data revealed that components such as individual interest, situational interest, and prior knowledge influenced their perceptions toward the writing process. Regarding individual interest, one of the initial findings observed was the level of effortlessness participants experienced when writing about a high interest topic. Participants expressed that the process of writing in the HTI condition was smoother than in the LTI condition. They underscored their intrinsic motivation when writing about an interesting topic, which made them feel more capable when generating ideas and content for the writing task. These perceptions are in line with research highlighting the positive impact of interest in writing and in other motivational variables such as self-efficacy (Hidi et al., 2006). Furthermore, individual interest has a positive impact on deep-level learning by fostering engagement, comprehension, and long-term retention

(Naceur & Schiefele, 2005), aspects that may have facilitated understanding of the topic and the production of text and content. Participants agreed that the LTI writing task was more difficult to complete as they were less engaged, and it required more time and effort for them to create arguments. Therefore, they ended up writing superficial ideas. A high interest in the topic drove learners to produce more words and content in the HTI writing task and, at the same time, motivated them to overcome challenges as they experienced positive emotions. As Renninger and Hidi (2016) state, individuals who are interested in a topic or task are more likely to experience positive emotions, set goals, and persist in overcoming challenges.

As regards situational interest, participants acknowledged its role in the writing process in terms of collative variables (Silvia, 2006) such as task complexity, vividness, and novelty. As regards task complexity, approachable and clear guidelines, materials, and instructions, along with the perception of an adequate level of challenge, played a supporting role in maintaining situational interest. These elements made the task manageable, reduced cognitive overload, and increased engagement with the writing tasks (Silvia, 2006). Hidi and Boscolo (2006) stated that a lack of understanding of task requirements can result in incorrect evaluations of one's own ability, leading to poor performance in the task. This situational feature was recognized in both HTI and LTI conditions and may have prompted learners to engage with the LTI writing task to some extent, even though they acknowledged the difficulties to produce content and arguments in that condition. If the topic is regarded as complex but incomprehensible, it can drive emotions such as frustration rather than interest (Tin, 2016). The impact of interest can emerge when individuals perceive a task as both interesting and within their ability to handle, aspects that were fulfilled in the HTI condition. Additionally, presenting information vividly, clearly, and in an appealing manner were situational interest features that contributed to a temporary state of engagement with the topic (Schraw et al., 1995; Tin, 2016). Finally, even though novelty has been found to positively influence learners' performance during tasks (Chen et al., 2001), these learners reported that they were more engaged with an interesting topic because they knew about the topic and knew what to write about. Thus, the quality of instructions and an appropriate degree of challenge and vividness are likely to trigger situational interest which, in turn, fosters greater behavioral and cognitive engagement, ultimately leading to improved learning and academic performance (Kahu et al., 2017).

Prior knowledge was regarded by participants as relevant in the HTI writing task, as it allowed them to provide sufficient content. They underscored the advantages of being familiarized with the topic when completing a writing task, as it helped them develop better and stronger arguments, in line with Yang and Kim (2018). They also stated that a topic that they considered interesting was related to a higher level of prior knowledge, which was pivotal in making the writing process more effortless. In contrast, participants in the LTI writing task reported a lack of prior knowledge regarding the topic, stating that their performance was limited when compared to the HTI writing task. Prior knowledge and interest typically correlate (Silvia, 2006), and they both optimize the cognitive and emotional resources that are needed to enhance writing coherence and argumentation (Catrysse et al., 2022). Learners likely remembered and retrieved information to prepare their arguments for the HTI writing task, and their perceptions suggests that performance in this condition was not only influenced by the level of interest in the topic, but also on the background knowledge that they possessed in relation to the topic.

It must be noted, however, that a highly interesting topic can encourage learners to explore the topic, even if their prior knowledge is low (Lee, 2009) due to the influence of intrinsic motivation in achieving personal enjoyment through a new challenge (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Nevertheless, prior knowledge was perceived by these participants as pivotal in developing their arguments in an efficient and coherent manner, fostering self-confidence and increased word production. To sum up, both individual interest and situational interest played a crucial role in shaping the development of HTI and LTI writing tasks. Individual interest led to more complex structures in the HTI condition, while situational interest was aroused by contextual features and helped initiate engagement.

CONCLUSION

The present study sought to assess the impact of TI on writing quality and writing quantity, as well as explore the perceptions of EFL learners toward TI in the argumentative writing tasks they completed. Results revealed that TI had an impact on the content of the writing and the number of words that learners produced, while perceptions of learners toward the writing tasks identified individual, situational, and prior knowledge components related to their performance. The study contributes to research evaluating the effect of motivational variables such as TI in writing outcomes, and to a more qualitative appraisal of the perceptions of learners when engaging in writing tasks. There are a number of limitations related to the study. A larger sample of students divided into groups matching specific baseline writing proficiency levels may have yielded stronger significant differences in the rubric components. Likewise, the inclusion of MANOVA designs for larger samples could allow for a more thorough examination of interaction effects across writing components. Additionally, although the within-subjects design increases validity of the responses provided by the participants, it did not trace any changes in interest over time. Under a developmental perspective, interest is regarded as a multifaceted construct that adapts over time and across contexts (Krapp, 2007), and as such, it can be influenced by cognitive, emotional, and contextual that allow progress from momentary engagement to greater, continuous involvement (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). Future studies could include a more longitudinal approach to assess how TI impacts perceptions and learning development over time.

Regarding pedagogical implications, the study highlighted the role of TI in writing development, an aspect that is relevant in secondary education EFL contexts. As Tin (2016) states, individual interest evolves over time, and the various interest frameworks that students have cultivated since early childhood significantly influence their educational experiences and the growth of other interests, such as learning a language. Teachers can benefit from providing learners with interesting topics and creating tasks that allow them to explore their interests. The EFL curriculum should provide learners with more frequent opportunities to choose their topics in the classroom, thus enhancing their interest and engagement in the EFL writing process. While it is acknowledged that including students' interests in each classroom activity may be demanding for teachers, simple approaches such as using a TI scale to gauge interest, holding conversations with learners, or keeping teachers journals may be useful actions to keep a record of students' current interests and use that information as a resource when planning the lessons. Once

learners identify an interesting topic, they can benefit from writing about it to build language skills that will be useful when they are required to write about less interesting topics in the classroom. Teachers can also increase situational interest to nurture TI in the classroom by means of engaging tasks and informative and clear prompts. Students who possess a personal interest in a particular topic tend to exhibit higher levels of attention, enjoyment, persistence, and knowledge acquisition while engaging with it, compared to those who do not (Troia et al., 2013). It follows that incorporating topics that resonate with students' interests can boost their motivation for writing tasks, their sense of autonomy, and their control over the task (Lo & Hyland, 2007). Moreover, if topics are connected to personal experiences, students are more likely to develop interest in the lessons and find them more meaningful and relevant, which can lead to deeper, long-term engagement (Kahu & Gerrard, 2018). Students will likely benefit from strategic approaches that incorporate students' preferences and prompt self-reflection during writing. These strategies may involve asking learners to compare L2 translations that tackle learners' interests, identifying changes in meaning, and using online dictionaries to compare and acquire lexical items. This approach involves redesigning writing tasks and objectives that align with learners' social context, creating writing activities that hold personal significance and interest, and incorporating opportunities for self-expression that can foster student engagement and higher quality written work in the EFL classroom.

THE AUTHORS

Marco Cancino is an associate professor at Universidad Andres Bello, Chile. He has a doctoral degree in Applied Linguistics and Education from the University of Bristol, UK. His main interests are related to reading interest, vocabulary learning, and using technological tools in the EFL classroom.

marco.cancino@unab.cl

Maria Rayo holds a BA in English Language Teaching for Primary and Secondary Education from Universidad Andres Bello, Chile. She currently works as an EFL secondary education teacher. Her main academic interests include L2 writing development and student motivation.

m.rayomandujano@uandresbello.edu

Marjorie Avila holds a BA in English Language Teaching for Primary and Secondary Education from Universidad Andres Bello, Chile. She currently works as an EFL primary education teacher. Her main academic interests include L2 self-efficacy and the use of technology in the EFL classroom.

mvilacastillo@uandresbello.edu

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