

The Effects of Prompts on Korean EFL Learners' Writing Performance

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of prompt types on EFL learners' writing performance. 6 university students and 10 university students were provided with bare and prose prompts and the fluency of their writings was measured by analyzing the length of product (word count) and mean length of T-units (MLTU) was used to measure syntactic complexity. Furthermore, independent T-tests were administered in addition to qualitative analysis in order to determine whether the differences between the two types of prompts were significant. The results showed that while high school students' writing wrote longer texts and had higher MLTU on the prose prompt than the bare prompt, a large portion of their writing was copied from the prompt when they were provided with the prose prompt. The university students' writing showed that they wrote longer texts and had higher MLTU on the bare prompt than the prose prompt. In addition, they had responded after the test that they were able to write more freely when they were given the bare prompt. The findings of this study suggest that test developers need to consider the effects of prompt types and examine the quality of the writings more carefully.

I. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

One of the most important factors that can affect students' writing performance in writing assessment is the prompt since it provides information regarding the expected response. In other words, the writing prompt determines and shapes the content of the students' response. A number of studies have examined the role of prompts in L2 writing assessment (Hirokawa & Swales, 1986; Hamp-Lyons, 1991; Kroll & Reid, 1994). Weigle (2002) identifies prompt wording (e.g., question vs. statement, implicit vs. explicit, and amount of context provided) as one of the features that influence task variability. Accordingly, while the topic of the writing prompt may be the same, students' response could differ as a result of different prompt formats. For example, Way, Joiner, and Seaman (2000) used two different prompt formats (bare and prose model) to compare the quality, fluency, and syntactic complexity in novice students' L2 writing in French in order to examine the different effects of prompts on students' writing performance. They conclude from the results of their study that providing authentic prose model prompt allowed students to produce written responses that were better in quality, fluency, and syntactic complexity. From such results, Way et al. (2000) suggest

that prose model prompt should be considered for writing tests since they allow students to interact with the text and help them write longer texts. Although their suggestion brings new insights concerning the effects of different prose formats, there has not been any attempt to replicate their study within ESL/EFL settings to check for the generalizability of their results.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine whether the effects of different formats of prompts are generalizable within Korean EFL. In particular, the aim of this study is to determine if there are similar effects, as reported by Way et al. (2000), when Korean EFL students are given the bare and prose prompts used in their study. In order to determine such effects, the following research questions are considered:

1. Are there quantitative differences between a bare prompt and a prose model prompt in terms of students' fluency?
2. Are there qualitative differences between a bare prompt and a prose model prompt in terms of students' content?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Hamp-Lyons (1990), writing prompt is considered one of the task variables, along with length of time, use of paper and pen, and topic, that is "manipulated and controlled to give every test taker the opportunity to produce his or her best performance"(p. 73). Prompts can also contain contextual material that helps the writer to engage in the task by "establishing the setting, participants, purpose, and other features of the situation" (Douglas, 2000, p. 55). Indeed, many L2 writing studies highlight some of the main points which test designers need to consider when writing prompts for assessment. For example, Antoniazzi (2005) provides a general outline of the characteristics of writing prompts by asking students to "describe, comment, criticize, agree or disagree" (p. 39). In terms of the formats of writing prompts, Kroll and Reid (1994) define a bare prompt as an "open structure" such as one provided in (a).

- (a) Many Americans like to participate actively in different sports.
Write an essay in which you discuss the reason why you do or do not like to play sports. Be specific. (p. 233).

On the other hand, a "framed" prompt is one where "a situation or set of circumstances is presented, and then a task is presented based on the interpretation of the frame" (p. 233). An example of a framed prompt is provided in (b).

- (b) It always strikes me as a terrible shame to see young people spending so much of their time staring at television. If we could unplug all the TV sets in American, our children would grow up to be healthier, better educated, and more independent human beings.
- Do you agree or disagree? Explain and illustrate your answer from your own experience, your observation of others, or your reading. (p. 233)

As illustrated in (a) and (b), many different aspects of the prompt including the length, syntactic and lexical complexity, and the degree of explicitness can affect the writing performance of the students. Cho (2003) points out the need for test writers to be aware of the effects of writing prompts when they design them for assessment since they “interact with other factors such as examinees’ background and raters’ scoring decisions” in addition to determining the content of the response (p. 168).

How do different formats of prompts affect test performance in writing assessment? In L1 writing research, Quellmalz, Capell, and Chou (1982) the discourse mode (i.e., expository and descriptive tasks) affects students’ writing performance. Hoetker (1982) found that while students performed better on the personal experience topic than the topic that required abstract reasoning. In terms of stimulus material, such as a reading passage, that helps students to engage in the writing task, Weigle (2002) argues that if the task is constructed poorly, there is a possibility that writers “borrow so extensively from the language of the input text that their own writing ability cannot be determined” (p. 95). In fact, Lewkowicz (1997) showed that while a background reading provided students with ideas about what to write, it did not improve the quality of their writing. The students who were given the text in Lewkowicz’s (1997) study tended to lack originality by being limited to the ideas given in the text. Furthermore, they also copied the language from the text. As for the rhetorical specification and prompt writing, Brossell (1983) argues that a prompt that moderately specifies what is required in the writing can help writers focus better than a high-load prompt that directs and controls each step of the student’s writing. As pointed out by Kroll and Reid (1994), “if there is too much specification, all the papers may end up sounding the same” (p. 239). However, Way et al. (2000) claim that the stimulus material was found to be helpful. In their study, they investigated how students’ writing differs according to different prompt formats (bare vs. prose model). They conclude from their findings that the prose model prompts elicited more interaction between the writer and the task, which allowed the students to write longer texts and more syntactically complex sentences. In addition, they claim that the students did not copy from the prose model prompt. However, their

conclusion is drawn from quantitative analysis of the students' writing without any qualitative analysis of their results. In fact, many studies often do not provide an in-depth discussion regarding the effects of prompts on writing performance since they tend to rely on holistic or analytic scores using a predetermined rubric to be the sole predictor of the students' writing quality. As Hamp-Lyons (1991) pointed out, there are too many studies that emphasize quantitative significance without considering qualitative aspects of the data. Similarly, results provided by Way et al. (2000) seem to provide quantitative results without explaining why there were differences between the two prompt formats.

Studies that did analyze the effects of prompts on students' writing qualitatively were based in the ESL setting. For instance, the results from the interview conducted in Hirokawa and Swales (1986) showed that their non-native participants performed better with elaborate prompts than simple prompts because they considered the former to be more direct in terms of what the participants needed to include in their writing. Although these results offer an insightful view of the interaction between prompts and writing performance, they can not be considered directly applicable to the Korean EFL setting due to many differences between the two FL contexts.

What is, then, the relevance of these studies for Korean EFL learners? In Pollitt and Hutchinson (1987) (cited in Hamp-Lyons, 1991, p. 89), the results of the Rasch analysis found that unskilled writers were the ones who were mostly affected by prompt variation. In this respect, Korean EFL students can be considered as novice and weak writers since they do not receive English writing instructions in secondary school and have little opportunity to compose in English for university courses. Hence, it is highly possible that Korean EFL students are sensitive to different types of prompts due to their low-level of writing ability. In addition, since such studies were conducted within ESL contexts (Hirokawa & Swales, 1986) and western participants in FL context, issues that pertain to the Korean EFL setting are not made clear. Therefore, a study that evaluates the effects of writing prompts on writing performance is needed in Korean EFL context in order to distinguish EFL from ESL factors.

III. METHOD

1. Data Collection

In order to determine the effects of different types of prompts on writing performance, two types of test were given to two different groups of participants, each group responding to either bare or prose model prompt. Both types of prompt were

descriptive, which asked the participants to write a letter to an imaginary pen-pal (Appendix I). The participants consisted of 6 university students and 10 high school seniors. The university students were non-English majors and did not have any experiences abroad. The high school students were mostly seniors and were prospective engineering majors who had already been accepted to universities including KAIST. Due to different levels of English proficiency, this study conducted within-group comparison. Each participant was asked to fill out a background questionnaire before the test and post-writing comments¹ were given after they had completed the test (Appendix II). Post-writing interviews were conducted in order to clarify the written comments. After meeting each participant personally, the test was administered by the researcher. The time limit of the test was set between 30-40 minutes and the participants were allowed to ask questions² and use their electronic dictionary if needed during the test.

2. Instrument and Scoring

In order to measure fluency, this study analyzed the length of product (word count), which was a scoring instrument used by Henry (1996), Reid, (1990), and Way et al. (2000). Adopting the scoring method from Way et al. (2000), mean length of T-units (MLTU) was used to measure syntactic complexity. In terms of length of product, the number of English words was used to measure fluency. As for MLTU, the sentences were divided into T-units (a main clause plus any embedded subordinate clauses or phrases) and then they were divided into the total number of words. After scoring the written products, independent T-tests were administered in order to determine whether the differences between the two types of prompts were significant. In addition to the quantitative analysis, students' responses were analyzed qualitatively by the researcher.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. High School Students

Although independent T-test showed that there were no differences between the two

¹ For the post-writing comment, each student was given the other type of prompt (which they were not given) and were asked how their writing would have differed if they had been given that prompt instead of the ones they had actually responded.

² In order to simulate a test-taking setting, the participants were asked not to speak with one another during the experiment and were only allowed to ask the researcher questions.

types of prompts ($p = .615$), a closer examination revealed that the two types of prompts did influence the students' performance. As indicated in Table 1, the results from quantitative analysis shows that high school students wrote longer texts when they were given the prose prompt ($M = 118.80$) than when they responded to the bare prompt ($M = 81.40$).

TABLE 1
High School Students Writing Word Count

	Prompt	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
WC	Bare	5	81.40	33.746	15.092
	Prose	5	118.80	57.799	25.848

Similar results were found in the analysis of MLTU in high school students' writing. Table 2 illustrates that high school students received higher MLTU scores in the prose prompt ($M = 7.66$) when compared to the bare prompt ($M = 7.28$).

TABLE 2
High School Students Writing MLTU

	Prompt	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
MLTU	Bare	5	7.280	1.0710	.4790
	Prose	5	7.660	1.2178	.5446

In addition, according to their post-writing questionnaires, they answered that they preferred the prose model prompt since the example can give them some ideas as to how they should write the letter. In sum, the quantitative results along with their post-writing questionnaire seem to suggest that students perform better on the prose model prompt than the bare prompt.

On the other hand, when the writings were examined qualitatively, the results showed that a large portion of their letters were direct copies of the prose model prompt. For example, the writing sample from student A in (1) demonstrates that the student used the sentence structure of the prose model and simply inserted the appropriate vocabulary (shown here in bold):

- (1) Hi, My name is **S**. I am **18** years old and I live in **Seoul**.
I have **dark** hair and **dark** eyes. I am studying at **H**
High school.

While many students used the “inserting” technique in their writing, as shown in (1), a number of students copied directly from the writing prompt. For example, the writing sample from student B in (2) shows that this student used the exact structure from the prose model:

- (2) I live in the dorms with a roommate because my house
is too far from my school. So I really miss my family.

As a result, 23 words and 3 T-units of which are not originally from the student were calculated into student B's score. This result is more in line with Lewkowicz (1997) in terms of the students' tendency to copy from the prompt when it is highly specified. On the other hand, such a result contradicts the claim made by Way et al. (2000) in relation to the possibility of students copying from the prose prompt. In their study, they argued that their students did not copy since their students' responses had “mistakes of form that could have been avoided by copying the model” (p. 179). As indicated in (1) and (2), such an argument can not be applied to the students examined in the present study. A majority of students had answered in their background questionnaire that they did not have any opportunity to write creatively in their English classes and have not had any training in English writing. It is interesting to note that when their writing was scored quantitatively in terms of their fluency and accuracy, their score was higher for the prose prompt. However, when the quality of their writing was analyzed in terms of their originality and creativity, students seemed to write more freely when they were given the bare prompt. For example, student C in (3), who was provided with the bare prompt, began the letter by describing the weather and the students' current condition.

- (3) Unfortunately today is very cold, so I can't write well.
Please understand that.

As shown in (3), the sentence construction and the vocabulary can be said to be entirely from the students' writing ability and language proficiency while determining the writing ability of students in (1) and (2) is a bit difficult since the rater needs to distinguish between what is copied and what is original. Thus, the effectiveness suggested by Way et al. (2000) needs further consideration within Korean EFL setting, especially when

dealing with inexperienced writers with low proficiency.

2. University Students

The results from the analysis of university students' response (Table 3) shows that they wrote longer text when they were responding to bare prompt ($M = 312.33$) than the prose model prompt ($M = 161.67$).

TABLE 3
University Students Writing Word Count

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Prompt					Mean
WC	Bare	3	312.33	54.169	31.275
	Prose	3	161.67	48.809	28.180

Furthermore, the differences between the two prompts were shown to be statistically significant ($p = .023$). The syntactic complexity of the bare prompt responses was also shown to be higher ($M = 8.8$) than the prose model prompt ($M = 6.37$). The results are shown in TABLE 4.

TABLE 4
University Students Writing MLTU

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Prompt					Mean
MLTU	Bare	3	8.800	.9539	.5508
	Prose	3	6.367	3.2192	1.8586

Although the independent T-test showed that there were no differences between the two prompts ($p = .278$), it is worth noting that university students had higher MLTU in the bare prompt than the prose prompt.

In the post-writing questionnaire, the students answered that they felt restricted to a particular structure when they were given the prose model prompt. However, the bare prompt group commented that they felt more comfortable overall. When the content of the responses were examined, the results showed that while the content of the prose model prompt group stayed within the boundary provided by the prompt, the bare model

prompt group provided additional information that were more original and personal, such as the writing samples provided in (4) and (5):

- (4) In this semester, I'm taking so many classes and now I've regretted about that. I'm so worried about whether I can have a good grade on it.
- (5) Wow, I'm seeing the first snow of this winter in my country at the moment. It'll also start snowing in American since America and Korea go through the same season. Anyway, I'm glad to finish writing this letter with the beautiful snow outside. I wish you could feel what I feel now.

As shown in (4), the student elaborated on her school experience by providing her personal thoughts and insecurity regarding her future outcome. When (5) is compared with the writing sample in (6), it seems clear that students, indeed, felt restricted within the boundary of the example provided by the prose model.

- (6) I major in biology. I like my major very much.
My family is mother, father and younger brother.

Student's writing in (6) shows that she tried to stay close to the example provided in the prose model since she only elaborated on her opinions about her major in just one sentence and then quickly jumped on to the next topic regarding her family. The students had answered in the background questionnaire that, similar to the high school students, they have never taken any type of writing test and have not had any former training in English writing. Since there was no writing test to compare with, it was difficult to compare the writing ability between high school and university students.³ The only difference between the high school and university students is that while high school students had no writing experience, even in their L1, the university level students had written papers in their L1 in their college courses. Thus, the university students could be said to be more advanced writers than the high school students. The fact that the university students wrote longer texts and higher MLTU for the bare prompt could be that university students had had more writing experience in their L1 and that this could have made them become more comfortable with the freer structure provided by the bare

³ The English proficiency scores of the high school students were not available at the time of the experiment, thus their English proficiency could not be compared.

prompt.

In sum, while quantitative analysis of the high school students' text displayed that they performed better on the prose prompt than the bare prompt. However, a closer analysis of their writing revealed that a major portion of their writing for the prose prompt can not be used to measure their writing and language abilities since the structures and vocabulary are direct copies of the prose prompt. Although their scores were lower for the bare prompt, the texts were shown to be more original and provide a better indication of the students' ability. As for the university students, the students were demonstrated quantitatively and qualitatively as preferring the bare prompt over the prose prompt and this could have been due to their writing experiences in L1. Thus, it seems clear from this study that providing an authentic prose model might not be the most suitable method for Korean EFL students when measuring their English writing ability due to the fact that many other variables, such as copying from the prompt and feeling limited to a given frame, could affect students' writing performance.

V. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The results of this study showed that prompts, indeed, affected the students' writing performance. In particular, the results have shown that while high school students preferred the prose model prompt, university students favored the bare model prompt. The qualitative analysis of the high school students' response showed that the scores did not match up with their actual content. On the other hand, the qualitative analysis of university students' response revealed that there was more originality in terms of content found in the bare model prompt than the prose model prompt. The results indicate that the level of students' proficiency should be carefully considered when deciding which type of prompts to choose. In addition, it is necessary for qualitative analysis to describe and explain the results that are analyzed quantitatively in order to check whether the variables were analyzed properly.

The limitation of the study, however, is that, due to small sample size, the statistical results were not proven to be significant. Therefore, the results in this study can not be generalized. On the other hand, the fact that the qualitative analysis in this study found different results from those discussed in Way et al. (2000) is worth noting. Such contrasting results raise the issue of the need to reexamine the results from ESL studies before applying them to the EFL setting. Another limitation of this study is that holistic score was not included in the analysis. Therefore, the quality of the students' response was qualitatively analyzed only by the researcher. There were also limitations in the writing task since it only asked the participants provide descriptive writing rather than

consider the effects on other task types such as expository or argumentative. Lastly, the participants were not divided according to their proficiency level within groups. Therefore, individual indifferences were not included in the analysis.

In conclusion, it is important to be constantly aware of the fact that Korean EFL context is unique and that every theory or methodology that is based in ESL context need to be replicated in order to check if it is suitable in our particular setting. As for the effectiveness of the prose prompt, further analysis is needed in order to determine whether it is equally effective for our students.

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APPENDIX I: Bare Prompt and Prose Model Prompt

BARE PROMPT

Imagine that you have a penpal, Irene in United States. She has just written a letter to you. In her letter she described many things about herself such as what she looks like, what she does, and what her hobbies are. Now write a letter back to Irene describing yourself, your family and what they do, what kind of classes you are taking in your university, what you do during your pastimes, and what kind of movie/music you like and dislike.

PROSE MODEL PROMPT

Hello, my name is Irene. I am 25 years old and I live in Los Angeles. I have brown hair and green eyes. I am studying at University of Irvine and my major is Philosophy. I live in the dorms with a roommate because my house is too far from my school. So I really miss my family. I have an older brother and a younger sister. My older brother, James, is married and has two kids. My younger sister is still in high school. Both my parents are high school teachers. My mother teaches history and my father teaches math.

During my free time I like to watch movies and listen to music. I love science fiction movies but I don't like horror movies. I like to listen to soft music so I don't really like rock music. My favorite sitcom is Friends and I heard that it is also really popular in Korea. I hope to visit Korea one day and experience a different culture that I have heard so much about. Hope to hear from you soon.

Now write a letter back to Irene describing yourself, your family, your classes, your pastimes, and you likes and dislikes.

APPENDIX II: Background Questionnaire

1) Name:

2) University and major:

3) How many year have you studied English?

4) What was your English writing test score?

5) Have you ever studies at a English 학원/ or have you ever received English 과외?

If yes, what did you study? (Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing, Grammar)

6) Have you ever been/studied abroad? If yes, where and for how long?

7) Do you think you need English skills in your area of study? If yes, what skill(s) and why?

Comments

1) What was the difficult part of the test?

(시험에서, 특히 문제구문에서 어떤 면이 어려웠습니까?)

2) Do you think the prompt was helpful? Why or why not?

(문제가 도움이 됐습니까? 어떤 면에서 도움이 됐고 또 어떤 면에서 방해가 됐습니까?)

- 3) 만약 아래와 같은 문제구문으로 시험을 봤을 경우 작성하신 시험과 어떤 면에서 틀릴 것 같습니까?