Virtual Free-Writing Journal Portfolios in an Intensive English Program in Iraq

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Virtual Free-Writing Journal Portfolios in an Intensive English Program in Iraq

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INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONAL PROJECT
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( Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)
School for International Training
(SIT) Graduate Institute
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# Table of Contents

I. Virtual Free-Writing Journal Portfolios in an Intensive English Program in Iraq ................. 6
   1. Background Information ........................................................................................................ 6
   2. Research Questions/Objectives/Methods ............................................................................. 9
   3. Limitations ............................................................................................................................. 10
   4. Action Research Locale ......................................................................................................... 11

II. Literature Review .................................................................................................................. 11
   1. Controversial History of Freewriting .................................................................................... 12
   2. Uses and Benefits of Freewriting ......................................................................................... 15
   3. Counterarguments of Freewriting ......................................................................................... 19
   4. Noteworthy Exemplar of Freewriting ................................................................................... 24
   5. Appropriateness of Freewriting: Case Study ...................................................................... 26
   6. Summary ............................................................................................................................... 30

III. Research Design .................................................................................................................. 31

IV. Data Presentation/Analysis .................................................................................................. 34
   1. Student Interviews ............................................................................................................... 34
   2. Student Portfolios ............................................................................................................... 41
   3. Teacher’s Field Notes .......................................................................................................... 45
   4. Course Evaluations ............................................................................................................. 49

V. Discussion ............................................................................................................................. 50
   1. Implications For Teaching Practice ...................................................................................... 51
   2. Author’s Writing Pedagogy .................................................................................................. 55
   3. ‘Teacherless’ Writing Workshop ......................................................................................... 61
VI. Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................... 62
VII. References ........................................................................................................................................ 66
VIII. Appendices ......................................................................................................................................... 71
  1. Appendix A: Freewriting Project Description ............................................................................... 71
  2. Appendix B: E-Mail Recruitment ....................................................................................................... 72
  3. Appendix C: Informed Consent Form ............................................................................................... 73
  4. Appendix D: Interview Questions ....................................................................................................... 79
  5. Appendix E: Organizational Research Approval ............................................................................... 80
  6. Appendix F: Sample Freewriting Portfolios ..................................................................................... 81
Abstract

Middle-Eastern English language learners (ELLs), specifically Iraqi students, are often not well equipped to succeed in university settings where English is the medium of instruction (EMI) for their intended graduate and undergraduate studies. Oftentimes, they are weaker in their academic literacy skills, when compared to listening and speaking, and need extra scaffolding and/or remedial instruction to develop their reading and writing dexterity for overall academic success. One way to support their writing development is to implement free-writing journal projects that will enable them to cultivate an original writer voice, to think quickly and critically in the L2, and to integrate the conventions and competencies of academic writing and grammar within their L2 production. Thus, this research project will explore how to enhance Iraqi students’ literacy skills, particularly in writing, through the classroom practice of creating free-writing journals as a project-based learning experience. The benefits of exposing students to this active-learning task and potential limitations to its use will be investigated within the researcher’s unique context.

Keywords: freewriting, virtual, journal, portfolio, project-based, literacy, university, Iraq
Virtual Free-Writing Journal Portfolios in an Intensive English Program in Iraq

The American University of Iraq – Baghdad (AUIB) is a start-up university that officially launched its academic programs on February 14, 2021. Located on the outskirts of the capital, AUIB sits adjacent to the international airport on what used to be the land where Saddam Hussein’s palace stood. It later became a military base for the American military before the property was purchased by a wealthy Iraqi entrepreneur and repurposed for the establishment of an institution for higher learning. “The campus is a sight rarely seen in Baghdad’s urban sprawl: Ducks float by peacefully [within the man-made lakes permeating the campus] as a handful of students, backpacks slung over their shoulders, head to class. Glossy new buses take others across a winding road” (Kullab, 2021).

Having witnessed the opening of this brand-new university in a war-torn nation that is working to reconstruct itself, I have had the rare privilege of teaching the pioneering students of this liberal arts, American-style education, which is a new concept in Iraq as journalist Samya Kullab (2021) reported in her Washington Post article “American university hopes to fill higher-ed gap in Iraq” published the day after the private university officially opened its doors. Most of the 300-something students that gained entry to the university entered the English Language Academy (ELA), which is compulsory for all students wishing to pursue undergraduate studies. These students must study English for a certain period in the Academic Success Program (ASP) until they become proficient enough to “graduate” from the ELA and, thus, fully matriculate into their intended undergraduate program where English is the medium of instruction or EMI. In fact, as of January 2022 students can test out of the ELA and can move directly into their undergraduate program of study if they attain a minimum score of 100 on the Duolingo English exam upon completing Levels Four, Five or Six at the ELA.
Typical students who enroll in the ASP are Iraqi young adults, some of whom work full-time as engineers, teachers or businesspeople and others who are recent high school graduates. A minority of them already possess college degrees and are in pursuit of more. They come from different walks of life. Classes are coeducational. Some of the students may have transferred from local universities in Iraq for an authentic American educational experience. Others may want to work/study in or travel to the USA or elsewhere. Most, if not all, of them seek entrance into the undergraduate program of their choice upon completing their language studies in this preparatory year program in which they study academic English from highly qualified, foreign English instructors who hail from the USA, the UK, South Africa, Ireland, and Lebanon.

Upon completing the placement test, students are placed accordingly in a level that encompasses all four skills in two distinct classes: listening and speaking; reading and writing within the sphere of critical thinking. This Intensive English Program (IEP) focuses on Content-Based Instruction (CBI) with National Geographic Learning as the primary textbook. Students receive certificates upon successful completion of the courses as outlined in the syllabus. If they wish to continue to the next level, then they may do so. Students can obtain additional help via tutoring during instructor, virtual or in-person, office hours. They may also take part in the extracurricular activities offered (such as the English conversation club, art club, book club, etc.) to supplement their intensive language classes and to orient them to campus life (AUIB, 2022).

The prevalence of COVID-19 in early 2021 necessitated all classes to be held virtually up until April when students returned to campus but in a hybrid format (i.e., four days of in-person class and one day of virtual). However, I continued teaching online because we had a decent number of remote students who needed to study fully online. So, I became the designated fully online instructor for the better part of 2021. This meant that I taught the fully remote students in
all four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) four hours a day, each class being two hours long, five days a week for a total of seven weeks, the normal term length.

Fairly new to the virtual teaching milieu, I had to find ways to engage students actively in the lessons while still exploring with them the academic skills they needed to be successful in not only the ASP, but also, ultimately, their prospective undergraduate program. My supervisor had assigned me to teach Level Four students, which is equivalent to the B1-B2 range of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Halfway into the term, I solicited students’ feedback on the Reading and Writing course because I wanted to know how they were progressing linguistically/academically, particularly in a course that many students do not find as appealing as its counterpart, given their overwhelming aptitude for the listening and speaking modalities of English. So, as a reflective practitioner it was important for me to understand student concerns or queries related to their online instruction via Microsoft Teams, our virtual educational platform of use while Canvas served as our Learning Management System (LMS) where students eventually submitted their virtual free-writing portfolios.

When they expressed the need for more in-class time for writing and for developing their writing techniques, it served as food for thought that would eventually become an experiment in starting and sustaining a virtual free-writing journal. This kind of daily writing exercise would, ideally, boost their writing skills and quench their thirst for regular writing practice in the virtual classroom. With each new term and class of students, I would have the opportunity to refine my teaching practice for enhancing creativity with and maximizing productivity of implementing virtual free-writing journal portfolios in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom of intensive English students. The next section will state the overarching objectives of this teacher action research project both then and now, given my reentry into the physical classroom space.
Objectives

Through this classroom-based research project, I wanted to be able to understand and to learn how virtual free-writing journal portfolios might have been able to increase the originality, autonomy, and fluency of pre-university Iraqi students’ L2 writing practice. Also, I wanted to be able to leverage the potential effectiveness of this project-based learning exercise to further enhance their skills in understanding and utilizing the writing process for other types of writing they will encounter in the academic setting.

Research Questions

The following inquiries represent the crux of what I wanted to know and learn based on the objectives of this research project: What metacognitive and metalinguistic knowledge and skills can virtual free-writing journals cultivate in the intensive English classroom student? Will students learn to write creatively and independently using free-writing journals? What will it teach them in the process? In what way(s) can this routine activity be adapted to meet the unique linguistic interests/needs of English language learners in an intensive English program? What are the potential unforeseen benefits and/or limits of implementing free-writing journals?

Methods

As this research project was a classroom-oriented inquiry situated in my local teaching context in Iraq, I essentially conducted teacher action research as part of the empirical research design. Therefore, I interviewed several students who have enjoyed and benefited from this project-based learning activity. I also used my routine class evaluation results to collect data which may produce interesting findings in which I can look for patterns, leitmotifs, and key insights from the students’ perspective on this activity. Other action research methods I employed were classroom observations, photographs, document analysis (i.e., student free-
writing portfolios), and diaries/field notes. Thus, these research methods have all sought to illustrate the hypothesis under qualitative study in this paper with the goal of achieving triangulation for a more nuanced and richer analysis and outcome of the study.

**Limitations**

This qualitative research study is limited to my unique teaching context at the AUIB where I have educated approximately 87 pre-university/university students in the use of virtual free-writing journal portfolios since May 2021 when the initial group of students embarked on this novel journey of experiential learning. All the students who experienced the process of freewriting did so in an intensive English learning environment; their portfolios counted as a project grade for the Reading and Writing course they took as part of the required curriculum of the ELA.

Meanwhile, as primary research was conducted in a robust effort to answer the research questions, the data obtained and compiled from the action research methods were evaluated for their depth and ability to extrapolate meaning from the subjects’ direct experiences regarding the topic under study. Consequently, it should be noted that the results from this empirical data are not necessarily generalizable to all pre-university/university IEP English language learners, though the larger-scale pedagogical implications for TESOL practitioners/applied linguists working with said students in similar contexts remains to be seen.

Henceforth, a thorough literature review serves to analyze the current (and not-so-current) body of knowledge available for the ever-evolving nature of freewriting, which has manifested in multifaceted ways throughout the decades. It is this versatility, utility and heurism of the free-writing phenomenon that will serve as the center of gravity for not only the literature review, but also the subsequent chapters/elements of this Independent Professional Project (IPP).
Figure 1

Action Research Locale

Note. The author’s ASP classroom at the AUIB and where the student interviews occurred.

Literature Review

Freewriting is not a fresh concept. It has been on the educational scene for multiple decades, sparking debate about its usefulness yet teaching generations of writing students how to write and think democratically and with greater clarity even in the absence of teachers or more formal writing instruction. This literature review will explore the origin of freewriting with a focus on one of its fiercest proponents and pioneers: Dr. Peter Elbow. Freewriting’s versatile uses will be examined in line with its benefits for students while the counterarguments by its
skeptics will also be delineated. Afterward, one powerful, modern example of student free-writing journals that has attained global acclaim will be profiled. Finally, a case study will be presented to examine the academic appropriateness of freewriting for success in higher education after which a summary will conclude the chapter. A contextualization of the author’s teacher action research plan will comprise the next chapter, which is the research study design.

**Controversial History of Freewriting**

Peter Elbow popularized the free-writing movement in 1973 (Grunwald, 2016) as a form of brainstorming, a major part of the prewriting stage of the writing process, in which sentences and paragraphs are composed in a stream-of-consciousness style. In other words, the writer writes for a specific amount of time nonstop. Ultimately, the writer is writing for him or herself and has creative license to write whatever comes to mind in an uncensored fashion to produce ideas that may prove helpful for the writing task at hand. Thus, freewriting “increases the flow of ideas and reduces the chance that one will censor a good idea,” and it facilitates writing fluency in second or additional language learners by focusing on the content of the writing as opposed to the conventions, which deal more with accuracy (Grunwald, 2016).

Historically speaking, Elbow credits Ken Macrorie, a mentor of sorts, as a trailblazer of freewriting when he introduced writing instructors to the concept in the 1960s, a time when it was viewed controversially up and through the time when Elbow sung its praises in the 1970s when he published *Writing Without Teachers*, the opus that gave freewriting its claim to fame. Janet Bean and Peter Elbow (2010) traces the radical nature with which the intellectual community regarded freewriting in these decades in their article “Freewriting and Free Speech: A Pragmatic Perspective,” which scrutinizes the parallel political dimensions between free speech and freewriting and how their theoretical underpinnings are not mutually exclusive.
Interestingly, the central tenet of this article can be ascertained from a sample “freewrite” penned by Bean during the writing process for said article:

I have the feeling that free speech actually WORKS as a widely held concept, but people really don’t believe in free writing . . . . It’s ironic that we might view free speech as a political act but freewriting as an asocial, politically naive practice. Of course, the first thing someone might say is, of course they’re different—free speech is rhetorical and public, freewriting is expressive and private. (I’ve just sat here for five minutes, thinking—by god, that’s right.) . . . . But maybe we need to free writing (like those posters, FREE MANDELA, FREE THE WHALES)—free writing from the racist and classist practices of educational institutions. Ha. No small order, there.

(Bean & Elbow, 2010, p. 2)

Elbow and Bean discovered through their research and writing that free speech and freewriting share many of the same qualities inherent in a democratic political system: freedom of expression, thought and inquiry. So, they challenged the ideas of postmodernist theory which interrogated the subjectivity and individuality of freewriting, an essential component of a democratized writing space for students. Bean and Elbow’s approach was one of pragmatism which sought to home in on the concrete and empowering nature that freewriting affords students by enabling them to utilize the languages of their diverse backgrounds and communities for work
in academia (Bean and Peter, 2010). Their prior linguistic knowledge and skills could be advantageous to their intellectual life, giving them agency and a voice within an institutional structure that often seeks to standardize student linguistic expression while minimizing their home/heritage communication styles, which goes against the grain of plurilingual pedagogy, a breakthrough and culturally/linguistically responsive approach to language teaching, as School for International Training alumna Elisabeth Wichser-Krajcik (2021) pointed out in her thesis, “A Teacher’s Guide to Plurilingual Pedagogy.”

Moreover, Bean and Elbow make a case for the political virtues of freewriting by pointing out how it can free students from the fear and fret of making mistakes in their writing so they may find and bask in their creative flow; and, in doing so, they can reconnect with the political history of freewriting which began as an American countercultural (anti-war/antiestablishment) movement in the 1960s. Eventually, its political edge dissipated, only becoming known and used by instructors as a generative prewriting technique and nothing more. But Bean and Elbow (2010) provide five ways that students can tap into free-writing’s political sway to resist both institutional and cultural pressures while achieving more free thought and inquiry:

- Freewriting fosters more inward thinking within a person (an internal ‘town meeting’).
- Freewriting helps learners notice ways that social forces shape their identities, especially when it is coupled with reflection (e.g., Am I really that angry? Do I really hate those people?) Private writing allows students to express feelings they wish not to do verbally.
- Frequent freewriting promotes a meta-awareness in students of the complex forces of authority and tradition in the classroom and culture. The unplanned and primarily
“ruleless” nature of freewriting encourages students to write how they speak and to focus on their goals and ideas in writing and not so much on what the teacher expects.

- Freewriting fosters equality. It “invites students to notice how they draw on their spoken language competencies to develop their literacy skills” (Bean & Elbow, 2010, p. 18).

- Freewriting is oftentimes pleasurable in two ways: the pleasure of breaking the rules (i.e., of standard written English); the pleasure associated with the cathartic and spontaneous release of emotions. Writing is segregated from punishment, offering a “counterculture of pleasure” (Bean & Elbow, 2010, p. 20).

To conclude, teaching as an act of subversion comes to mind when ruminating on the gist of Bean and Elbow’s compelling article. It is up to teachers to reclaim the political empowerment with which freewriting originated if they are to equip students to function as egalitarian thinkers and writers, confident to speak up and out about important issues through the medium of writing.

**Uses and Benefits of the Freewriting Believing Game**

Stephen Lloyd Webber, in his innovative book *Deep Freewriting*, heralds Peter Elbow as a forerunner of the free-writing phenomenon. He explores the myriad of possibilities in which freewriting can be leveraged to navigate the creative flow masterfully, which includes anecdotes of what he calls the 24-hour free-writing marathon. This marathon entailed a mindset wherein laser-like focus is a key ingredient to unlocking the flow state wherein one’s maximum energy and potential is unleashed in an environment conducive to fostering a deep kind of freewriting: writing for 24 hours nonstop. Webber shared what he learned through this experience, content with how much he produced in that timeframe which included drafts for a few books of prose, poetry, and a vision for the future, to name a few (Webber, 2020).
The author explicates freewriting’s multimodal nature when engrossed in the process of deep freewriting as it is not limited to merely typing on the computer or writing by hand while seated. It can be done standing up or through using a voice recording application such as Vocaroo.com. Thus, deep freewriting is about making writing an integral part of one’s identity habitually and fearlessly and, consequently, embodying the core philosophy of freewriting by actuating its principles and practices for ultimate self-development (Webber, 2020). Intriguingly, The Douglas Fir Group’s (a team of 12 educators in the field of second language acquisition who coauthored a paper that speaks to the kaleidoscopic nature of language learning and teaching in the twenty-first century) fourth fundamental theme of its transdisciplinary framework for multilingualism which states that “language learning is multimodal, embodied and mediated” (2016, p. 29) epitomizes Webber’s ethos of freewriting’s substantive nature.

Furthermore, he concretizes the concept and act of freewriting in this recipe-style book that deconstructs the phenomenon, with all its multifarious applications. According to Webber, “the more you freewrite, the more you get in touch with yourself, your own voice, your own nuances of thinking” (2020, p. 18). Therefore, it is a solitary exercise in introspective self-discovery. Deep freewriting is characterized as dynamic and developmental, taking the “freewriter” into the depths of him or herself, those submerged parts of the iceberg, so that one can “fully participate in the best the world has to offer” (Webber, 2020, p. 30).

Moreover, Webber (2020) defines a host of benefits of freewriting (no matter the writing task):

- Freewriting is enchanting.
- It defeats writer’s block.
- It produces a habit of productivity.
• It creates a healthy relationship with writing.
• It removes the limits from what one thought was possible.
• It moves one towards mastery of the writing craft.
• It engages an organic part of the writer: the creative self.
• It embraces intuitive/imaginative chaos before reaching logical control and order.

Such benefits harmonize with what Elbow (1986) articulated in his book chapter “Teaching Two Kinds of Thinking by Teaching Writing” from *Embracing Contraries* when he spotlighted the favorable learning outcomes of activating students’ first-order thinking skills of creativity and intuition. Unfortunately, as he pointed out, the second-order thinking of critical conscious control and revision has overshadowed the first-order in the educational enterprise because second-order thinking is often equated with critical thinking by most people. However, second-order thinking, as Elbow notes, does not make people think better; it is counterproductive. First-order thinking, he suggests, “heightens intelligence” when learners engage in “fast exploratory freewriting” in response to a hard question as opposed to being told to “think carefully” on the topic in question (Elbow, 1986, p. 56). It is not that one kind of thinking is better than the other; they are equally interdependent and necessary at different stages in the writing process.

Elbow argues that students cannot effectively practice the more careful and conscientious second-order thinking until they have initially completed their first-order thinking of getting their original thoughts and ideas down on paper or on the screen. Once they have had the time and freedom to flex their creative muscles, then only can they summon their inner critic to revise critically the material they have produced from imaginative and exploratory writing. Ergo, “the two writing processes enhances the two thinking processes” (Elbow, 1986, p. 58). And, in fact,
Uncensored freewriting can improve creative first-order thinking by unlocking the imagination, which unleashes a momentum of words, ideas and sentences that pour forth uninhibitedly by the writer who is free to “speak on the page,” or to use simple natural speech for writing, including academic writing (Elbow, n.d.). Hence, the creative flow working in full effect!

One article reviewed showcased how two Faculty of Education instructors worked with student teachers (STs) at a university in the Czech Republic by having them create dialogue journals as a way of enhancing their “critical thinking skills as they progressed in the teaching profession” (Vojtkova & Collins, 2012, p. 2). While dialogue journals may differ from personal diaries or learning journals in that the student is writing specifically for his or her instructor in what becomes an ongoing dialogue between both parties over a certain period, the overall concept is the same: increasing writing fluency in the target language. Both types of journals can nurture guided self-discovery within the student, which is how learning often best proceeds as Mick Randall (2001) points out in Chapter Three of Advising and Supporting Teachers.

For example, the Czech STs who participated in dialogue journaling became able to articulate new insights about their academic lives, reflect on their teaching practice as novices, think deeply about their professional goals and offer helpful feedback to their instructors about the integrated course in which the journals were being used (Vojtkova & Collins, 2012). Moreover, the STs could interrogate aspects of the teaching profession by asking questions in their dialogue journals that the instructor would then answer. For instance, one ST wondered about their instructor’s beginnings as a teacher while another wanted advice on how to manage grammatical teaching skills in class (Vojtkova & Collins, 2012). Eventually, some STs began incorporating dialogue journals into their teaching repertoires, which was the idealized hope of the STs’ instructors. As the STs, themselves, became more comfortable and confident using
dialogue journals, they managed to use them with their learners who also benefited from the structured and supportive student-centered activity (Vojtkova & Collins, 2012).

**Counterarguments/Limitations of the Freewriting Movement**

When Peter Elbow originally published *Writing Without Teachers* in 1973 his strong support for freewriting within the context of teacherless writing support groups endured criticism from scholars who, perhaps, misunderstood the value such groups could offer writers from every walk of life. The idea of a teacherless writing group has even been endorsed by teachers, themselves, for the value it can bring to students who use it to improve their writing.

A teacherless writing group functions as follows: 1. A group of seven to ten writers meet weekly over a 12-week period to share pieces of writing they are working on. 2. Each person in the group reads her/his work aloud to the group twice with a one-minute pause in between readings (or the writer can make copies of the writing piece for silent reading). 3. The group members listen/read actively and try to enter the writer’s world before sharing what they felt, heard, and experienced as they listened. 4. No critical evaluation, feedback for improvement or judgment is allowed to be given to the writer after he reads his work; only what the listener/reader experienced, felt, and noticed as he listened to the writer. 5. The end of each teacherless group meeting concludes with five minutes of free-writing reflection on the session (Elbow, 1998b).

This is the basic format for a teacherless writing group meeting and works best when all the members are fully committed to attending the meetings and participating by sharing and being present with each other (Elbow, 1998b). It is also a chance for people who cannot find time to write, otherwise, to devote a portion of each meeting to getting the writing done, another advantage of such meetings. Elbow mentions how these teacherless writing groups fosters real
learning and that “learning is independent of teaching.” (1998b, Intro to Second Edition, p. xviii) a radical idea that sparked criticism of his book during a time when writing instruction was largely viewed in terms of the conventional setting of teachers pouring knowledge into the brains of their students as the authoritative gatekeepers of information. Many educators in the academic enterprise still conceptualize teaching and learning in this way. Freewriting was a major thread of the teacherless writing group, which suffered its share of critical evaluation.

Such criticism of Elbow’s wild notions of writing pedagogy came in the form of emphasizing his alleged disregard for the integral resource of education, the educator, and what the teacher provides to the learner by virtue of his or her expertise/experience; other students, as a result, “replace” the teacher in the teacherless writing groups, purported the critics. The skeptics also rejected the fact that the process proposed in managing a teacherless writing group lacks the alpha mentality (the dominant intellectual and masculine qualities of logic, debate, and critical thinking) quick to quell and challenge those in disagreement or with alternative viewpoints. In critics’ minds this process was unintellectual and sentimental (Elbow, 1998b).

Nonetheless, the epistemological facet of Elbow’s positionality on freewriting and teacherless writing groups can be summed up in his analysis of the believing and doubting game within the intellectual enterprise, which he briefly prologues in the book before directing the reader to his elongated essay in the Appendix section (Elbow, 1998b). For him the believing game represents active listening, empathy, presence and seeking to understand more fully and deeply others’ competing ideas/opinions/propositions while the doubting game does the contrary. The doubting game is more concerned with condemnation, argumentation, and detachment from others’ ideas/opinions/propositions vis-à-vis logic and critical thinking (Elbow, 1998b). Elbow expresses how the doubting game is the top dog in academia, somehow “gaining a monopoly of
legitimacy in our [Western] culture” (Elbow, 1998b, p. 149), because people who can spot a logical fallacy in someone’s argument or can shut down a competing notion from a peer are often lauded as being tough-minded critical thinkers and, thereby, highly clever.

According to Elbow, “since the doubting or arguing process invites people merely to criticize ideas they don’t like, it permits them to stay insulated against any experience of alternative thinking” (1998b, Intro to Second Edition, p. xxiv). Conversely, the believing game takes a more openminded approach to considering and testing out the ideas of others and tries to discern the strengths in them rather than the weaknesses to find the best possible solution or answer to a problem in connection with all relevant stakeholders working together. It is this healthy, collaborative interaction among the group members that entails the essence and effectiveness of the teacherless writing group that Elbow upholds in his book (Elbow, 1998b).

Furthermore, everyone may benefit from listening to a diversity of views and experiences of each other’s writing. Trying “to experience and enter into” (Elbow, 1998b, Intro to Second Edition, p. xxv) someone else’s written work of art and heart can yield positive outcomes which may deepen relationships between people and lead to greater self-awareness of and insight into one’s own writing and thinking process. These are all such desirable effects of playing the believing game. Elbow does not denounce the doubting game (recognizing the dichotomy) but aims to shift the limelight to its underrated counterpart and to appreciate its contribution to intellectual life. Both games serve a valid role in the academic community just as the two kinds of thinking, creative and analytical, are needed to produce competent student writers. Balance is key, which Elbow understands and acknowledges of the dichotomic nature of the two games and of the two kinds of thinking and teaching of writing. The following image is a dialectic of the two games as “reinforcers of different character traits”:
Figure 2

Dialectic of the Doubting and Believing Games

Note. Elbow, 1998b, p. 178

Deborah Fox and Charles Suhor’s (1986) The English Journal article on the “Limitations of Free Writing” evaluated what criticism the free-writing movement suffered following Elbow’s seminal publication, Writing Without Teachers, on the phenomenon. For example, one critique made, which is not unique to the critic who made it, deemed freewriting as “undisciplined” (p. 35) and, therefore, relegates the value of formal writing skills training in the name of enhancing fluency in writing. Another critic raised the issue of how students who experiment with freewriting may become lax and develop an aversion to having eventually to revise and edit their work in the more consciously controlled phase of the writing process. He also stated how they may write unauthentically despite freewriting’s focus on careless spontaneity of thought. In this critic’s view, “writing is of value only when students are able to use their past experiences as part of planning and editing activities in the writing program” (Fox & Suhor, 1986, p. 35).
“Why Johnny Can’t Write,” a widely cited Newsweek article published in 1975, was referenced in Fox and Suhor’s article as they pointed out how, in that article, Merrill Sheils contested the experimental methods of the neo-progressive movement by some writing teachers, of which freewriting was one of them. In her article, Sheils (1975) endorsed a view toward accuracy in language and in honing students’ literacy skills so they would be prepared to enter the job market and/or higher education. Educating students well in standard written English would be the antidote in combating the American educational epidemic of graduating a “generation of semiliterates” (p. 1) ill-equipped for the demands of college and the workforce.

Meanwhile, the limitations/challenges of freewriting were not the sole focus of Fox and Suhor’s article. They illustrated the history of and pragmatic uses for freewriting while referencing its biggest cheerleaders, Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow and Daniel Fader, who have all advanced the movement, respectively, as influential English education scholar-practitioners. George Hillock is the central figure in this article in that the authors credit him with usefully describing the freewriting phenomenon in his book Research on Written Composition published in 1986. Fox and Suhor (1986, p. 35) then discuss Hillock’s composition research on freewriting, a meta-analysis, and how it categorized free-writing studies as a “natural process” mode identified by its low-stakes and minimal structure nature, whereas the “presentation” or teacher-centered mode proved to be ineffective when up against the former.

What is more telling is that the “environmental mode,” Hillock discovered, was the most powerful of the three (Fox & Suhor, 1986, p. 35) because it capitalized on the learning affordances inherent in the environment through the “unique relationship between each learner and the learning environment” (Anderson, 2015) and through carefully crafted classroom activities (Fox & Suhor, 1986, p. 35). Hillock also found that freewriting outshined the Classical
Method (Brown, 2014, p. 378) of composition pedagogy but that it should be supplemented with other tools and techniques such as “writing models, sentence combining, writing criteria and inquiry” (Fox & Suhor, 1986, p. 35) in cultivating competent writers in a student-centered or, instead, what Parker Palmer elucidates in *The Courage to Teach* as a subject-centered classroom where the subject is at the center of both teaching and learning in an optimal educational setting (Palmer, 2007).

**Noteworthy Exemplar of Powerful Freewriting**

The power of freewriting can be seen in one distinct example that tell of its influence on not only the person doing the freewriting, but also on the larger audience that such writing reached on a wider scale. This example is illustrated by the book, *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*, which became a motion picture film (*The Freedom Writers* starring Hilary Swank) almost a decade after the book’s publication. This inspirational book is the product of a four-year labor of love assembled by high school students and a gifted teacher who wanted them to tell their stories. Erin Gruwell was a new English teacher working at an inner-city high school in Long Beach, California. The school was known to have many students who came from troubled backgrounds and might be classified as “at-risk” youth. African Americans, Asian Americans and Latinx students predominated the student body.

When Gruwell stepped into her freshman English classroom on the first day of school, she had no idea what awaited her. As a White female teacher, Gruwell wanted “to see past color and culture” (The Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999, p. 1), but it confronted her in those first teaching moments on that first day. Long story short, she decided to discard her organized lesson plans and to make “tolerance the core of her curriculum” (The Freedom Writers & Gruwell,
1999, p. 2). What followed eventually became a book of free-writing journal entries all penned by her students throughout the next four years; the stories written by these students were raw, unadulterated, and gripping accounts of their young lives. Gruwell encouraged them to speak truth to power by using freewriting as an emotional release from the pain, trauma, and adversity that they suffered at the hands of gun, gang and domestic violence, molestation, suicide, illegal immigration, and myriad other challenges that haunted them and plagued their self-esteem.

They called themselves the Freedom Writers to identify with and to stand on the shoulders of the Freedom Riders of the United States’ Civil Rights Movement they had learned about in English class during Black History Month. As one student wrote in a diary entry: “there were seven whites and six blacks on the bus, most of them college students. They were called the Freedom Riders, and their goal was to change segregated interstate travel” (The Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999, p. 152). Watching a video in class about the Freedom Riders struck a chord with the Freedom Writers because they also dealt with racial inequities in their school and personal lives in a post-Rodney-King-riot world. Thus, freewriting gave them a constructive outlet to reflect on the subject matter personally because they saw the relevance of the class content to their own lives, which was a strategic choice on Gruwell’s part.

Learning about other heroic young people such as Anne Frank (after having read her well-known book) and Zlata Filipovic (who penned the foreword to The Freedom Writers Diary), a young survivor of the war in Bosnia in the early 1990s, inspired the Freedom Writers to fight for tolerance not only through writing, but by becoming passionate activists. Their lives began to take on new meaning as they read and wrote about young people who made a difference in their generation; hope began to blossom in their hearts for the possibilities that existed for them to make a mark and change the world. It all started with one teacher who pointed them
toward impactful historical figures and to the powerful and political tool of freewriting in taking charge of their education and lives. Peter Elbow and Janet Bean wrote in their article on “Freewriting and Free Speech” about the effectiveness of how “freewriting can help students discover that ‘inappropriate’ ‘talking onto the page’ sometimes yields language that’s better for writing than their careful “writing language” (2010, p. 17).

This is evident in The Freedom Writers Diary as students engaged in the two-stage process of writing as Elbow (1998a) explains in his book Writing with Power. They were free to write exactly what was on their minds and hearts in narrating true-life stories/histories before later engaging in peer editing and in the more conscious control stage of revising and polishing the writing. So, the book contains numerous colloquialisms, swear lingo and the like as students “talk on the page” (Bean and Elbow, 2010, p. 17) in uttering their innermost thoughts and feelings. The Freedom Writers’ authentic voices permeated their writing and became a saving grace to many students as they developed the art of storytelling. Eventually, the published book became a New York Times bestseller, and some of the students went on to attend college and to defy all the odds stacked against them in life, having traveled the United States and the world to speak to audiences about their message of tolerance. Indeed, “freewriting develops students’ capability to express themselves” as Lucia-Larissa Morar et al. (2019, p. 298) concluded in their article “From Word to Idea: Freewriting.”

**Appropriateness of Freewriting for Academic Success: A Case Study**

Freewriting can be done anywhere at any time for any purpose with or without a teacher. “The only requirement is that you never stop” according to Peter Elbow (1998b, p. 3), probably the most prolific authority and author on the subject since it gained in popularity in the late 20th century. In much of his writing and publishing of the freewriting phenomenon, Elbow endorses
the view that freewriting is pivotal to the overall writing process in that uncensored, nonstop
writing for a given period can result in creative idea generation and can help writers to tackle
fear of the blank page, what many students have known and experienced as writer’s block
(Thesaurus, 2020). Freewriting can be distinguished from other forms of brainstorming or pre-
writing by some of the following techniques: writing in sentences and paragraphs, writing for a
continuous amount of time (e.g., 15 or 20 minutes), keeping one’s hand moving whether typing
or handwriting, and, when necessary, using words from one’s L1 if the English translation is
unknown, extinct, or nonexistent (Grunwald, 2016).

Consequently, over time these techniques can build students’ fluency and consistency in
writing skill development as they learn to overcome their “writing apprehension” by keeping a
“personal journal” targeted to an audience of one: the writer (Shvidko, 2015). Such personal
journals are meant to be pleasurable and motivating while also teaching students valuable skills
that will improve both their thinking and writing capacity in a measurable way. This was the case
when one primary researcher conducted classroom inquiry research at an Australian university
where she taught a brief intensive writing course to a diverse student group using an inventive
focused free-writing technique (Li, 2007).

Li exploited the focused freewriting technique to foster students’ academic writing skills
by engaging them in the writing process through an active learning exercise that would empower
them to “realise the value and power of freewriting as a useful learning tool for their disciplinary
studies through intensive application and practice of freewriting in the intensive writing
program,” (2007, p. 43) which lasted two weeks. Delivered in a workshop format, the intensive
writing course explored the elements of academic writing with a core part of the class consisting
of focused free-writing prompts that, for example, entailed the following:
Your writing task: Now, midway through this intensive writing course, you have come to understand that academic writing is research-based. What is research? What does research involve? How do you view research in academic writing? Freewrite for 10 minutes to demonstrate your understanding of the role research plays in academic writing. Start your writing with “Research is …” (Li, 2007, p. 44)

Students were always given clear instructions for the various focused free-writing tasks, and the instructor scaffolded the exercise for students by providing sentence/phrase/word starters to jump start students’ thinking on the topic at hand. In this way, they could direct their unique thoughts and ideas in an organized way on relevant subjects such as grammar, paragraph features, etc., while writing continuously for 10-15 minutes at the start of each class. Li discovered in her findings and analysis that “freewriting served as a useful thinking tool for exploration and understanding” (2007, p. 45) of the academic writing subject matter as students learned to make sense of the material through their quotidian journal entries. Their comprehension of the expectations and intricacies of academic writing was enhanced through the focused freewriting prompts, which were exchanged and read by their classmates who commented on the writings. This is what Elbow calls public freewriting in which students “write with the expectation of sharing” (2010, p.10).

Additionally, Li discovered that the students, who all came from different disciplinary backgrounds, were able to make connections between information in their respective fields of study and the conventions of academic writing for greater clarity in what constitutes effective writing “from a discipline-specific perspective and within a disciplinary context” (Segall & Smart, 2005; Lee & Stierer, 2000 as cited in Li, 2007, p. 46). For instance, one student majoring in industrial design likened effective paragraph writing to the construction of a brick in a
building. She used metaphor to illustrate the importance of unity in writing strong paragraphs (Li, 2007).

Other insights from Li’s qualitative research study revealed improved self-confidence, engagement in collaborative learning and student empowerment. The students adopted a new and improved attitude toward the writing process as they became familiarized with the free-writing exercise every day. Li found that they approached it with a positive attitude as they were free to express their transparent thoughts about the writing prompt. Collaborating with peers in reviewing each other’s “freewrites” facilitated a sense of community and common purpose; ergo, cooperative learning is “one of the most valuable tools educators have” at their disposal (Johnson & Johnson, n.d.).

Finally, a major premise of Li’s research study entailed the use of freewriting for multidisciplinary teaching and learning. She wanted the students to grasp the concept that they could employ independent freewriting as a means of investigating their subject matter within their given discipline. Thus, she provides a list of suggestions in her article, “Exploring the Use of Focused Freewriting in Developing Academic Writing,” for educators to impart to their students for them (i.e., students) to benefit from what Elbow and Sorcinelli (2005) refer to as low stakes writing and which Li proposes should count as formative assessment, indicative of stressing the learning process over the learning product. Consequently, students’ critical thinking skills will be promoted when they can leverage both the creative and analytical minds to grapple with the, oftentimes, complex content of their field of study (Li, 2007).

William Zinsser (1988) speaks of this kind of “writing across the curriculum” in his book Writing to Learn, which unveils the potency and possibilities that exist in learning to write in/about/for disciplines that are popularly regarded as being “writing-unfriendly” (e.g., STEM
subject matter). Thus, the public and hallowed academics tend to see English instructors as the omniscient forces for teaching and training students to write properly in attaining Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency or CALP (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) while relieving non-English educators of a task that should be assumed by everyone in the business of [higher] education. Because writing is an essential life skill and does not discriminate in the school of life, Zinsser argues that all higher education faculty, specifically, ought to share the responsibility of teaching their students how to write well within their specific discipline/major; one simple way to do this, he proposes, is by showing students excellent models of clear and effective writing because people learn how to write by imitation (Zinsser, 1988). This is what he did in Writing to Learn where he showcased a variety of writing models from esteemed writers and thinkers in a range of fields from the humanities to the sciences. Thus, such shared accountability for the teaching of discipline-oriented writing will mitigate the fear and stress often associated with learning to write well in these somewhat esoteric fields, subjects like physics, astronomy, geology, and other hard sciences. Students will, then, reap the rewards later in life.

Summary

Ideally, the overall goal of implementing structured and purposeful freewriting tasks, particularly, in the language classroom is to guide students toward autonomous, self-directed free-writing behavior that they can employ as a disciplined tactic throughout their academic careers and, perhaps, as a lifelong learning strategy (Larsen-Freemen & Anderson, 2011). In no way is freewriting meant to be a panacea for any and every writing flaw or challenge with which students flounder. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked nor belittled for the ample techniques that it offers teachers and students in the process of learning how to write and think with better clarity, creativity, authenticity, confidence, and verve. Students can and should be
encouraged to form their own teacherless writing groups, to engage in deep freewriting sessions and continually to explore the versatile ways in which they can use this accessible tool to upgrade their informal and formal learning behaviors. In short, the better they become at it, the more they may feel comfortable using it strategically and for successful writing practices.

**Research Design**

I strategically decided to use freewriting to satisfy my students’ desire to do more in-class writing during the spring term of 2021 when this activity was first employed. My Academic Success Program (ASP) pre-university upper immediate Iraqi students expressed a need to develop their writing skills in English; so, after thinking about how to do this, an idea dawned on me to incorporate a daily free-writing exercise that they could execute in our virtual reading and writing class for a period of three weeks. The first week would commence with students writing for a duration of five minutes. The time duration would increase to 10 minutes during the second week; finally, their writing muscles would be challenged to write for 15 minutes in the third and final week of the free-writing ritual. Indeed, it would be an action research experiment that would enable me to gauge its effectiveness for future use in Intensive English Program (IEP) classes, and in others, perhaps, such as the one with which I piloted this free-writing task.

Providing my students with agency and enhancing their capacity to write more fluently served as the impetus which made this simple idea a reality. On the first day of introducing this new classroom ritual, students were given five minutes to write about whatever they wanted; once the digital timer (timer-tab.com) started, they were encouraged to write for the full duration until it stopped. I gave them the option of posting their “freewrites” in the Microsoft Teams chat stream (Mansur, 2020), which most of them did throughout the three-week activity; it also was a useful way of verifying their regular participation in the task. Students were instructed to
compile all 15 journal entries into a portfolio for submission as a project grade toward the end of the term via Canvas, which vetted each student portfolio for plagiarism using the integrated Turnitin software purchased by the AUIB. I stressed that I would not be checking for absolute perfection in the mechanics of their writing, but rather the flow of content their portfolios contained with a focus on the progress made during the three-week period of the experiment. Therefore, students were advised to write their total word count on the cover or last page of their portfolios so they, too, could recognize their potential growth in fluency as writers and thinkers of English. (See Appendix A for the complete project description.)

Once I reentered the physical classroom setting in the autumn of 2021, I was in a better position to witness firsthand the impact of freewriting on student writing development. In this face-to-face space, I was able to get a closer feel for the students’ approach to the activity and able to observe them executing the activity in real time unlike during my fully-online classes where students did not use video cameras, understandably yet unfortunately due to Internet bandwidth issues in Iraq. Students were encouraged to bring their computers to class for greater success in keeping a free-writing journal. They were also instructed to consult me or their peers for the free-writing prompt topics on days when they missed class.

Meanwhile, I utilized qualitative research methods to conduct this research study because this kind of research aligns with the nature of the research study and will provide insight into the “how” and “why” of the research objective: the impact of virtual free-writing journals on Iraqi IEP students’ writing development. Possessing an “exploratory, open mindset to the variety of perspectives and issues that might arise” (Glesne, 2006, p. 5) on my quest for pattern identification in the collected data will, hopefully, result in the most fruitful analysis and discussion of the data. By no means will the findings of said data “be reduced to a norm”
(Glesne, 2006, p. 5) as that is not my purpose nor the goal of qualitative research; however, whatever conclusions are made from this study may have useful teacher implications for applied linguists and other relevant stakeholders with similar research interests/queries.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven former students who participated in the free-writing activity after distributing an e-mail blast for recruitment (see Appendix B). The interviews were audio recorded and occurred in a safe and comfortable environment at the AUIB that guaranteed confidentiality of the meeting only after students gave their informed consent via the bilingual (Arabic-English) informed consent agreement (see Appendix C) which they read and signed pre-interview. Rapport was established with the interviewees at the AUIB where the interviews occurred. Student interview subjects did not receive any compensation for partaking in the research. Peter Elbow (1998b) expressed in *Writing Without Teachers* how learning is its own reward, which may represent that hidden curriculum knowledge and awareness born from metacognitive reflection on experiential learning (*Hidden Curriculum*, 2014). Document analysis was used to assess the breadth and depth of student learning after encountering the free-writing journal experiment. See Appendix F for sample student free-writing journal portfolios from both the hybrid and fully-online classes of students that participated in the free-writing journal project. Consent was granted by the students to include their portfolios in this research study. Organizational research approval by the ELA director was also granted to execute this research study at the AUIB (see Appendix E).

Classroom observations, course evaluations and a teacher’s field notes also comprised the action research methods that generated a wealth of data with which the central research objective and questions of this project can be duly examined. Triangulation of the evidence collected through these methods will allow for different perspectives on the topic of study and
will facilitate a sharper analysis in respect to the relationship the different pieces of evidence have with each other (Elliott, 1991). Thus, the results of this data collection aim to understand the overall influence and impact of virtual free-writing journals on students’ writing development in an IEP and, hopefully, will contribute new knowledge to the TESOL and applied linguistics strand of academic writing practices that both scholars and practitioners can use in their local teaching contexts to ameliorate student success in the complex skill of foreign language writing.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

**Student Interviews**

The seven students who participated in the research as interview subjects were asked an average of eight questions (see Appendix D) directly related to their personal experience with creating and submitting a virtual free-writing journal portfolio as a project grade. The data collected from these interviews are presented in the following tables with respect to the evidence’s connection to the central research inquiries under scrutiny. The research query is listed first followed by a short author’s summary of the respondent’s answer that correlates to the information the researcher wanted to know and understand within the scope of the research aim.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>What metacognitive and metalinguistic knowledge and skills can virtual free-writing journals cultivate in the intensive English classroom student?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>R1:</strong> The freewriting journals served as a helpful test taking strategy that facilitated the successful pass of the Duo Lingo exam because of having to write a certain amount of information in four minutes. The increase in writing and thinking speed strengthened computer literacy skills, which was a factor in successfully passing the exam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2:</td>
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<td>R3:</td>
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<td>R6:</td>
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<td>R7:</td>
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keener self-awareness of one’s writing style for self-editing emerged as a reward. Learning from one’s mistakes in writing was another benefit.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Will students learn to write creatively and independently using free-writing journals? What will it teach them in the process?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R1: Learning to brainstorm at a faster rate than previously done, thinking about what to write and writing it quickly and revising the written text in a specific period (free-writing session) was a significant learning outcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2: Writing is not so difficult when the ability to type faster and generate lots of words in each free-writing session improves. Releasing ideas and putting them in written form builds confidence, inspiration, and momentum to write in English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3: Thinking in another language engenders new thoughts in the mind and causes one to rethink or to think more creatively about a topic. Freewriting fosters creativity of thought; and taking a writing class can help students to learn to write to express their thoughts in a creative way in addition to improving their academic writing and overall written communication skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4: Freewriting was a springboard for engaging in it at home and beyond the classroom walls, particularly during the winter break. It gives a window into the self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R5: It took time to relax and to get a feel for the act of freewriting. Once that happened, the brainstorming and speed of writing blossomed. Honing computer familiarity also enhanced the writing and thinking flow.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
R6: Feeling free to write without the grammar hindering the writer proved helpful in providing the space to explain oneself in English. Freewriting promotes writing for an audience of one: the writer. Writing to improve oneself.

R7: The freedom in freewriting is an advantage to give students space to write anything they want, especially without instructions. Students at the ELA face a wall when trying to write, and the free-writing journals breaks that wall of writer’s block.

Table 3

In what way(s) can this routine activity be adapted to meet the unique linguistic interests/needs of English language learners in an IEP?

R1: It should be routine in every level, meaning all students should practice freewriting in class including the lower-level students. These students could be given easy topics and shorter time to write to simplify the task for them.

R2: Lower-level learners of English can do freewriting because all of them are afraid to write. Once they understand the purpose of it and its low-stakes nature, they will/may feel free to try it out. On a different note, having the free-writing sessions at the start of each class worked well because they fostered higher creativity, word productivity, and exploratory writing.

R3: Practicing and writing about different subjects is the best way to improve writing.

R5: Viewing sample free-writing portfolios of former students who created them was helpful.

R6: A short video/audio clip or something subject-related in class may help students to come up with ideas/thoughts to write about just before the free-writing session. Scaffolding the activity to ignite the flame of creativity in students to write freely could be helpful.
R7: Writing simple and not complete topics for their level, especially if the students are new to the activity is a way to adapt the free-writing project. Students can be trained to write topics for their language level such as simple topics to show the students what limits they have.

Letting students choose academic-related topics that are more serious and relevant to current events may also help them take interest and exhibit agency in their free-writing journals. For example, they could select topics related to the themes in the course textbooks (CBI): “Happiness”; “Memory & Learning”; “Inventive Solutions”; “Connected Lives”.

Students should use a laptop for writing and/or can be taken to the computer lab during the free-writing experiment so they can use the computers to complete their journal entries. Lower-level learners may benefit from having a time and word count challenge. For instance, who can write 50 words in 5 minutes? When given a challenge people will usually rise to the occasion to meet the challenge/reach the target. Gamifying the free-writing activity to incentivize the writing task is another potential adaptation for multilevel learners.

Example: Who can write the most within the allotted time? Who can stay on topic while writing? Who can write consistently without stopping for the duration of the session?

Table 4

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<tr>
<th>What are the potential unforeseen benefits and/or limits of implementing free-writing journals?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R1: The free-writing portfolio experience was positive from the start. All students in the ELA should have the chance to experience the activity to reap its rewards. Self-confidence to write with greater ease and speed was a major benefit that helped in developing writing skills after completing four levels in the ELA. The free-writing project should be part of every class.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
R2: Students who have trouble typing and using a computer may struggle to “free write” in this manner; however, many students used their phones to manage the activity. Taking a computer applications or science course prior to freewriting may help solve this problem. Some students procrastinated. Instead of using the class time to write and work on the project gradually as instructed/expected, they waited until the last minute to cram all their writing into one or two sittings and so feared not reaching the minimum word count criterion by the free-writing project deadline. Having the free-writing sessions toward the end of class time was harder because they were more taxing on the brain.

R3: Freewriting is not appropriate for young learners because they must understand and absorb information before they express it. They need to read more so they can choose the best ideas before writing [about] them. For everyone to write creatively they should read more.

R4: Generating individual ideas and going back to see mistakes is helpful. Freewriting may be feasible for middle school students to discover their writing mistakes; contrarily, it may not suit primary school students who need a better knowledge of grammar and syntax.

R5: Freewriting is something new and interesting. A great experience.

R6: Freewriting and psychotherapy are related in some way. Whatever one needs to write can be written, be it a problem, question or whatever. Freewriting is a tool for dealing with mental health issues, especially when there is nobody to talk to or if one does not want to talk to anyone. Freewriting can be that escape.

R7: This classroom activity may benefit others; it is enjoyable and builds confidence and gives experience to write daily. There was a connection between the class content and being able to learn more about it through free-writing practice.
Through these semi-structured interviews, it became clear that fluency and originality of expression was a major student learning outcome of participating in the virtual free-writing journal portfolio experiment during a three-week period. Once the students understood the nature of freewriting and adjusted to the ritual of the daily free-writing sessions, they felt free to release their thoughts, feelings, and ideas into their private journals, primarily writing for an audience of one: themselves. As one respondent put it: “I learned to write unconditionally about your own and for your own [yourself].” Most of them had never done any freewriting and/or had only dabbled in it in high school but in their native Arabic language. So, the experience of creating a free-writing journal portfolio in English emerged as a new and different approach to learning how to write and think in English, which also yielded fruit in their test taking efforts. For example, the first interview respondent shared how the free-writing activity aided in her successful passing of the Duolingo English exam, a requisite for direct entry into undergraduate studies at the AUIB. This correlates with what another student (who was not interviewed) also remarked, retrospectively, about the practicality of engaging in freewriting.

One of the respondents who is an educator and a writer (with a published Arabic book of poetry) shared a cultural insight into the writing lives of Iraqi women, which came about when she rationalized the challenge of authentic self-expression for Iraqi women, specifically. The fact that Iraqi women should adhere to self-censorship during their writing process, especially when it involves the touchy subjects of politics, religion, and gender roles in society, demonstrates the inward and, perchance, taciturn challenge they face when engaging in the process of freewriting even though freewriting is private. The respondent alluded to the thorny inner critic that plagues women to think fastidiously about what they write for fear of potential external critics and, consequently, prevents them from being fully honest in the written word.
On the contrary, the respondent does not subscribe to such self-censorship, societal expectations for women and the internal apprehension that stifles the bona fide creativity, immediacy, and transparency so characteristic of freewriting. “It’s not an issue for me,” she noted, the underlying reason unbeknownst to her. Though, she does recognize the truth of her family’s open-mindedness in support of her writing and in giving her the freedom to make her own choices. Also, her penchant for extensive reading and the solitude of the intellectual life may supply a source of empowerment and encouragement to break glass ceilings of literary repression in her cultural context. She expressed how “when you are honest in writing, you will be honest in doing it,” and this [honesty] is something that is missing in a closed and patriarchal society where women, educated or not, are often controlled by their male counterparts.

All in all, the respondents provided plenteous information related to the heart of the research study, and through which leitmotifs and insights about the impact of freewriting on IEP student writing development emerged. The Discussion will explore, in depth, these findings and will examine the significance of this study for ascertaining the implications for teachers and scholars looking to implement a free-writing element to their teaching of writing after gaining a solid footing in the principles and practices of this democratic approach to writing. Now I will move to the document analysis part of this research study, the free-writing student journals.

**Student Portfolios**

Upon completion of the three-week, free-writing journal experience, students had to compile their journal entries (usually ranging from 12-14 in total) into a portfolio that was graded as a project, their only one for the Reading & Writing course. The criteria and expectations (rubric) for what was evaluated can be found in Appendix A. Thus, the findings from the most recent iteration of this free-writing journal experiment can be noted in the
following takeaways that were discovered in their final journal entry, wherein they had to reflect on the overall experience of keeping a free-writing journal and to write about their learning takeaways and if the project had any benefit to them and their writing. These were the findings discovered:

- Keyboarding/typing/writing speed increase (gradual improvement over time)
- Brainstorming (thinking fast about ideas in English)
- Essay writing application (the elements and aspects of a five-paragraph essay)
- Self-confidence (approaching writing with the confidence to express thoughts)
- Vocabulary practice (learning new words and being able to use them)
- Enjoyment / Pleasure (a few students wrote how it was their favorite part of the class)
- Reading “freewrites” to the class and listening to others read or summarize theirs
- Challenging activity (enhanced confidence to write more topics/ideas)
- Imagination and creativity (learning to think outside the box on the topic)
- Developing writing skills (which includes syntax and grammar and writing sentences with better punctuation and spelling)
- Mental therapy to reduce stress (suggesting the exercise as a cathartic practice)
- Research a topic enough to be able to write in own words on it
- Comfortable with writing progress reached by the end of the free-writing experiment
- Overcome fear of making mistakes and of improvisation in writing (taking writing risks)
- Pique curiosity for the next day’s free-writing topic (building momentum / anticipation)
- Facilitate translation of more words and searching more on specific subjects (thinking
widely and deeply about a subject)

- Share via word-of-mouth the free-writing activity with family members, friends, and peers as a recommendation for writing improvement

These findings suggest that freewriting benefited students in numerous ways that may have exceeded their expectations from the start of the exercise as some of the interview respondents noted. With time, patience and personal engagement, the students began to think about writing and their relationship to it in a new way. One student commented in her final journal entry how the free-writing journal was “one of the most beautiful and clear experiences for learning academic writing” which suggests how focused free-writing prompts, as were done in the most recent iteration of the experiment, can reinforce students’ knowledge and understanding of class content. Another student echoed this insight: “we are ready to write a full essay in [an] academic way after 14 days of freewriting because we learned about paragraphs and the hook, supporting details and the concluding sentence.” This learning occurred through whole-class discussions, teacher clarification and example illustration, and through the frequent homework readings students were assigned in a flipped classroom style of learning. Some students chose to handwrite their journal entries in class and then later typed them up on the computer at home, which was another way of solidifying the learning material in their minds.

A few students offered feedback in terms of ways to improve the free-writing project. For example, one person wrote how grading the free-writing journal entries daily may be useful. Surely, doing this might prove time-consuming for the teacher who has large classes of students. It may also hinder the spontaneous flow of ideas and creative juices if students know that their writing will be evaluated in a certain way, which I almost see as counterproductive, unless
students were “graded” solely on completion of the writing task for that day as a way of “guaranteeing” their participation. This piece of feedback is certainly worth considering.

Another student suggested giving everyone time to peer edit each other’s freewriting at the end of each writing session (time permitting); or it could be done on a weekly basis. Students could exchange journals and peer edit their colleagues’ entries for that week following a simple ready-made checklist to guide their review. This seems a plausible notion that would facilitate the gradual preparation of their final free-writing portfolios that are submitted for a project grade. Elbow speaks of “inkshedding” as a cousin of freewriting, which is slightly connected to what my student suggested. More specifically, inkshedding is done when “everyone writes simultaneously and quickly and then the texts are passed around the room” (Elbow, 2010, p. 16) to be read at the same time. Oral discussion of the text/topic may ensue. Afterward, the “freewrites” can be discarded much like people’s speech acts are thrown away after they have achieved their goal. Such a technique, developed by two Canadian writing teachers as Elbow explains, seeks to highlight the advantages of speech for writing by essentially creating a hybrid between speech and writing, what Elbow calls “speaking onto the page” (2010, p. 16).

Meanwhile, structuring the free-writing journal exercise in a more academically relevant and focused way (as the case study in the literature review illustrated) proved to be of greater value in this recent iteration of the experiment compared to previous iterations when the students were asked to select the writing prompts in the final two weeks of the experiment. Sometimes, the topics were lackluster and/or did not challenge students to think critically or creatively about the subject. As part of improving my teaching practice through action research, I altered this part of the free-writing experience for students, which was for their ultimate gains and growth in learning. Futuristically, I would like to experiment with different free-writing techniques to
deepen learning even the more for students and so they can see and frolic with its multimodality and multidimensionality. (See Appendix F for samples of student work.)

**Field Notes**

Just as the students created free-writing journals for their writing development, so too did I follow suit for my learning about their learning. As much as possible during our freewriting sessions in class, I opened my free-writing journal and wrote and responded to many of the writing prompts that were selected by students and by me in the early versions of this experiment. In the most recent iteration with the emphasis on focused academic writing prompts, I recorded my observations of student behavior during the free-writing sessions as well as their publicly shared responses to the daily writing prompts. This teacher diary kept me aware of their thinking and learning processes and helped me to think of ways to connect all the learning material in class with their freewriting, especially since my main aim for the focused free-writing prompts was for students to use them as a springboard to research and to write their APA-style, 500-700-word problem-solution essays, the preeminent student learning objective of the course.

The following table is an excerpt from my field notes:
This is what a typical journal entry for me entailed in this new iteration of focused free-writing prompts. It allowed me to be present, to listen actively to my students as they read or summarized their “freewrites” to the class and to keep the “it” (the subject) at the center of the teaching and learning scenario as Parker Palmer eloquently describes in *The Courage to Teach*.

The unabashed free-writing advocate, Peter Elbow, encourages (he implores instructors to do it) teachers to engage in freewriting with their students because, firstly, it is a powerful act of leading by example. Secondly, students can get to see how freewriting is not an inconsequential prewriting method for novices but that any kind of writer a, even professionals and academics, can exploit its many advantages, such as in “developing their thinking” (Elbow and Sorcinelli, 2005, p. 4). Elbow even suggests how freewriting is often more advantageous to experienced writers who can harness it to ease their anxiety about a writing project or even in facilitating a writing workshop. He uses himself as an example, stating how freewriting provides
an affective release, albeit incoherent, that assuages his nervousness for verbally expressing his fascination with the free-writing phenomenon (Elbow, 2010).

This next excerpt from my field notes stems from the second time I implemented free-writing journals with my AUIB students when I was still teaching fully online classes. A student chose the writing prompt that day (which topic I do not recall), but I decided to write what was on my mind at that moment in time, which I also encouraged students to do, then, if they did not wish to write in response to the question/topic of the day, being that the free-writing topics were randomly selected and not all that related to the academic content covered in class. I wanted to empower them to write freely. My journal entry is as follows:

Table 6

**September 2021**

Having the students choose the daily writing prompts is a nice way to give them agency so that they can write about the subjects/topics that appeal to them and not what may appeal to me. Now in our final days of the freewriting journal activity, I hope that they can see an improvement or difference in their writing fluency over the three-week duration of this exercise. I look forward to seeing what they have learned through this process as they reflect on their writing process during their project presentation next week. I want to continue implementing this freewriting task activity in my future English to Speakers of Other Languages classes whether online or in person. I think it has great value for skill building/active learning.

Undoubtedly, my approach to the free-writing project evolved with each new class of students and the learning objective for students. With my fully-online students, I was more
concerned with keeping the affective filter low and with giving them agency so that they would invest themselves holistically into the exercise of freewriting. As I taught the same students for Listening and Speaking class, I wanted to crystallize the learning process of freewriting in their minds linking all four skills together by having them deliver an oral presentation on the freewriting experience (learning outcomes, critical reflection, self-assessment). Thus, they would develop the skill of metacognition, “an integral aspect of self-regulated learning” vis-à-vis self-assessment (Lam, 2011, p. 16), and hone their computer literacy skills by creating a Power Point, Prezi, Genially, Padlet or any other kind of interesting virtual visual aid that would concretize the learning that happened for them individually through freewriting.

The final excerpt I will include from my field notes dates to May 2021 when I first initiated the free-writing journal portfolio; it was still in seed form at the time. I included my global pedagogical goal and objective which has, all things considered, remained the same:
May 2021

My students really seem to be enjoying this new freewriting/journaling ritual I started this week upon return to classes. They have five minutes to write whatever they wish in a stream-of-consciousness format focusing on fluency and producing as many words as possible. The first day they could write whatever was on their heart and mind to write about anything. The second day many of them wanted a writing prompt so they could focus their thoughts on a specific topic, so I posed the question: What are the secrets to a long life? (Extracted from EnglishClub.com)

Whoever wanted to write about whatever they wanted still had the option to do that. Several students posted their writing in the chat stream even though they didn’t need to do that. I’m thinking of having them submit all their freewriting work in a project portfolio that I can easily evaluate. My hope is that they will continue the discipline of writing long after this class ends, especially this summer during the two-and-a-half-month break to keep their L2 (English as an Additional Language) thinking and writing muscles strong.

Course Evaluations

At the end of every seven-week class term, I typically distribute digital surveys to the students so they can provide transparent, thoughtful, and anonymous feedback about the class, which can help me to improve my teaching practice as an action researcher. Such student encouragement to critique my professional practice (Elliott, 1991) has resulted in the discovery of the virtual free-writing journal portfolio’s indelible impact on their learning behavior. The simple exercise of freewriting for three consecutive weeks seemed to have made a lasting
educational impression on my IEP students more than any other experiential learning activity executed in class as the class evaluation results demonstrated.

Comments such as “freewriting helped me a lot,” “the thing that helped me improve my writing in this class is freewriting,” and “the freewriting every day helped me a lot to develop my skills in writing” have all stood out as many students’ greatest takeaway from the course in both the fully online and hybrid courses wherein students participated in this project throughout the past year. Adjectives such as “excellent” and “amazing” were also employed to express the impact of freewriting on their writing development. Most of these comments were in response to one of the questions which asked students to indicate what helped or did not help them to learn in the Reading and Writing class. Thus, it became abundantly clear that the virtual free-writing journal portfolio remained a fond and memorable learning experience that they will, hopefully and theoretically, carry with them throughout their college careers.

Discussion

The following statement by the Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) pioneer, David A. Kolb, captures the major goals of experiential learning in which the execution of virtual freewriting journal portfolios by IEP students essentially exhibited: “One is to learn the specifics of a particular subject, and the other is to learn about one’s own learning process” (n.d.). Thus, the introduction to and implementation of freewriting in the intensive English classroom with pre-university Iraqi students for the purpose of developing their academic writing capacity has been a grounded exercise in active, experiential learning in which students had to invest themselves wholly into the practice of freewriting. The primary research has shown that the students who appeared to have gained the most from the free-writing journal activity are those that were fully invested in its philosophy, representative of their consistent motivation to participate in the
regular free-writing sessions throughout the project’s duration. Surely, like with anything in education and life, the more time, energy, and patience an individual invests into something, the greater the likelihood of success and satisfaction during the harvest season.

This chapter will discuss the implications for teaching practice this research study may contribute to the field of TESOL and English applied linguistics and will briefly delineate how the author teaches writing to students in his context, thereby providing a balanced view of the approach to composition instruction vis-à-vis the seminal views and voices presented in the literature review. The conclusion will proceed followed by the references and appendices.

**Implications for Teaching Practice**

Having utilized both theoretical and empirical research methodologies to investigate the research questions under study, I can draw connections between what I found in the literature and what I discovered from my action research. For instance, one interview respondent mentioned how practice is a suitable formula to improve student writing in addition to writing about diverse subjects. She also advised that students need to spend more time reading in earnest so they can select the best ideas before they write about them. This pragmatic wisdom is consistent with what I found in Dr. Badreyya Alkhanbooli’s Department of English dissertation on *Investigating L2 Writers Investment Toward Constructing a Successful Writer Identity: Case Studies of Arab Students from Saudi Arabia Studying in U.S.* wherein she stated how writing is intertextual because writers of any genre and discipline learn the linguistic mechanisms necessary for entry into and success in a target discourse community (2018). This statement also aligns with Zinsser’s core belief that effective writing is learned through emulation and in reading noteworthy exemplars from outstanding writers within a particular discourse community.
As a matter of fact, when I interviewed a respected global educator and conference speaker by the name of Dorothy Zemach, the opening plenary presenter at the 2019 TESOL Arabia conference in Dubai, UAE, for my university’s student magazine, Zemach emphasized the need for instructors to encourage their students to read extensively. In the article “Don’t Be Easy, Be Effective” she advises students to learn to read and to read abundantly. She makes a case for extensive reading and how language schools, universities and other institutions can incorporate it into their curriculum design and grading policies so students will do it. It does not have to be strictly academic material, Zemach clarifies, but anything that interests the reader. Acquiring more knowledge about the world and more exposure to the English language will strengthen students’ literacy skills (McKinney, 2019), which can automatically translate to better writing and thinking in the target language. As my international relations professor once told my political science class in college, the more students read the better they will become at writing. Now I impart the same certitude to my English language learners as a firm believer of this tenet.

When I presented a webinar on my ongoing action research for the TESOL Kuwait Association in January 2022, one of the attendees asked if and how freewriting could be adapted for young learners. It was a cogent query and something to mull over pedagogically. Through my primary and secondary research, I have discovered that freewriting can be used in the English classroom for young(er) students. In fact, this is an insight that emerged, to varying degrees, during the data collection process in my teaching context. Specifically, the student interviews and portfolios revealed that grade-school students can partake in free-writing exercises by being given “topics they are used to studying [in their grade level] and not hard things,” noted one interview respondent. Another respondent expressed how she shared the free-writing journal activity with her younger [high-school-aged] brother so he could experience it personally. She
Virtual Free-Writing Journals in Iraq

also said that middle-school students are better positioned to benefit because they can “discover mistakes in their writing early.” She did not think that primary school pupils were ready for freewriting in that they are not as well versed in grammar and syntax conventions. Another respondent did not think that freewriting was at all appropriate for young learners “because they have to understand and absorb information before they express it.”

Teachers can adapt the free-writing activities to their younger students with some strategic planning because it is not a monolithic activity as I have endeavored to prove in this research study. For example, a TESOL instructor and her colleagues in Japan had their senior high school students create exchange diaries, a form of dialogue journaling, to change their attitudes toward English study from boring to intriguing while giving them real practice in writing to a peer. Each student was introduced to the concept of exchange diaries at the start of the school year as a long-term homework assignment. Students were paired up and given a notebook per pair. After being shown a sample journal entry from the teacher, they were given the guidelines (e.g., the number of journal entries, expected word count per entry, conflict resolution advice, etc.) they needed to heed for writing to their exchange partners with limited interference from the instructor so they could feel free and inspired to do their creative best. The instructor concluded that students enjoyed the activity and learned from each other in this “cooperative learning environment” (Okada, 2014, p. 79).

Truthfully, I can attest to the benefit of this activity as a graduate student because it was part of my TESOL specialization track of teacher training and development in 2021. I spent a month keeping a dialogue journal with my classmates. I wrote my weekly journal entries which were read by one classmate and read and responded, via e-mail, the journal entries written by a different classmate. It was a superb way to take stock of my teaching life and to cultivate a
consistent reflective practice mindset as John Elliott (1991) reinforces in *Action Research for Educational Change (Theory in Practice)*. And what began as dialogue journaling with a trusted and thoughtful peer responder has evolved into a monthly teacher development video conference check-in that keeps us both motivated and inspired to upgrade our professional identities through supportive sharing of resources, networking and coaching each other in our graduate studies.

According to Carol Cox (n.d.) in her article on “Journal Writing,” young learners (primary-school-age) can participate in authentic journal writing with the proper scaffolding from the teacher. For example, providing students with graphic organizers can be a launch pad to stoke their inner creativity, especially when the teacher is using literature as the content focus for student writing. Excerpts from children’s books or relevant illustrations can spark ideas in the learners. They can write from different viewpoints of the character(s) alone or in pairs or groups (Cox, n.d.). Differentiated instruction for English language learners and struggling students can be made, incorporating dialogue journals between the teacher and the student or student to student. Family members can even get involved in writing in or reading the student’s dialogue journal at home. The student can write in his or her native language and/or in English, depending on proficiency level, which is the power of plurilingual pedagogy at work. He or she can dictate the journal entry to a more proficient student or family member who then writes it on the student’s behalf (Cox, n.d.). The possibilities are numerous, demonstrating the inclusivity of freewriting for all ages, learning abilities/styles and linguistic backgrounds.

Concerning the applicability of freewriting for lower-level learners such as for pre-university students who are beginner to intermediate level, the forenamed notions can, with teacher discretion, apply. As the interview respondents pointed out, the free-writing tasks should be simplified and graded for their (i.e., lower-level learners) language level with all the necessary
scaffolding in place. Perhaps, this is where an appreciation for plurilingualism/translanguaging in the language classroom becomes even the more viable because students who lack the language input to “freewrite” adequately in English can pull from the “whole scope of their language resources” (SIT Blog, 2021) to accomplish the goal of the writing task. Using words, phrases and other lexical chunks from their mother tongue may be needed for them to complete a decent act of freewriting. It would be interesting to see what research is being done on this aspect of freewriting and language development for said English language learners preparing to enter university studies in an EMI institution.

**The Author’s Approach to Writing Pedagogy**

Based on the data collected in this empirical study of virtual free-writing journal portfolios, they inevitably gave me a clarity of vision as to how I view and practice the teaching of writing in my current teaching context. Having taught a decent portion of my classes fully online at the AUIB, I agonized to find a way to make the teaching of writing more relevant, engaging, and productive for students. Free-writing journals materialized as the answer. Thus, the data garnered through my teacher action research methods showed repeatedly that freewriting empowered students to be themselves, to discover their voice and to learn the subject matter of academic writing by writing and thinking about it on a perpetual basis. Free-writing journal portfolio reflection statements from students such as “it was one of the most fascinating experiences in my life” or “often you won’t know what you want to say until you start writing” echoes the beliefs about the free-writing movement undergirded by Peter Elbow.

The field notes (free-writing journal) that I kept throughout the duration of each iteration of the free-writing portfolio experiment with each new class of students since May 2021 suggest a sense of community, agency, and fluency development among students and within the class
itself. Students saw an increase in their word count and typing speed over time (in conjunction with their capacity to think more quickly in English), the fully online students almost always posted their daily “freewrites” in the Microsoft Teams chat box that we used for easy communication and language analysis (in other accuracy-focused exercises). This public access to their journal entries enabled everyone to bond on a deeper level by getting to know each other better and fostered an appreciation and respect for a multiplicity of views, opinions, and ideas on any given subject from the complex to the simple. Allowing students license to choose the free-writing topics yesteryear, in the unrefined approach to freewriting, and encouraging them to be creative in the creation of their final project portfolios, perhaps, promoted an implicit affinity for student agency in the learning process so that they would take ownership of their learning, an essential ingredient to a responsible and fertile experience in the educational enterprise.

Upon fine-tuning the free-writing project as of January 2022, with the new intake of ELA students, to equip students for more research-oriented academic writing, I decided upon selecting focused free-writing prompts that would facilitate student knowledge and understanding of the academic writing process. For example, topics related to crafting an outline, academic (dis)honesty, the elements of an introduction paragraph, sources, libraries, and all the other subject matter that we covered in class served as sumptuous fodder with which students could grapple in their free-writing journals. When they were given the opportunity to read them to the class it gave them practice in active listening and in opening new pathways for “seeing” the learning material from different perspectives. The end-of-term course evaluation results confirmed much of what was analyzed and learned from the data; a few students even wished more time had been devoted to freewriting in class. I do wonder what that would have entailed,
given the severe time constraints of needing to cover so much academic content within the reading and writing modalities in a seven-week intensive English class.

A new educational technology teaching technique that I embraced in this New Year of new students came to me after skimming a blog post titled “5 Ways to Use Padlet as an Icebreaker” on the TESOL Blog. I decided to digitize an activity that I have been doing with my language students since starting graduate school in 2019 so students would “feel more comfortable with each other and to start to create a classroom community” (Warner, 2022). This activity, essentially an icebreaker, is called “What I Wish My Teacher Knew.” In a nutshell, students write three facts about themselves they would like their teacher to know. As Donna De La Cruz (2016) wrote in her New York Times article on “What Kids Wish Their Teachers Knew,” the enlightenment generated from the honest and simple writing of primary-school children gave one educator a glimpse into the lives of her students beyond the classroom walls. This included information such as poverty, grief and loss and other adverse situations the students faced. The teacher then wrote and published a book about her lessons learned through this activity that went viral on Twitter via the hashtag “#iwishmyteacherknew” (De La Cruz, 2016).

Meanwhile, my variation of this first-day-of-class icebreaker activity went like this:

- Students post a fun fact about themselves on the Padlet.
- Students post a likeable original photo on the Padlet.
- Students post their/a favorite song on the Padlet (with the embedded link).

Leading by example, I showed them my data. Quickly catching on, they added their information and before the end of class, almost everyone stood up, approached the smartboard, and introduced him or herself. It was a fun and seamless way to break the ice and to learn everyone’s
name. Then, throughout the term I asked students to add to their stream of posts, all accessible via the unique URL, by publishing information on their: current reading material, proudest writing piece, favorite film, and best memory of the reading and writing class. They could include memes, images, GIFs, and display their unique personalities in this sort of public freewriting class blog that counted toward their overall class participation grade at the end of the term. It became a memento of our educational experience and something I have continued doing.

Figure 3

What I Wish My Teacher Knew Class Padlet

Note. An example Padlet created for/by one of my reading and writing classes, January 2022.

While I understand and appreciate the value that freewriting offers in developing students’ writing fluency, I would be remiss to exclude the other equally necessary facet of the writing process, which deals with accuracy. Balance is crucial to nurturing a well-rounded language student who can navigate the complete writing process from the early stages of more
exploratory, creative writing to the latter stages of critical revision and polishing. Thus, I take students through the gradual steps of the writing process using the Writer’s Handbook provided in the National Geographic Learning *Great Writing* textbook, the second book for my course. This text contains numerous exercises that deal with accuracy in grammar, vocabulary, paragraphing, the elements of effective writing and the deconstruction of the problem-solution essay, which is their final assessment for the course. Students learn to peer edit using checklists and rubrics, they work together in groups to write stories and paragraphs, they work in pairs on editing and revising sample writings from the textbook, and they receive individual feedback both handwritten and typewritten (depending on the assignment) from me on both global and local errors in their work. The quizzes are more accuracy-focused, assessing how well they know the relevant grammar and writing concepts that were taught in class.

Additionally, Canvas allows me to provide annotated comments that points out recurring errors in their work within their writing assignments. I also refer students to helpful resources for self-directed study in working on their writing-related weaknesses. TedEd videos, dictionary websites, plagiarism checkers, and Englishclub.com are but a few of the websites that I post on Canvas for their reference. Occasionally, I will record a screencast lecture in which I address issues with which they are struggling to resolve in becoming better writers. As of 2022, students get to visit the library for a special presentation on how to utilize the library resources available for them as imminent undergraduate students. This includes an introduction to the AUIB research databases and the common citation/documentation styles they will encounter in secondary research projects. In brief, I strive to guide them toward becoming more accurate and fluent writers of English because these dichotomic linguistic features are both paramount for academic success in higher education and in the professional world beyond academia.
Finally, the assessment aspect of the free-writing journal project, as mentioned in the Research Design, did not serve as a critical evaluation of their “impeccable” writing ability but was intended as a curious observation of their writing progress during the three-week experiment. Their free-writing portfolio project grade was based on a culmination of the following criteria: organization/presentation; language fluency/topic relevancy/academic honesty; and visual appeal and design. A select few students earned a perfect score on the project while most others achieved an above average or satisfactory grade. As one who is not so fond of giving students grades or in ascertaining learning quantitatively, I cared more about their cognitive and affective learning process. Reading through their journals gave me glimpses into their line of thinking on the various free-writing prompts. On the first day of the activity, students could write about anything they wanted to get a feel for the exercise. The following are various subjects that students wrote freely about for five minutes (in this recent action research iteration): critical thinking; new student university life; vacation destinations; self-introduction; pets; daily routine; favorite movie; self-development; positivity; undergraduate major interest (e.g., dentistry; pharmacy) and sports. I did not read their portfolios verbatim but focused on the final journal entry where they had to self-assess the free-writing journal experience for learning.

When I taught the fully-online classes in 2021 these students had an opportunity to not only write about the impact of freewriting on their learning, but also to give a virtual oral presentation on the impact which counted as a summative assessment (listening & speaking final project). The final project consisted of a portfolio presentation (in whatever form or fashion they chose/prefer) in which students used their free-writing journals from our reading and writing class as fodder for this presentation. They presented their learnings in class during the final week using the following questions to incite critical thinking on their key takeaways:
What was the [thought] process of doing this daily class task like for you? Did it improve your writing somehow? Has your attitude toward/about writing changed? How so? What would you like us to know [that you discovered] about your writing style or voice? Any noteworthy statistics about average word count, sentence amount, recurring themes, grammar/vocabulary use, organization, mechanics, etc.? Will you keep freewriting? Do you feel more disciplined to write [more] regularly? Are there any images that capture this experience for you? What are they? As with the free-writing journal portfolios, the virtual presentations were enthralling and really showcased their learning progress following the free-writing journal experience.

**Figure 4**

*Teacherless’ Writing Workshop*

![Teacherless' Writing Workshop](image)

*Note.* I recently tried out this “teacherless” writing workshop with my new class for the first time. They had to work in groups to write a paragraph to get practice with the content we recently studied on the features of paragraphing. Then, to engage them all in each other’s work more intimately, we tried a variation of Peter Elbow’s ‘teacherless’ writing group session. The student groups responded to their peer groups on the Canvas Discussion Forum after hearing a single reading of
their work. This experiential learning activity generated lively debate and discussion (e.g., can money buy happiness?), and the students asked thoughtful questions about their peers’ work while offering constructive criticism. Some of them shared its utility in their “freewrites” when given the opportunity to reflect on the experience. Afterward, I provided feedback to all the groups on Canvas both on a local and global level for reflection on learning and for learning.

**Conclusion**

This research study has aimed to understand the value of virtual free-writing journal portfolios on Iraqi IEP students in a start-up university as the AUIB. As Iraqi students often struggle in gaining competency within the literacy skills, I, as the teacher action researcher, wanted to learn how I could enhance their reading and writing skills, with an emphasis on writing development. The birth of free-writing journals seemed to have emerged organically as I was teaching fully online classes in 2021 and needed to reconcile hooking and sustaining student engagement in learning how to write an essay with my pedagogical focus of appeasing their desire to do more in-class writing through “hands-on” exercises. Through a series of action research cycles with each new term and class of students was I able to refine my teaching approach to the employment of freewriting for building student language output, self-confidence, and a sense of community. Each new class afforded more creative opportunities to experiment with the multifarious nature of freewriting to produce optimal linguistic gains for the students.

A plethora of information can be found in the literature on the exploitation of freewriting for developing students’ thinking, writing and creative/critical thinking acumen. As with many inventive and even radical theories in education, freewriting has undergone its share of criticism by those who think that freewriting is used as a lackadaisical means of teaching students to write because whatever students write is acceptable and thus, unalterable, in the name of creative self-
expression. Peter Elbow, a popular proponent of the free-writing phenomenon, begs to differ in that he sees freewriting as part and parcel to the overall writing process. It is half of a two-step process. Critical revision and conscious control are the other half making the two kinds of thinking about and teaching of writing interdependent. Both are needed to produce the best quality writing, regardless of genre, the writer’s background, and all other related factors.

It is this balanced view of the teaching of writing that I have endeavored to take in my composition pedagogy, though that is beyond the scope of this research study. Through qualitative action research methods, I have gained a deeper understanding of free-writing’s impact on my pre-university English learners in Iraq, a country formerly esteemed as the cultural and intellectual mecca of the Middle East in its historical heyday. Moreover, the triangulated data gathered for this research study has sufficiently indicated that the implementation of virtual free-writing journals in an IEP program can prepare students to succeed in an undergraduate studies program at an EMI-structured American university. It will produce the cognitive, physical (fine motor) and emotional skills they need to perform adequately in a liberal arts curriculum of study. Therefore, they can harness it as an independent academic study tool.

A longitudinal study would be interesting to conduct at the AUIB on these same students who participated in the free-writing journal experience to see how their writing development evolved over the course of their undergraduate careers and how freewriting in the ELA experience may have impacted their writing growth and any other future freewriting they may encounter throughout their undergraduate career. For example, writing across the curriculum and other types of writing within academia. Future research in this specific context and in any EMI-structured higher education context where students need to be ready for success in an academic program may add to the growing body of knowledge in the field. Also, more research on the
influence of freewriting on young learners may be of use to teachers in this sphere of education. The variations and adaptations of this practice and philosophy known as freewriting and how it can develop the writing ability of language learners that are navigating English as newcomers is something worth exploration within a classroom-inquiry, action research environment.

Finally, in my local current context and, perhaps, in other start-up educational institutions, I recommend a kind of cross-fertilization of ideas, practices, and synergistic interactions in which undergraduate professors meet with ELA instructors to exchange best practices for the teaching of composition, akin to a colloquium. Both parties could share assignments (or components of them) and expose their students to the expectations for writing they would need to be able to master writing at an undergraduate level successfully. ELA instructors could provide the professors with sample student writing so they would be privy to the kind of writing they may expect to see once students reach their undergraduate studies. Plagiarism committees could be formed to deal with such issues as well as panels and other institutional resources such as a writing center, which no longer exists at the AUIB, unfortunately. On a larger scale within TESOL research, I see promise for university and college writing centers to investigate how they view and may utilize freewriting to help students write better as this IPP has aimed to illustrate.

Overall, I am passionate about continuing to implement free-writing journal portfolios in my future ESOL classes whether online and/or in person. I think it is an indubitable asset for skill building/active learning as both a learner and facilitator of learning. Also, I look forward to promoting this activity by presenting at English language education conferences globally to share my passion with other educators seeking to enliven their classes with more student-friendly assignments that will foster an atmosphere of agency, community, and fluency in students’
academic, linguistic, and social-emotional development. As twenty-first-century experiential educators we have the highest duty and honor to shape the lives of the “future of the world in our classrooms today”; may we assume the noble responsibility of “the greatest profession of all” through relentless vigilance and presence in teaching, “lest we lose one fragile opportunity to improve tomorrow” (Ivan Welton Fitzwater as cited in Kolb & Kolb, 2017, Introduction).

**Figure 5**

*English Language Academy*

*Note.* The English Language Academy (ELA) at the AUIB.
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Appendix A

Virtual Freewriting Journal Portfolio Project Description

Submit your three-week typewritten freewriting journal portfolio to me as a project grade. We completed a total of 13 journal entries for this activity in three weeks, equating to more than two hours of in-class academic topic-oriented freewriting.

1st week: 5 minutes

2nd week: 10 minutes

3rd week: 15 minutes

It should have a cover page (name, date, and title) which I showed you in class and be presented in a neat and clear manner that I can easily go through to read and/or skim. I prefer that you use Times New Roman, 12 pt. font formatting, double-spaced text. Feel free to add visuals/graphics and your personal touch for the best grade! I recommend that you proofread through it and that you edit for mechanics. Include your TOTAL word count at the end. The estimated completion time is 30 to 60 minutes.

RUBRIC (Newly created as of February 2022)
Appendix B

E-mail Recruitment – Interviews

My name is Charles McKinney, and I am a master’s student in the TESOL Dept. from the School for International Training. I’m writing to invite you to participate in my research study. This is a study about the benefits and challenges of creating student free-writing journals. You're eligible to be in this study because you have gone through the experience of keeping a free-writing journal.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will participate in an interview which will last 20-30 minutes. I will ask questions about your experience creating free-writing journals, how it helped you to evolve as a writer and thinker and the overall impact it may have on your academic career. I am also interested in discovering any challenges you may have encountered with free writing. I would like to audio record your interview, which will help me to reflect on your answers and look for patterns and insights that will help me to answer my central research question.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate, we can schedule a time for me to meet with you to give you more information. If you need more time to decide if you would like to participate, you may also email me with your decision.

If you have any more questions about this process or if you need to contact me about participation, I may be reached at charles.mckinney@auib.edu.iq.
Appendix C

Informed Consent Agreement

Bilingual Informed Consent Form

Title of the Study: Virtual Free-Writing Journal Portfolios in an Intensive English Program in Iraq

Researcher Name: Charles McKinney

My name is Charles McKinney, and I am a student with the SIT MA TESOL program. I would like to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting for partial fulfillment of my MA TESOL degree. Your participation is voluntary. Please read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy of this form.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The project aims to examine the impact of student free-writing journals on their English literacy development. This will also include interviews with students who have created free-writing journal portfolios. To support these interviews, I will aim to collect student portfolios for further analysis.

STUDY PROCEDURES

Your participation will consist of an interview based on questions that will be provided prior to the interview. This will require approximately 30 minutes of your time and may occur in person or via other communications such as email or Microsoft Teams. The interview will be
audio-recorded for my own reference. However, if the participant does not wish to be audio-recorded he or she can still participate.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study and no penalties should you choose not to participate; participation is voluntary. During the interview, you have the right not to answer any questions or to discontinue participation at any time.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Through this study I hope to contribute to the current research on the advantages of free-writing journals for students in a second/additional language setting, particularly in the Near East. It is my aim that the research participants will develop a greater awareness of their learning process in developing their writing skills as well as cultivating a positive attitude toward the overall writing process.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Any information provided based on student work will not be identifiable by the student’s name or image. A pseudonym may be used in certain cases and will be verified by the interviewee before publishing. All information and research data will be stored on a USB which only I will have access to. Audio-recordings will be kept in a password protected file on my computer. The results of the research paper will be published as part of SIT’s digital collection. Participants will be provided with a draft before publishing to ensure they agree to any statements or remarks I’ve attributed to their names.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**
Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

“I have read the above and I understand its contents and I agree to participate in the study. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older.”

Participant’s signature ____________________________ Date ____________

Researcher’s signature ____________________________ Date ____________

Consent to Quote from Interview

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

_____ (initial) I grant permission to Charles McKinney to use quotations from or refer to excerpts from interviews and class discussions.

_____ (initial) I do not grant permission to Charles McKinney to use quotations from or refer to excerpts from interviews and class discussions.

Consent to Audio-Record Interview

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

_____ (initial) I agree to have my interview audio-recorded.

_____ (initial) I do not agree to have my interview audio-recorded.

Consent to Use Data for Future Projects

_____ (initial) I grant permission to the researcher to use the data for future projects.
______ (initial) I do not grant permission to have the data used for the researcher’s future projects.

**RESEARCHER’S CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have any questions or want to get more information about this study, please contact me at charles.mckinney@auib.edu.iq.

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION**

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by an SIT Study Abroad Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant or the research in general and are unable to contact the researcher please contact the Institutional Review Board at:

School for International Training
Institutional Review Board
1 Kipling Road, PO Box 676
Brattleboro, VT 05302-0676
USA irb@sit.edu
802-258-3132
استمارة الموافقة

عنوان الدراسة: محافظة افتراضية للكتابة الحرة في برنامج اللغة الإنجليزية المكثف في العراق

اسم الباحث: تشارلز مكيني

أنت تشارلز مكيني ، طالب في برنامج تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلهجة ثانية في مدرسة التدريب الدولى (SIT). أود أن أدعوكم للمشاركة في دراسة أجريت كجزء من متطلبات الحصول على شهادة الماجستير في البرنامج المذكور أعلاً. برنامج المعلمين طوعية. أقرأ رجاءً المعلومات الواردة في أدناه وأسأل عن أي شيء قبل أن تقرر المشاركة. إذا ما قررت المشاركة، فستكون عليك التوقيع على هذا النموذج ومن ثم الحصول على نسخة منه.

الغرض من الدراسة

يهدف المشروع إلى دراسة تأثير المذكرات التي يكتبها الطلبة بشكل حر على تطوير مهارات القراءة والكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية لديهم، سوف أعمل على تلخيص الممارسات والأطر الحالية وسيشمل ذلك أيضاً مقابلات مع الطلبة الذين كونوا حافظات يومية للكتابة الحرة. وللدفع هذه المقابلات الشخصية، سأسأوى إلى جميع محافظ الطلبة زيادة في تحليلها. أخيراً، سأجري مناقشة جماعية مركزة مع المشاركين في البحث لتلخيص النتائج والدور المستقبلي.

كيفية إجراء الدراسة

تقوم مشاركتكم في هذه الدراسة على إجراء مقابلة ومجموعة من الأسئلة التي سيتم اجتهادكم إليها قبل إجراء المقابلة. سيبقى هذا الأمر حوالي 30 دقيقة وقد تكون المقابلة بحضور شخصي أو عبر وسائل اتصال أخرى مثل البريد الإلكتروني أو عبر تطبيق Microsoft Teams. سيتم تسجيل المقابلات صوتياً من أجل الرجوع إليها لأغراض الدراسة والبحث، مع هذا، إذا كان المشارك غير راغب في التسجيل الصوتي فيمكنه المشاركة كذلك. ستكون مجموعة المناقشة خصوصية عن مناقشة داخل الصف المكرسة حول موضوع البحث. لن يستغرق الأمر أكثر من ساعة واحدة وسأستخدمه صوتياً بموافقة الجميع في صف دراسي داخل الحرم الجامعي.

المخاطر المحتملة والشعور بعدم المستفيد

لا توجد أي مخاطر من جرّاء المشاركة في هذه الدراسة ولا عقوبات إذا ما أخترت عدم المشاركة، فالمشاركة طوعية. يحق لك عدم الإجابة عن أي سؤال أو التوقف عن المشاركة في أي وقت تشاء.

الفوائد المحتملة لهذه الدراسة للمشاركين أو للمجتمع ككل

امل أن يكون هؤلاء مساهمة في البحوث الحالية حول مزايا الكتابة الحرة في مذكرات الطلبة في بيئة لغوية ثانية إضافية، خاصة في منطقة الشرق الأدنى. أن هدفي من هذا البحث هو أن يطور المشاركون وعيا أكبر لفهم التعلم الخاص بهم في تطوير مهاراتهم في الكتابة.

السرية

ستبقى أي معلومات تعريفية ، تم الحصول عليها نتيجة لإجراء هذه الدراسة، سرية. تتعهد بأن لن يتم التعرف على أي معلومات تعريفية بناء على مشاركة الطالب في هذه الدراسة. يمكن للأستاذ أن يختبر في حالات معينة، أسماء مساعدة وسأستخدمها بناءً على التحقق من طبيعته الشخصي التي يتم مقابلته قبل النشر. سيتم تخزين جميع المعلومات وبيانات البحث على وحدة تخزين متصلة (USB) أن أستطيع أن أقفلها فقط من الاتصال مع مكتب المستندات الصناعية في ملف محمي بكلمة مورَر على هاجس الحاسوب الخاص بي. سيتم نشر نتائج البحث كجزء من المجموعة الرقمية للمؤسسة التعليمية التي أدرست فيها.
وسامب تزويد المشاركين في البحث بموضوع قبل النشر للتأكد من موافقتهم على أي بيانات أو ملاحظات تتعلق إلى أسمائهم.

المشاركة في البحث والاحساح منه

عزيزي الطالب، مشاركتك في الدراسة طوعية ومن ثم لا يتطلب من امتناعك عن المشاركة أي عقولة أو فقعدة للمزايا التي كنت تتمتع بها قبل مشاركتك. يمكنك سحب موافقتكم في أي وقت تشاء وتوقف عن المشاركة دون أي مطالبات أو حقوق أو تعويضات قانونية بسبب مشاركتك في هذه الدراسة البحثية.

لقد قررت ما ورد في أعلاه، وأفهم محتوياته وأوافق على المشاركة في الدراسة. أقر بأن عمري 18 عاماً أو أكثر.

توقيع المشترك:-------------------------------------------
التاريخ:----/----/----

موافقة على الاقتباس من المقابلة
وفق بالحروف الأولى لاسمك للتعبير عن اختيارك:
(وفق بالحروف الأولى) أمنح الأذن للسيد تشارلز مكيني لاستخدام الاقتباسات أو الإشارة إلى مقتطفات من المقابلات والمناقشات الصوتية.
(وفق بالحروف الأولى) لا أمنح الأذن للسيد تشارلز مكيني لاستخدام الاقتباسات أو الإشارة إلى مقتطفات من المقابلات والمناقشات الصوتية.

موافقة على المقابلات المسجلة صوتياً
وفق بالحروف الأولى من اسمك للتعبير عن اختيارك:
(وفق بالحروف الأولى) أوافق على تسجيل المقابلة أو مناقشات مجموعة الاختبار صوتياً.
(وفق بالحروف الأولى) لا أوافق على تسجيل المقابلة أو مناقشات مجموعة الاختبار صوتياً.

موافقة على استخدام البيانات للمشاريع المستقبلية
وفق بالحروف الأولى) أمنح الإذن للباحث لإستخدام البيانات للبحوث المستقبلية.
(وفق بالحروف الأولى) لا أمنح الإذن للباحث لإستخدام البيانات للبحوث المستقبلية.

معلومات الإتصال بالباحث
إذا ما كان عندك أي سؤال أو كنت راغباً في الحصول على مزيد من المعلومات حول هذه الدراسة، يرجى الإتصال بي على charles.mckinney@auib.edu.iq

حقوق المشاركة في البحث - معلومات الاتصال بمجلس المراجعة في المؤسسة
كجزء من الالتزام بالمعايير الأخلاقية لجميع المشاريع الدراسية في مدرسة التدريب الدولي (SIT) فقد تم النظر في هذه الدراسة والموافقة عليها من قبل مجلس المراجعة المحلي في المدرسة المذكورة أو مجلس المراجعة في المؤسسة. إذا كانت لديك أسئلة أو مخاوف أو شكاوى حول حقوقك كمشارك في البحث أو حول البحث بشكل عام ولم تتمكن من الإتصال بالباحث، يرجى الإتصال بمجلس المراجعة في المؤسسة على العنوان التالي:

School for International Training
Institutional Review Board
1 Kipling Road, PO Box 676
Brattleboro, VT 05302-0676
USA irb@sit.edu
802-258-3132
Appendix D

Student Interview Questions

- What was your initial impression of free writing upon doing it the first day?
- Have you ever done this activity in a school setting or at all?
- What did you learn from this daily exercise throughout its three-week duration?
- Did your writing improve? How so?
- Would you recommend this classroom activity to others? Why or why not?
- Describe any challenges or disadvantages in doing this experiment.
- How could it be improved? What changes would enhance the activity for students?
- Are free-writing journals appropriate for young learners and/or lower-level learners?
- Anything else to add?

Student Observation Guide

Research participants will be informed beforehand that I will be observing them during this classroom exercise. I do not foresee this being an issue with any student because teachers ordinarily observe their students by virtue of teaching and monitoring student engagement in class. However, if anyone objects to me taking notes and partaking in my research duties, then I will focus on the other students who consent to my classroom observations. I will stress that no individual student will be identified in my research report and findings but that I am gathering general information about student learning and possible struggles that may need to be addressed in subsequent classes. I will make clear that it is all intended for their benefit. Thus, they should act natural and need not feel timid about completing their daily journal entries.
Appendix E

Organizational Support E-mail Approval for Research Study

December 15, 2021

Great! You have my support and permission.

Dr. Lisa Roegner, Ed.D.
Director of the English Language Academy
Mobile: +9647833246682
Ext: 9255
Business: 6227
Email: Lisa.Roegner@auib.edu.iq
American University of Iraq Baghdad
Airport Road, Baghdad, Iraq
www.auib.edu.iq

From: Charles McKinney <Charles.McKinney@auib.edu.iq>
Sent: Wednesday, December 15, 2021 10:18 AM
To: Lisa Roegner <Lisa.Roegner@auib.edu.iq>
Cc: Ziad Chaaban <Ziad.Chaaban@auib.edu.iq>
Subject: RE: Thesis Proposal Research

Feel free to skim the complete proposal for more info. I have informed consent forms that students will have to read and sign before participating in the research. All I need is written approval from the ELA Dept. (this e-mail will do) that I can submit to my grad school’s IRB when I send in my human subjects application this week.

Thanks,
Charles

Charles McKinney
ELA Instructor
Mobile: +9647833246753
Ext: 9256, 9257
Business: 6227
Email: Charles.McKinney@auib.edu.iq
American University of Iraq Baghdad
Airport Road, Baghdad, Iraq
www.auib.edu.iq
Appendix F

Sample Student Virtual Free-Writing Journal Portfolios

Keep calm and write on
Assim Anas
7TH Nov-25th Nov
Level 4, Section 1
Reading and Writing

November 7, 2021

**Free writing**

Sundays are usually hard at ELA because you must think about many things that you should have done at the weekend. Sunday also usually looks like the longest day of the week. Probably because it is the first day after the weekends. For instant, this Sunday I'm worrying about the presentation that Mrs. Nancy gave us the previous week and we must present it today in front of the class. Furthermore, on Sundays, the streets are often crowded and there are a lot of traffic jams. It may be because of the weekend some people have things to do that they wouldn’t be able to finish before the weekend. Finally, Sunday is the most day that you feel sleepy on it even if you got enough sleep the day before and nobody knows why.

November 8, 2021

**What are your biggest fears?**

When someone mentioned fear, usually the first thing that comes into his mind is his biggest fear. For me, my deepest fear is losing my family. Someday I had that nightmare when I lost my family on it. I was 13, but it still the most frightening nightmare I have ever had. Of course, everyone has different fears. But as much as the fear is deep, as much as you do not want to think about it, or even admit that you are afraid of it. A wise old man gave me this advice years ago "Your deepest fear is a secret, and you should not tell it to anyone. If you did, maybe your enemies will get benefit from it".
November 9, 2021

**Cooperative learning**

Cooperative learning may benefit our lives in many different ways. But if we are talking about what will we benefit from beyond school, I think it will totally affect our lives positively. Cooperative learning helps us to be able to work in groups. It also makes us more open-minded to different thoughts and ideas. We may not accept these ideas or do not believe them, but we are still able to understand and be acceptable and respectful. Overall, having the ability to work in groups is one of the most qualities that are in demand for almost all jobs.

November 10, 2021

**What is your favorite kind of music?**

One of the most difficult things to opt for is the kind of music that you like. Because everyone appeals to a kind of music because of the mood that he is in and then he may appeal to a different kind of music when he switches to another mood. So, I think everyone appeals to many kinds of music in general. For me, I appeal to traditional Arabic music at this moment. Yesterday I was appealed to heavy metal music.

November 11, 2021

**An unforgettable day that you spent in 2021**

The 19th of June was my special day in 2021. There was an event inside AUIB, so we did a lot of great things there. Firstly, we were able to bring a guest with us, so I brought my cousin and he enjoyed it and took a lot of photos. Secondly, everyone brought food to campus, so we ate together with the staff and our guests. The food was amazing, and we were happy to let AUIB staff taste our traditional food. Also, students sang together and played games. Finally, we took a group picture for the memory. This day was the most beautiful day in 2021 not only because I enjoyed it, but also because everyone was having fun.
November 14, 2021

**Write about a special trip you took**

Last year I went to AL-Habania lake. I went there with my family members and my cousins. We were at least 23 members. We arrived there very early in the morning. There were only us. After we arrived, we set our big tent directly. We changed our clothes and ate a tasty breakfast near the lake. Then at once, we all jumped into the lake. It was a little bit cold, but we were very active, so we warmed our bodies by swimming. The most interesting thing on this trip was singing by speakers inside the water and we were competing in diving. We swam for 4 hours. While people started to come, we left the lake and went to have lunch in one of the restaurants there. Then we came back home around 11 a.m. overall, it was the fastest and greatest trip ever.

____________________________________________________________________________

November 15, 2021

**What makes people lie?**

Firstly, the most common reason that makes people lie is when they want to get out of a difficult situation. For example, students always lie when they are late. Employees always do that too when they are late or when they need vacations. However, there are some people who lie as a hoppy. That means there is no reason to lie but they still lying. Or sometimes they do it just to impress people. Secondly, which is the worst type of lying, is when people lie to themselves. People lie to themselves for many reasons. But it is the worst kind of lying because they know unconsciously that they are not honest. For example, people always give themselves excuses when they do wrong things like when they behave disrespectfully toward someone. In
write about your most important goal in life

If we talk about goals, I think I will not stop talking because I do have many goals. Firstly, being friendly and helpful to people are the most important goals for me. To be clear, all people have goals for only one reason "happiness". So, everything we did, we do, we will do is to achieve happiness. For me, happiness is all about giving not gaining. So, as much as you give, as much as you will gain happiness. And if people gain it, that’s it. all goals that people seek are to feel happy or satisfied throughout their lives. Overall, the most important goal is to give and make other people happy. I do have many goals to make people happy. One of them is being successful in my life. Then I will get money, give people, then I will feel satisfied. In conclusion, there are different definitions for goals. Giving and happiness are my aspects.

If you were president, what would you change about your society?

Firstly, I will look after the education and put it at top of my priority. Secondly, I will encourage and help people to start their own businesses. Because depending on the government jobs is not the real solution to our problems. I will also focus on the tourism industry because Iraq is one of the oldest countries in the world and it has many ruins that tourists are interested in. In addition, I will change many rules that are incorrect. For example, I will make education free for everyone and for all ages instead of the current rules which allowed only young people to have free education. Lastly, I will change all people who oversee the Iraqi government and higher new faces with great qualifications.

Describe the last film you watched

The last movie I have watched is "V for vendetta". And last time was the 5th time I watched it. It is one of the best movies that I have ever watched. The story of this movie is about a revolution. the star actor is wearing an anonymous mask. He wants to change the government in his country because they are corrupt. And he chose the 5th of November to do his revolution. He managed everything for his revolution for one year. While he was cleaning his town from bad people, he met a girl. He got confused because she helped him. he couldn’t leave her because the government will kill her. Eventually, he took her and kept her in his place "underground". Then she saw how honorable he is. So, she helped him back to succeed in his revolution. One of the most thing that I liked in this movie and made me repeat it, again and again, is the quotes that he
said during the movie. One of them reached fame in our society. Which is "remember, remember, the fifth of November" and the second one is "beneath this mask there is more than face, there is an idea, and ideas are bulletproof".

November 22, 2021

**Which is the best way to learn English?**

There are many ways to learn English. Learning at schools, by watching movies, online free videos, and more. For me, the best way to learn English is to visit or become a friend with native speakers. In this way, people can learn English through their daily communication with native speakers. In addition, they could not speak Arabic or their mother tongue language at all. In this way, people will learn English unconsciously, or at least they will learn without butting that effort that they used to put into their usual learning ways. The most important factor in this way of learning is to practice English daily without excuses. Because if people don’t, they will not be able to communicate. For me, the best way that helped me to learn English is talking with native speakers like instructors in AUIB and I also have a friend from Australia who speaks English fluently. I also do self-learning from websites on the internet, watching movies, and reading books. However, all these ways of learning were not effective as much as speaking, and chatting with native speakers. Finally, teachers can support their students by chatting, and talking with them as much as they can. They also can give them the best references that might help them. And tries to make the lectures fun and do not let students feel stressed about learning. Teachers also should try to analyze what every student need and give them extra work to strengthen their weakness places.

November 23, 2021

**What is your favorite food? How do you make it? what is the recipe?**

There are many types of food that I like. But in general, I liked Iraqi food. Not because it is my country, but because I have tried different types of food from different countries and the Iraqi food was the best. It is too hard to choose one type of food, I do like many. For example, dolma is one of my best foods ever, there is also kabab, mandi, and sweets like Klecha. It is too hard to make this kind of food without getting help. The recipes are too complicate, and the time of cooking must be very accurate. A few seconds may ruin all the food. For dolma, the recipe is pepper, cucumber, tomato, potato, different kinds of green leaves like grape leaves, meat, rice, and different kinds of spices. To make dolma, we must put the rice, meat, and spices together. Then we make a whole in the middle of the vegetables and put the rice, meat, and spices inside it. also, we must flatten the grape leaves and roll the rice inside them. some people may also use onion. Then we put all these ingredients in a big pot of food and cook it for 90 minutes. In the last 30 minutes, the fire must be very low. Finally, it must be served in a big bowl and all the
family should eat from it. Overall, dolma is only for family occasions so it will not taste good if there are only two or three people at the table.

November 24, 2021

**Compare today's mobile phone with those of five of teen years ago.**

Phones have changed a lot since the revolution of technology in 2010. Computers, phones, and video games jumped into the industry of technology. Phones used to have buttons and their storage used to be less than 16g before 2010. These days, approximately, all phones have a soft touch screen and storage of over 256g. Also, the systems industry has developed a lot. Like android system, windows, and mac. 10 years ago, we used to use cameras to take pictures. Nowadays, almost everyone uses his mobile to take pictures because of its quality, even photographers do that sometimes. In addition, video games used to have fewer graphics, nowadays, video games look real, in some high-quality video games, you cannot know if they are real or games. Finally, I mustn’t forget to mention the car industry, cars used to depend on mechanical parts, nowadays, many parts of cars depend on technology. Technology has changed our lives incredibly and we are going to depend on technology for things that we didn’t believe could happen 10 years ago.

November 25, 2021

**The most experience that was meaningful during the free writing project.**

It was one of the greatest experiences that I have ever had. I learned a lot from it. It helped me to feel free to write, be able to think fast, and be less nervous. Also, it helped me to write faster in English and developed my writing skills. In addition, it was great practice for the first draft and a little bit for brainstorming. For me, the most benefit I got while free writing lesson is writing comfortably without feeling stressed. Finally, seeing the words that I have typed after the free typing project makes me feel proud. Till now I wrote over 2000 words which is something great. Moreover, the free writing project was really beneficial.

Total words: 2342
Freewriting Journal

Heba Ahmed Jassem

September 12, 2021

Level 4 – Reading & Writing

Total Words: 1560
September 12, 2021

Healthy Lifestyle

The most important thing we have to follow is a healthy lifestyle. In the beginning, we should be aware of the kind of food that we eat. We must avoid a diet that contains a lot of amount of sugar and fats. Next to that, when we are under stress, we should take a break. Also, we should sleep enough time and early. Eventually, we must exercise four times per week. In conclusion, follow some basic steps in your life to live correctly.

Words: 83

September 13, 2021

What was a cherished (favorite) childhood memory?

The most lovely memory to my heart, when I was at my grandmother’s house. I remember when we were playing in her home’s garden. I remember the smells of flowers, trees, and my pink bike. I felt down from it a lot. I loved to sit around the fireplace and talk to her. I remember her advice about life for us. Eventually, I didn’t think I well have like these beautiful times again.

Words: 73

September 14, 2021

What motivated you to seek admission to AUIB?
The thing that motivated me to join AUIB is my average. After I finished high school, I thought a lot about universities. One day I was talking to my friend and, she told me about it. I ask my mom to join it, and she agrees. I chose it because of the guilty of education, the beautiful building, gardens, and water. For all these reasons, I thought to join AUIB.

Words: 70

September 15, 2021

Farm Technology

Mills can be used to get clean electricity and is an important factor to save the environment. It can be to water extraction. It really has a good impact because we can use it to watering transplant also to run some machines.

Words: 42

September 19, 2021

How was the peer editing process for you last week? How can peer editing help you develop as a writer and reader?

Every student should peer editing her/his writing because it was helpful. It makes you know your mistake. Also, it is an important thing to know the other`s opinion because maybe they have information that you don`t have. In addition, peer editing makes you develop your English writing. For example, when you know your mistakes, you will never repeat them. Also,
peer editing makes you thinking in the correct way about your sentences. Last week, I enjoyed peer editing with Maryam. She gave me her opinion about my draft. She was respectful and helped me a lot. For these reasons, every time that I write an essay, I will do peer editing.

**September 20, 2021**

**What the thing that make you optimistic and want to live for more time?**

In our lives, there are a lot of things that motived us to be optimistic. In the beginning, we have to look at the bright side of our life. We should avoid negative thoughts. Life is beautiful if we deal with it correctly methods. In addition, we should accept every bad thing that can happen. We mustn't give up. We have to achieve our goal. Another thing that motived me, is taking care of ourselves. If we want to live happily, we have to avoid disease by following some basic steps. Eventually, happiness and optimism are contagious. For example, if the people I know are happy, I will become happy. In conclusion, life is beautiful if we take it easy.

**Words: 120**

**September 21, 2021**

**What is the biggest problem in your community and how can we solve it?**

Pollution is a big problem In my community. In the beginning, cars smoke is a big problem. We can use another way to transform like bike and electric train. Then another problem is the factories. They throw their chemical items and waste in the water. It pollutes water and kills a lot of sea animals. The government should avoid factories doing that. Also, it is harmful to
human health. In addition to that, trash is everywhere on roads, gardens, and landscapes. It brings unwanted animals. To solve this problem, we can create robots that collecting trash. It will be a helpful idea. As a result, the government should put some laws to protect the environment and humanity.

Words: 117

September 22, 2021

What kinds of books did you read, and how is your favorite writer?

I don`t love reading, but my favorite type of book is sciences books. I love to collect information, and I want to be aware of everything about the world. I don`t find enjoyment when I read history, geography, and literature books. I love the book that talks about human and animal bodies. Sometimes, I read about the plants. I like to learn about living creatures. Eventually, I like to search for information on the internet than reading books. The internet gives you just the information that you need. In the book, you have to read a lot to find what are you need.

Words: 103

September 23, 2021

Difficult Experience

In my life, I faced a lot of difficulties. After I completed middle school with a 96 out of 100, I didn`t achieve my dreams. I felt I lost myself. I became very sad, and I didn`t want to talk to anyone. I spent a long time in my bed. I cried a lot. In the morning of one day, I called my teacher and told her. She told me not everything we want will come true. Also, she reminds me
how I am a hard worker. She teaches me how I should adapt to sudden changes. As a result, I
learn how I should be strong and be ready to change the plane.

September 27, 2021

Have you ever read a story in a book or seen it in a movie and it happened in
real life?

In general, our lives are full of events that are similar to movies. So let's talk about
miracles first. I believe in miracles according to the rule that dreams come true. We don't know
what the future holds for us, and we don't know what could happen. The future may be better
than the present, or maybe not. Our dreams will come true if we believe in them. Perhaps some
of our dreams are easy to achieve, but we do not seek to achieve them, we do not make any effort
and say that our dreams do not come true. On another side, the thing we want to achieve maybe
it harmful to us. We should not look at the empty side of the glass. We have to adapt to our life
and accept it as it is. In the end, if our dreams do not come true, we have to continue in life and
look for other dreams to achieve them.

September 29, 2021

What's your favorite quote or proverb that you like to follow/obey/apple to your life?
In our public life, we hear many quotes, but there are a few quotes that we relate to. The first quote that motivates me is "Don't stop until you're proud." When I am bored with studying or any other occupation, I write this quote near me and meditate on its deep meaning. This quote tells me not to give up my goals in the middle of the road. I feel like it's telling me to keep moving forward. Another one that I love is "Don't accept less than you deserve." This quote tells us not to be satisfied with poor treatment and keep moving forward until we stay in the first place. It tells us that we deserve good treatment and appreciation. For these reasons, I love these quotes and apply them in my life.

September 30, 2021

What are your favorite place in your country and why?

My favorite place in my city is AL-Karrada. I chose this for a place because I feel it mixes the present and the past. You can see the old huge houses, shops and serious commercial malls. I chose this place because I feel that it reflects the originality of the Iraqi people. In addition to this, you can feel safe in such places. The thing that makes me love and feel comfortable in this area is seeing the kids playing in the streets at noon. For these reasons, I love this area so much.
October 3, 2021

Do you love yourself?

In general, no person does not love himself but, the way people take care of themselves differs from one person to another. A person can show his love for himself by doing what your soul desires and avoiding taking people's words. Bring the things you like for yourself, such as food, clothes, or anything else. You can also love yourself by taking care of it and avoiding self-harm and excessive thinking. Look on the bright side, even if your life is going wrong. Life is short, and we must live it the right way, and nothing deserves to take it seriously. Do not waste your happiness and pleasure offending others. In short, nothing on earth is worth worrying about and hating yourself.

Words: 122
Free Writing Journal Project

Week 3 – Week 5
Feb 13 - Mar 3, 2022
By Hussein Abbas Razzaq – Lvl. 4 – Sec. 4

1400 Words
**Paragraph 1 – Week 3/Day - 1**

**The life’s lessons**

Life always gives us many lessons. If you are alive and still breathing of course life gives you free lessons every day in different life sides such as, relationships, work, communication, and many other things. For example, if you fail in a relationship don’t be upset because you learnt something from that try, and you can do better in the next time or if you aren’t accepted in a job because you didn’t qualify so in this case you must work on yourself and make it happen in the next try.
Paragraph 2 – Week 3/Day – 2
The Essay’s Introduction

What is the introduction of an essay? The introduction is the first paragraph of an essay that contains the hook, background information and thesis statement. The hook is a sentence that interact reader’s attention and it is often the first sentence of the introduction. Then, the background information statement has a numbers, facts or history that’s prove your main idea is true. In the last, there is the thesis statement that contains the main idea of the essay and what the ideas will we develop in the rest of the essay.
Paragraph 3 – Week 3/Day – 3

Global Warming

What is the global warming? Global warming means to increase the temperature of the earth. There are many causes lead to that like air pollution from the cars and factories. Actually, this is a serious problem because it can affect on our health like breathing and maybe it causes cancer. To prevent that we must find other ways to generate the power like solar power or wind power or waterpower. In conclusion, global warming is a great problem, and we must find ways to prevent it.
Paragraph 4 – Week 3/Day – 4

The Good Essay

What does a good essay include? An academic essay should be built in a specific structure. A good essay should include at least five paragraphs; introduction, three main body and conclusion. The introduction should contain the ideas will develop in the essay; 2-3 ideas. Main body should explain these ideas and support your writing with examples, reasons and evidence. In the end you have to summarize your writing in the conclusion paragraph.
Paragraph 5 – Week 3/Day – 5

Traditional & Modern Medicine

The development of medicine has many new effective elements on illnesses and human’s health. The old traditional medicine is good and it can reduce many illnesses but it’s works slowly. The new medicine methods are more effective and work quickly but if we use them without doctor’s advice, they can have more side effects. So, we must ask the doctor which kind of medicine is good for us. In a word, the traditional and modern medicine are good but we must know how to use them.
Paragraph 1 – Week 4/Day – 1

The problem-solution essay

The problem-solution essay discusses a specific problem and then give some solutions for that problem. Usually, this kind of essays introduce the problem and solutions in the introduction paragraph and then we have to explain and support the solutions in the main body paragraphs.

Which Topic I chose?

Actually, I have not decided yet, but I think I will go with the global warming topic because I have a lot of information about this topic, and I can support my information more by looking for new ones. Global warming has a lot of effects on the environment, to prevent that we have to use clean power resources, use electric cars and plant more trees.
Paragraph 2 – Week 4/Day – 2
Introduction For My Essay

What global warming means? Hundreds of illnesses can happen because of the global warming, like cancer and eyes and breathing issues. This problem can cause a hazardous effects on environment besides the illnesses such as the planting problems, decrease in oxygen levels and higher temperatures. So, global warming means that to increase the earth temperature and it has a lot of effects on the environment, to prevent that we have to use clean power resources, use electric cars and plant more trees.
Paragraph 3 – Week 4/Day – 3

Resources For an Essay

If you want to write an essay about any topic you have to have some information about it. You can find this information in many different places like internet or books, etc. for my essay I chose National Geographic for global warming essay, and I will find more. I will select them depending on what the quality of the information it provides and is it clear enough or not. In a ward the essay needs a lot of information and evidence, and you must look for them.
Paragraph 4 – Week 4/Day – 4

Am I really like libraries or not?

Am I really like libraries or not? Actually, I like to go to libraries to looking for new books and get familiar with new titles, but I do not really like to sit in there and reading my book, I prefer to borrow the books and read them on my home to be more comfortable. Libraries have great reputation in Iraq because many of Iraqi people read and buy books. In a ward, libraries are good for many people, but they are not perfect for me.
Paragraph 1 – Week 5/Day – 1

Outline

How can the outline help us with our writing? The outline of an essay can help us to focus on main ideas and don’t waste time to thinking about things far from the main topic. In addition, it makes us know how to organize our final essay, it also let us know if the content of the essay is good enough or not. Make us look for resources that help us to make our essay stronger and richer. My outline was really good it had perfect structure and organization, but the instructor told me that it I have to attach the resources in the end of the outline. So, the outline is the first step of your writing and sure you have to make it well.
Paragraph 2 – Week 5/Day – 2

Plagiarism

It’s important to be honest in your writing. Plagiarism is like a lesion in some people. People who don’t work hard in getting information and looking for them they are always use these ways to just pass or looking in good shape in the other’s eyes. If you want to be an academic writer, you must be honest. Don’t copy your classmates’ work or copy and paste from the internet. You must write your own ideas and support them with another information that you found in different resources. The plagiarism takes many forms, some are plagiarism, and some are not for example copying others’ work is plagiarism but looking for different resources and get information and then you restatement them together to support your ideas and put them in academic form is not plagiarism.
Paragraph 3 – Week 5/Day – 3

The First Draft of an Essay

What is the first draft of an essay? It is the first sample that you write for yourself to practice and realize the errors that maybe happen and try to avoid them in the final essay. The draft let you use your information and resources and let you know if they good enough or not. In addition, the draft makes you able to use your outline and practice on organizing your essay. In my draft I will take my outline and start writing my ideas and information I got maybe I will need more information so in this condition I have to looking for more. In a word, I believe that writing a draft is a part of your writing, so you have practice and try repeatedly.
Paragraph 4 – Week 5/Day – 4
My Freewriting Experience

Actually, it was very helpful because I knew a lot about my level in writing so I could improve my paragraphs across three weeks. In addition, it was nice experience because I felt very free while writing and I wrote what was I thinking about. Also, it makes me able to check my vocabulary and use them in the right place. Across three weeks my writing was improving you can see the difference between the paragraphs. It was helpful practice for writing and that make you ready to your final essay.
Figure 6

*Free-writing Journal Image*

Note. A different student inserted this image into his free-writing portfolio, which sums up the complicated and often agonizing nature of the [academic] writing process.