

Why Write More When You Can Write Less? EFL Students' Insights on Prewriting

Nada Algharabali

The English Department, Public Authority for Applied Education & Training, Kuwait City, Kuwait

Email: Na.algharabally@paaet.edu.kw

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Abstract

Many students seem to believe that writing the first draft should be considered the final product, thus disregarding the different stages of the writing process, such as prewriting, drafting and revising. The present study investigates students' perceptions of prewriting. Seventy-one students attending an English writing course participated in this study. A two-pronged quantitative and qualitative data collection method consisted of an online questionnaire and a semi-structured face-to-face interview to consider two research issues, namely: if and why students tend to resist prewriting techniques as well as their most and least preferred prewriting activity in the EFL classroom. The findings demonstrate that students have conflicting perceptions towards the concept of prewriting. Although possibly helpful, they perceive prewriting as a separate part of the writing process that could certainly be skipped unless carried out with the teacher's assistance or assigned extra grades.

Keywords

EFL Writing Students, Prewriting Awareness, Prewriting Techniques, Resistance to Prewriting

1. Introduction

What is it about the writing process that English language learners find challenging? For decades, this question has puzzled teachers and educators. A large body of research over the years has shown that of all the language skills, writing is the one skill students struggle with the most (Ganske et al., 2003; Saddler et al., 2004; Ghabool et al., 2012; Sağlamel & Kayaoğlu, 2015). According to Saddler et al. (2004), writing involves numerous mental operations (including advanced levels of cognitive effort and attention) rendering it not only too overwhelming a process for learners, but also difficult to master. Since the writing process usually

involves several stages leading to the end product, such as prewriting, drafting, writing, and revising, it is interesting to investigate which of these stages tends to be the most overlooked by learners.

The main purpose of the present study is to examine college students' perceptions of one of the stages of writing, namely the prewriting phase. It has come to the attention of this paper's researcher, who has been teaching writing for 30 years, that a large number of college students in Kuwait seem to resist the prewriting stage. It is believed that finding out how students actually feel about prewriting could help teachers clear out any misconceptions and/or create more awareness among students as to the importance of utilizing prewriting during writing. To obtain perceptions behind this resistance, the researcher set out to investigate the following issues: 1) If and why do students tend to resist prewriting techniques? 2) Are they aware of the different prewriting techniques if so, which do they prefer? 3) Could introducing a new technique (e.g., a "word bank", a brief task involving creating keywords related to a given topic at an impulse) trigger the students' interest in prewriting?

Study Background

At the English Department, College of Basic Education (CBE) in Kuwait, female and male students must study 3 basic skills courses of English (speaking, reading and writing) as part of a BA program in English language teaching. Two of these courses are dedicated to the writing skill. Since most of the students in the English Department mainly rely on memorization as opposed to critical thinking due to study habits associated with public education at Kuwaiti government schools, they tend to begin their writing process directly with the end product. Hence, teachers encounter some resistance when introducing the idea of prewriting as the first stage in the writing process.

In fact, left to their own devices, students are prone to copying whatever they come across on the Internet and submit it as their own piece of writing. But of course, it is not as simple as that. A lack of L2 proficiency is another strong reason students struggle in their English writing classes at CBE. This is mainly due to prevalent low English language standards taught in Kuwaiti government schools from which most CBE students have graduated. Therefore, when they are not copying from the Internet because of stringent plagiarism rules, they tend to skip all the stages of writing (mentioned above) and resort to their target language (Arabic) to help them with what they seem to think is "free writing" i.e., begin writing an assignment and submitting it straightaway as the end product. The question is: are students aware of prewriting techniques and that they may enable them to write more effectively? This crucial question was the incentive behind the present study, namely gaining insights into how students perceive prewriting techniques and why some students view them unfavourably, which seems to be the root of the issue here. Investigating these perceptions could help teachers obtain a better understanding of how to help students overcome writing challenges.

2. Literature Review

When asked to write (even about the simplest of topics), many students are plagued with doubts, such as: perhaps their ideas are not good enough, how to begin writing about a certain topic, how to avoid language mistakes, and so on. What is our role as educators in developing the students' confidence during a demanding skill such as writing? Essentially, writing is a cognitive process, which requires constructing ideas and conveying them into well-presented and legible sentences and paragraphs (Brown, 2000; Boardman, 2002). A deeper look at the writing process also reveals a great necessity for grammatical and syntactic knowledge as well as the ability to organize ideas logically using relevant vocabulary, rendering it quite challenging to deal with by both students and teachers (San Rizqiya et al., 2017).

Fortunately, according to decades of research in the communicative approach of teaching English, writing, nowadays, is more commonly recognized as process-based rather product-based—where emphasis is placed on the stages of the writing process leading to the end product rather than merely the end product itself (Flower & Hayes, 1977; Hasan & Akhand, 2010). Therefore, writing is seen as a process involving different composing phases: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing (Brown, 2000; Boardman, 2002; Holmes, 2003; Graham & Perin, 2007). All these stages are equally crucial for the writing process. Nevertheless, for the purposes of the present study, only the prewriting stage will be examined in a specific context: the English Department at CBE, Kuwait.

Research has also shown that prewriting is one of the important stages in the writing process because it provides students with the confidence they need to begin writing, much like a warm-up is to athletes (Tompkins & Goss, 1987). Parson (1985) argues that “students who are encouraged to engage in an array of prewriting experiences have a greater chance for writing achievement and progress than those enjoined to ‘get to work’ on their writing without this kind of preparation” (1985, p. 105). According to Nemouchi (2008), prewriting activities could include: talking, listening, reading, thinking, drawing, discussing, problem solving, among many other activities. While Seow (2002) states that the prewriting or planning stage is: brainstorming (a quick generation of ideas), clustering (spreading and linking ideas into visual circles or bubbles), wh-questions (asking questions about a topic, e.g., who, why, what, where, when, and how), and free writing (writing freely and quickly anything that comes to mind on impulse). As essential as the prewriting stage is for the process of writing, it seems to be a much-neglected phase (Tompkins & Goss, 1987). Morris (1968) was among the first of many researchers to point out that teachers often find themselves confronted with students failing to understand how prewriting can help facilitate their writing experience (a visible point in the present study).

However, it is imperative to point out that prewriting could hinder the process of writing if teachers automatically start pointing out students' mechanical mistakes during this preparatory phase, sending a false impression to students that

content is unimportant if the writing is error free (Sommers, 1982). On a different note, many teachers believe prewriting is extremely helpful to students so much so that they assign a grade to prewriting tasks in order to raise students' interest in this phase of writing (Phelps, 1987). And yet, regardless of what teachers believe or hope to encourage, the widely researched prewriting technique known as "free writing" seems especially favoured among students (further discussed in the present study; see Drabick, 2007 and Alharthi, 2021). In fact, Elbow (1998), one of the pioneers of free writing, argues that this technique allows learners to write freely without concern and without editing (at least initially), thus placing emphasis on the process of writing rather than the finished product. However, it is also worth cautioning that free writing, more often than not is a draft resulting from the prewriting phase and therefore not to be considered as the end product but merely a draft that needs to be revised or proofread and edited (Byrd, 2011).

A considerable amount of research body suggests that employing prewriting techniques vastly improved students' quality of writing. A study conducted by Abdullah et al. (2018) aimed at identifying the advantages of using images from Pinterest (a visual discovery engine for finding ideas such as recipes, home/style inspiration, and so on) as an alternative prewriting activity proved that it actually helped students develop ideas when writing their essays (also see Hung & Van, 2018; Alharthi, 2021). Another study that is closely related to the present study is one carried out in Malaysia by Yunus et al. (2018). Students in their study believe that engaging in prewriting activities helped them organize their ideas and develop creativity and confidence making the execution of writing easier and faster even during exams (also see Halim & Alliouch, 2015).

However, what several studies do not seem to consider is, whether students actually understand the notion of the prewriting stage as part and parcel of the whole writing process as opposed to being a separate assignment (see Section 4.0)? In the present study the researcher sets out to reveal the students' perceptions on the different techniques or activities of prewriting and whether they deem these techniques helpful to the process of writing. It also introduces a slightly different prewriting activity (a word bank), which is a quick and brief task that activates the students' thinking process through creating words linked to a given topic.

3. Methodology

The present study aims at investigating students' perceptions on the concept of prewriting. Suspecting this research issue may be significantly linked to a particular age group and/or the gender of students, the researcher initially targeted the questionnaire to identify the participants' age and gender as the demographic data of the sample. However, age as a variable had to be omitted because more than 90% of the participants belonged to one age group (18 - 22 years old, typical of college level). In addition, an online questionnaire focused on the research

questions under investigation here. The data collected from the questionnaire was then quantified using the Excel analysis tool to show descriptive statistics across one variable: gender. This would yield insights into whether prewriting resistance correlates more with male or female students. This basic framework would then be coupled with findings obtained from face-to-face interviews (conducted with a small number of male and female students) to gain a qualitative identification of students' perceptions towards prewriting in general, and their preferences for different prewriting techniques, if any.

3.1. Participants

This study was carried out during two consecutive semesters in 2020-21 and involved 71 students (50 female and 31 male). The lower number of male participants is mainly due to The English Department having fewer male students in comparison with female students. Participants were asked for their permission to use their views as research data in investigating writing at the English Department, CBE. All participants were first-year students attending a writing course in partial fulfilment of a BA in English linguistics that would enable them to become middle school English teachers upon graduating.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. The Questionnaire

The primary data for the present study was gathered from an online questionnaire that was administered to the student sample during their writing class. Although the questionnaire was in English (and not Arabic, because the researcher's proficiency in Arabic is not adequate enough to capture the aspects being researched using correct wording), students were given the option to answer questions in Arabic to encourage elaboration since they are merely 1st-year students, thus may not have sufficient linguistic tools. A total of 9 online questions were administered, 8 of which were multiple choice (some questions allowed the option of choosing more than one answer) and 1 open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire (see **Appendix**).

The intention behind the first two questions in the questionnaire was to form an idea about the students' knowledge of the different prewriting techniques and their most preferred method. Since students seem to persistently complain that prewriting is time consuming and challenging, questions three and four aimed at revealing how much time students believed should be assigned for prewriting tasks and if these tasks should be carried out with/without the teacher's assistance. Question five is linked to a new prewriting technique "the word bank" introduced by the teacher (the researcher) to investigate whether students found this prewriting method less challenging and time consuming. Given that students generally need an incentive to encourage diligence, question six asks students if they thought prewriting should be given extra credit. Question seven aims at generating opinions on which parts of the writing process greatly benefited from prewriting. Finally, based on the participating students' consistent

avoidance of prewriting tasks during classwork, questions eight and nine look at the other side of the coin: what students “really” seem to think of prewriting? Therefore, question eight offers students four possible options why prewriting “could” be unnecessary (time consuming, too much work, distracting, and unhelpful), and question nine is open ended and explores the best method that students believe helps them prepare for a writing assignment. The online questionnaire essentially provided the quantitative and some of the qualitative data for the present study.

3.2.2. The Interview

A face-to-face interview was conducted with 6 students—3 female and 3 male—who volunteered to elaborate on some of the questions that were closely related to the questions in the online questionnaire. It is worth noting that although this aspect of data collection may appear redundant, however, a face-to-face interview would enable the researcher to glean valuable feedback since verbal expression facilitates elaborate explanation of opinions especially for ESL/EFL learners (Foddy & Foddy, 1993).

4. Findings and Discussion

Based on the findings of the present study, the researcher identified several themes from a two-pronged data collection method (an online questionnaire and a face-to-face interview) employed here. In this section five themes will be described and discussed: 1) the importance (or lack thereof) that students assign to prewriting techniques; 2) the prewriting techniques preferred by students, if any; 3) students’ views over the disadvantages of prewriting; 4) students’ perceptions on the word bank as a prewriting technique suggested by the teacher; and 5) the areas writing that benefit most from prewriting task.

4.1. The Importance Students Assign to Prewriting Techniques

Interestingly, some of the insights gathered from the importance of prewriting question are closely linked to the next theme (Section 4.2). The questions discussed in the present section are, (question 3) the timeline that students believe should be allowed for prewriting; (question 4) whether the teacher should be involved in the prewriting process; and (question 6) whether prewriting should be given extra credit (see **Appendix**).

About 60% of female students and 50% of male students feel they should be given 15 minutes and more if they are to engage in prewriting. It is noteworthy that this question gave students the choice to offer their own answers indicated by the word “Other”. About 15% of both female and male students felt they needed up to a whole hour for prewriting. Additionally, according to the questionnaire findings and students’ interview comments, more than 90% female students and 75% male students believe the teacher should take part in prewriting tasks, especially if they (teachers) consider it important. Responses from students of both genders were distributed as follows, 50% “agree” and 50%

“somewhat agree”. This seems to suggest that students perceive prewriting not only as a separate task from the whole writing process and therefore requiring more time, but also as extra work imposed by the teacher and should thus involve the teacher’s assistance (Morris, 1968).

In addition, curiously, even though the students feel that their teacher must work with them on prewriting tasks, 52% of the female students and 43% of the male students also believe that they should be given credit grades for prewriting. Moreover, it was surmised from students’ interview feedback that they see the prewriting stage as an individual part that is separate from the rest of the writing process and should therefore carry a percentage of the overall grade (see similar point suggested earlier by Phelps, 1987). One male student commented that “prewriting techniques usually determine how much we know about a given topic, but they’re not necessarily helpful in the actual writing itself.” While another male student added, “I would do the prewriting only if it’s given a grade cuz it’s a waste of time”. A female student expressed her opinion by stating, “I don’t know how to brainstorm cuz I’m not used to it. But I feel I can do it only if teacher helps.”

Additionally, the interview shed light on gender differences in terms of the teacher’s involvement in prewriting. The female students seem to believe that “the teacher knows best”, a unanimous comment expressed in the questionnaire with regards to engaging in prewriting tasks with the teacher’s assistance. The male students’ comments, however, reflected more confident and independent writers (although admittedly, their grades do not necessarily surpass those of the female students, as noted by the researcher). This point was elicited from comments expressed by male students during the interview: “We can’t think on our own if the teacher keeps getting involved in our writing” and “The teacher’s way is ‘a way’ not ‘the way!’” Interestingly, these comments are somehow linked to the theme in the following section.

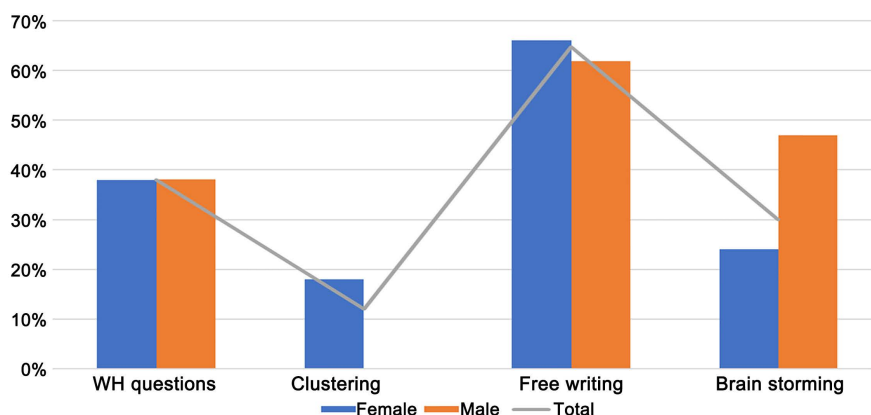
4.2. The Prewriting Technique Preferred by Students

The idea behind the first two questions in the online questionnaire was to get an understanding of students’ awareness of prewriting techniques, which incidentally are introduced to them at the beginning of every writing course (see **Appendix**, question 1). Question 2 asks which of these techniques students prefer. It is important to point out that these two questions (among others) provide students with the choice of selecting more than one answer, as this will be reflected by the statistical numbers (see **Table 1**, below).

Accordingly, about 50% of both female and male students are aware of the different prewriting techniques with most students of both genders choosing “free writing” as the preferred prewriting activity (see **Figure 1**, below). The second prewriting technique was wh-questions for female students and brainstorming for male students (both at about 40%). The least preferred prewriting technique for students of both genders is “clustering”. These findings were confirmed during the face-to-face interview in which all 6 students agreed they believe “going

Table 1. Students' perceptions over the preferred prewriting technique.

	WH questions	Clustering	Free writing	Brain storming
Female	38%	18%	66%	24%
Male	38.10%	0%	61.90%	47%
Male & Female	38.03%	12%	64.79%	30%

**Figure 1.** Students' perceptions over the preferred prewriting technique.

straight to free writing without wasting time on preparation” was their unanimous comment. Although the students’ preference was explicitly directed towards “free writing”, (also see [Drabick et al., 2007](#) and [Alharthi, 2021](#)), the present findings reveal a different perspective towards this specific prewriting technique (see Section 4.3, below).

4.3. Students' Perceptions over the Disadvantages of Prewriting

According to question 8 in the online questionnaire, 50% of female population, and 39% of the male population of students see prewriting as a “time consuming” task in the writing process. Additionally, female and male students also believe it is “too much work” as demonstrated by the following figures, 43% and 30%, respectively. Approximately 20% of the female students and 7% of the male students perceive prewriting as “distracting” (see [Figure 2](#), below). And finally, only a small percentage of female and male students thought it is “unhelpful” with writing (2% and 10%, respectively).

As demonstrated previously from both questionnaire and interview comments (see Section 4.2), students seem to perceive prewriting as a hindrance rather than a complement to the writing process. Female and male students tend to have a common notion that prewriting creates confusion and consumes time, as one female student aptly put it: “The more I brainstorm before writing, the more confused I get. Whereas if I begin writing straight away, I feel I can organize my ideas on the paper as I’m writing and finish on time.” This reaction by students towards prewriting, as an impediment rather than a helpful preparatory phase in the writing process, is quite curious and raises several investigative leads.

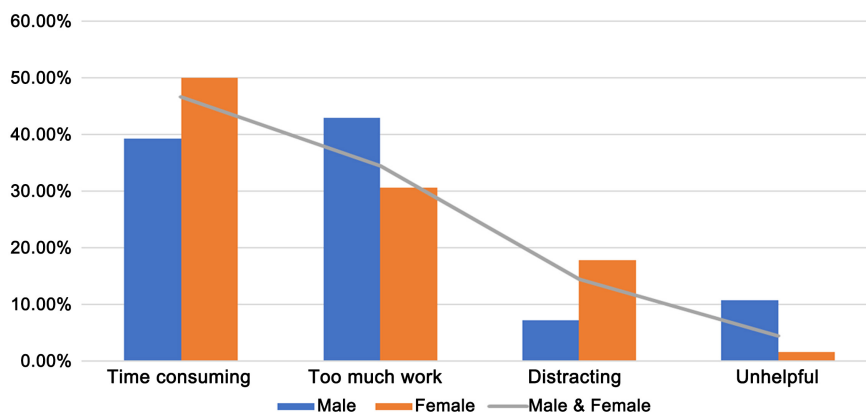


Figure 2. Students' perceptions on the disadvantages of prewriting.

What if teachers did not put so much emphasis on this stage of writing as a necessity allowing it to become an optional choice? Or perhaps demonstrate to students the comparative benefits of prewriting tasks through their writing portfolios (i.e., show students grade differences with and without prewriting preparation). Better still, what if teachers came up with a more simplified task, such as allocating 5 or 10 minutes at the beginning of a writing class by asking students: “What words come to mind when you think of topic X?” During the two semesters in which the present research was carried out, the researcher proposed to the students a somewhat different prewriting activity, namely a “word bank”. It was hoped that this could encourage students to think for a moment before they began writing. The idea is that a “word” might be a simple, single unit that could be more easily conjured up than a whole, complex idea or as Flower and Hayes put it, “a whole network of ideas might be represented by a single keyword” (Flower & Hayes, 1981: p. 372). This point will be elaborated upon in the following section.

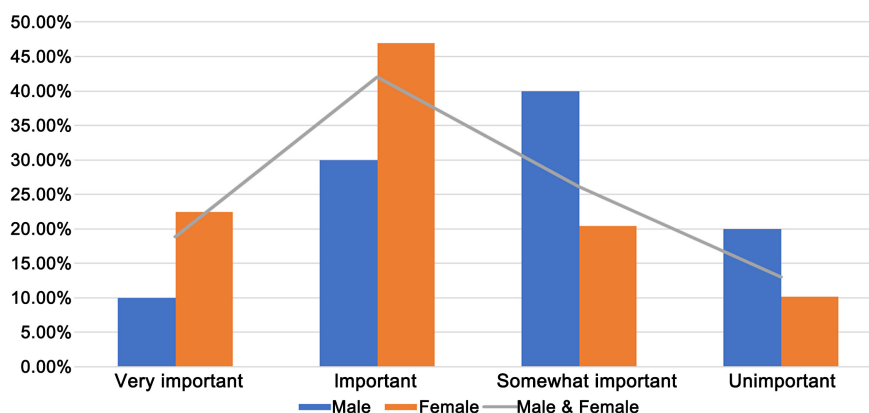
4.4. Students' Perceptions on Use of a “Word Bank”

After being employed numerous times before the questionnaire was administered, findings from question 5, demonstrate that 23% female students and 10% male students believe that the concept of a word bank is “very important” (see **Table 2**, below). Furthermore, 47% female students and 30% male students believe it is “important”. Resulting with a mere 10% and 20% of female and male students, respectively, consider a word bank as “unimportant” (see **Figure 3**).

Data gathered from the face-to-face interview with students along with comments from question 9 in the questionnaire indicate that students agree that the word bank technique is helpful in preparing them to write. Comments such as, “it’s way simpler than brainstorming or wh-questions” by a male student and “it’s something we can do on our own without the teacher’s help because it’s not so hard” by a female student, seem to support the idea that employing a word bank is a simpler prewriting task. And therefore, it may be more favourable to students than other prewriting techniques that they consider challenging and/or

Table 2. Students' perceptions on the idea of a word bank.

	Very important	Important	Somewhat imp.	Unimportant
Male	10.00%	30.00%	40.00%	20.00%
Female	22.45%	46.94%	20.41%	10.20%
Male & Female	18.84%	42.03%	26.09%	13.04%

**Figure 3.** Students' perceptions on the idea of a word bank.

time consuming. But if the importance of the prewriting stage is to be brought to the students' attention by teachers in the EFL classroom, then it is worth understanding their insights on how prewriting helps with writing, if at all.

4.5. Areas in the Writing Process That Benefit from Prewriting

Question 7 in the questionnaire was aimed at eliciting feedback from students in terms of which area in the writing process prewriting helped them with most. According to the findings, 43% of female students and 25% of male students felt prewriting encouraged creativity. 40% of female students and 25% of male students thought it prevented going off-topic, and 40% of female students and 8% of male students felt it helped generate vocabulary. The numbers are slightly lower for the other areas of writing: 29% of female and 25% of male students acknowledged that prewriting enables them to narrow down the topic and 27% of female students and 25% of male students felt prewriting helps when dealing with complex vs. simple topics. These figures somehow correlate with the body of research that argues that prewriting is an important and helpful stage in the writing process (Tompkins & Gross, 1987; Parson, 1985; Brown, 2000; Boardman, 2002; Graham & Perin, 2007).

The last two options (how prewriting might help with classwork and exams) were unrelated to the writing process per se, however were placed (perhaps unwittingly) in question 7. These two options were among the choices given and they address the writing assignment types in which prewriting could help. Findings indicate that 30% of female and 23% of male students felt it helped them with classwork whereas 25% of female and only 3% of male students thought it

could help during tests and exams. Similar findings were also concluded in a study by Yunus et al. (2018). According to students' feedback from the interview as well as question 9 in the questionnaire, most students seemed to agree that they would not voluntarily choose to engage in prewriting unless they felt they absolutely must or if the teacher insisted, they do—mainly because it is too time consuming. One female student expressed, "If I really need to do prewriting, I'd choose to do a word bank since it takes less time." Two male students shared a similar point: "If we have to do prewriting, then we need extra time" and "If the teacher gives us extra grades for prewriting, then we'd choose the easiest of the prewriting tasks: a word bank".

5. Conclusion

Through a two-pronged data analysis method, the present study has demonstrated that generally, EFL students tend to favor being given the liberty to write freely without having to engage in prewriting activities before the actual writing. Moreover, both quantitative and qualitative data show that they view prewriting as a separate assignment and consequently not as part of the writing process. Students therefore believe that it should be given extra credit and/or should be a task performed with the teacher's assistance, especially if the teacher thinks it is an important part of the writing process. And finally, introducing students to a simpler prewriting activity, such as a word bank (explained above) seemed to resonate more with their views of making the whole writing experience less challenging and time consuming.

It is important to point out that the purpose of the research was more investigative to find out how students perceive prewriting and whether they are aware of the different prewriting techniques and their possible beneficial role during writing (see Section 1.0). Admittedly, the significance of the research conclusions in the present study could have been further empathised by including data on the students' actual performances that could reflect whether skipping prewriting has an impact on their writing. The present study could also have benefited more from a larger sample, one that is evenly distributed in terms of "*gender*" and across a wider age range (see Sections 3.0 and 3.1). Indeed, the larger female participating sample may have influenced the findings' representativeness in this study in some way or another. Moreover, age, as an added variable for example, could enlighten us of whether an older age-group of EFL learners may be more likely to engage in preparatory tasks before the actual writing than younger learners.

In addition, a future study that may yield more specific results could target students' perceptions based on focus groups that test writing performance "with" and "without" the prewriting task. These results can then be cross-examined with students' actual pieces of writing to reveal comparative findings over the effects of prewriting activities on the writing process. Furthermore, investigating teachers' perceptions on the factors that affect students' writing will undoubtedly

provide a more rounded representation and an additional source of insight. The findings of the present study have brought forth the importance of the prewriting concept by attempting to understand the source of students' resistance towards it. This research paper and similar future studies on prewriting are likely to stimulate teachers and educators to raise their students' awareness of the usefulness of prewriting as a resource (rather than an impediment) that will result in better writing outcomes.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix

Content Questions in the Questionnaire

- 1) Could you identify the following pre-writing techniques? If no, which one(s) could you not identify?
 - a) Clustering (mind-mapping)
 - b) Free writing
 - c) WH questions
 - d) Brain storming
- 2) Which of the above pre-writing techniques do you prefer to use? (You may choose more than one)
 - a) Clustering b) Free writing c) WH questions d) Brain storming
- 3) In your opinion how much time should the pre-writing technique take?
 - a) 5 min. b) 10 min. c) 15 min. d) 20 min. e) Other _____
- 4) Should the pre-writing process be done with your teacher?
 - a) Agree b) Somewhat agree c) disagree
- 5) Do you think preparing a “word-bank” as part of the pre-writing process is? (*A word-bank is writing down all the of vocabulary words you can think of that are related to the topic you are writing about)
 - a) Important b) Very important c) Somewhat important d) Unimportant
- 6) Do you think pre-writing should be given some credit out of the overall grade?
 - a) Agree b) Somewhat agree c) Disagree
- 7) In your opinion which of the following factors may benefit from the pre-writing preparation? (You may choose more than one)
 - a) Topic narrowing down
 - b) Preventing going off topic
 - c) Topic itself (complex vs. simple)
 - d) Encouraging creativity
 - e) Generating vocabulary
 - f) Classwork assignment
 - g) Test assignment
- 8) Do you feel pre-writing is unnecessary because it is? (You may choose more than one)
 - a) Time consuming
 - b) Too much work
 - c) Distracting
 - d) Unhelpful with writing
- 9) What in your opinion is the best way (That is not mentioned in this questionnaire) to prepare yourself for pre-writing?