

## Learning to Write: Effects of Prewriting Tasks on English Writings of Vietnamese Students

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## **Abstract**

In learning to write in English, students from so-called interdependent cultures might face the clashes of the communication conventions of their mother tongue and of English as a Foreign Language. Prewriting tasks might overcome these difficulties in learning to write in English. The effects of two prewriting tasks, group discussion and free writing, on the length and the quality of English argumentative texts of Vietnamese university students were examined with a two-groups pretest-posttest design with switching replications. Repeated measures analyses of variance indicated both tasks had a positive effect on the productivity and the writing quality, with free writing showing a larger effect on productivity. Limitations as well as implications for learning English as a Foreign Language in interdependent cultures are discussed.

**Keywords:** prewriting tasks, English as a Foreign Language, group discussion, free writing

## **Introduction**

Embedded within a larger context of Asian culture, Vietnamese inherit the Asian typical traditions of avoiding the expression of their own thoughts towards an issue. Cross-cultural studies (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2009; Triandis, 1995) revealed communication issues that are typical for Asian collectivism culture which emphasize (a) the views, needs, and goals of the in-group rather than of oneself, (b) social norms and duty defined by the in-group rather than pleasure, (c) beliefs *shared* with the in-group rather than beliefs that *distinguish* oneself from the in-group, and (d) great readiness to cooperate with in-group members. In communication, society do not expect that writers express directly and strongly their *I* attitude, intentions and positions, but that they seek conformity to what is socially shared. Therefore, students from so-called interdependent cultures, like Vietnam's, where collective values take precedence over individualism, might lack individualized voice in their second-language (L2) writing (Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003; Li, 1996; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996a, 1996b; Rinnert, Kobayashi, & Katayam, 2015; Wu & Rubin, 2001).

A study on writing instruction in Japanese English as a Foreign Language context indicated that teachers focused their writing instruction on grammatical correctness at the expense of content and that free composition, which requires students to express their ideas, was seldom employed in classrooms (Yasuda, 2014). In English L2 classes, producing a

meaningfully written discourse in English requires a high cognitive effort of the students. The challenges they face are English-L2 word or grammar-related difficulties as well as L2 genre conventions which are different from what they are used to in their mother tongue (L1). In their L1 writing classes, they are expected to respect socially accepted points of view and traditional values of their culture, and express their personal thoughts in reference to what other people in their community might think. On the contrary, English L2 writing classes require them to set their own stance and support their stance with their own perspective. Prewriting tasks in Vietnamese English L2 classes, such as encouraging students' personal potential, autonomous learning, and sharing knowledge, might soften these difficulties and support students in their writing. In the current study, effects were examined of two prewriting tasks (free writing and group discussion) which aimed at supporting Vietnamese students in their cultural challenges in EFL academic argumentative writing.

*Learning to write in English in Vietnamese higher education*

–When I look at a new topic, I do not have any idea to write [about] the topic and consequently my text is a boring and not persuasive text.‡

(Linh, one of the Vietnamese students participating in this study)

In the quotation presented above, student Linh, a Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writer student, shared her problems in the first meeting of this study when facing the writing task –writing for or against a crime punishment‡, a task which is extracted from her Anglophone EFL writing text book.

In compliance with the essential requirements of Vietnam in the new era of an open, global-oriented economy, in academia, undergraduate Vietnamese students are required to reach the standard of writing academically in one foreign language. The emphasis is mostly on English because of its role as the most popular lingua franca at present. In teaching L2 writing skills, different genres can be distinguished of which the narrative, descriptive, expository and argumentative are those commonly mentioned. Writing argumentative and expository texts is more cognitively demanding than writing a narrative and descriptive texts (Weigle, 2002).

Because of its relevance in academic discourse, the argumentative genre has been one of the most favoured genres in teaching writing skills. Vietnamese university students, embedded in a larger Asian community, are required to convey reproductive knowledge in academic writing and are most of the times not asked to go beyond the declarative knowledge stated in their course-book or provided by their teachers (Phan, 2011), although this view of

Asia students as passive rote-learners has been challenged by Wang (2011). Students get used to the method of teaching that tends to emphasize the memory of commonly accepted knowledge. From a sociocultural perspective, this non-availability of individualized voice of Vietnamese students could be traced back to the established norms embedded in the two different L1 and L2 cultures (Hamano, 2008; Peyser, Gerard, & Roegiers, 2006; Saito & Tsukui, 2008).

L1-L2 differences in what academic writing requires are also reflected in genres and conventions. First, academic writing in mother tongue of Vietnamese EFL writer students is not a subject per se; writing is about literary fiction instead. Linguistic features of mother tongue writing and discourse essays in simple forms, like narrative letters, are taught in lower education (primary, lower-secondary level). In upper-secondary level, academic writing is writing about aspects of literary stories such as writing about the character(s) or discussing the thematic issues of a story. How to write those literature-related academic essays, yet, is not taught in schools (Pham, 2007, 2011; Phan, 2011).

Second, writing in Vietnamese lessons is a means for Vietnamese students to show, and for teachers to examine, to what extent the students have internalized the transmittable traditions and values of their culture in a literary work and rearticulate them in a traditional writing form (see further discussions of Phan (2011) on Vietnamese writing). On the contrary, L2 academic writing places emphasis on writers' uniqueness, such as the writing task for student Linh above requiring the writer's own stance and supportive arguments. In conclusion, the argumentative writing genre and the writing conventions expected of that genre, which is closely related to L1 Anglophone cultures or settings, are far from the Vietnamese students' experience in their mother language writing.

#### *Prewriting tasks in learning to write*

Prewriting tasks in Vietnamese English L2 classes might help to overcome students' experienced difficulties and support them in their writing. Prewriting can be seen as a process of discovery, allowing for mistakes and restarts. It mostly occurs at the beginning of writing process, but more and more, teachers are encouraging students to use this technique whenever they are writing. In a meta-analysis of single subject design writing intervention research, Rogers and Graham (2008) reported a few empirical research studies examining prewriting tasks: using a computer prewriting outline to generate and organize information (Channon, 2004), learning to use a graphic organizer for generating ideas prior to persuasive writing (Thanhouser, 1994), and learning to use a story web for generating ideas prior to

writing (Zipprich, 1995). Although these studies reported positive effects on improving writing quality, the effect sizes were small.

In another meta-analysis of experimental and quasi-experimental studies on writing instruction, Graham and Perin (2007) found that studies on particular prewriting tasks before composing were found to have a positive, yet small impact on writing quality. These prewriting tasks included encouraging planning before writing (Brodney, Reeves, & Kazelskis, 1999), group and individual planning before writing (Vinson, 1980), organizing prewriting ideas by means of a semantic web (Loader, 1989), and prompting planning following a brief demonstration of how to plan (Reece & Cumming, 1996).

In a more recent review, Byrd (2011) lists six types of prewriting tasks and their effectiveness for generation of ideas and writing quality: 1) brainstorming, 2) clustering through e.g. mind maps, 3) drawing, 4) graphic organizers, 5) small-group discussions, and 6) free writing. The author suggests to grade student prewriting activities in order to stimulate students' participation as otherwise prewriting might not be taken seriously. He also concludes that prewriting activities will not become a cure-all for writing assignments and that with some encouragements students probably use these techniques on their own, regardless of where they may be in the writing process.

In a recent study of Joaquin, Kim and Shin (2016), these –spontaneous‖ prewriting activities were examined of students taking an English as a Second Language placement examination. They coded students' notes to examine five types of prewriting activities: 1) drafting, 2) freewriting, 3) outlining, 4) listing and 5) clustering. The small majority of the 513 students used prewriting with outlining (52%) and listing (29%) as the most frequently applied prewriting techniques. Students who prewrote outperformed those who did not and - although freewriting seemed to be related with higher essay exam scores- differences between the types of prewriting were not statistically significant. The authors did find a significant relationship between the elaborateness of students' prewriting and their essay scores: Students who were elaborated in their prewritings had higher exam scores compared to those who applied prewriting in a minimal way.

Based on the findings from the reviews and studies described above, we selected two prewriting tasks for our study that support the generation of content and consequently enhance the quality of argumentation as well as fit with the cultural context of Vietnamese higher education: free writing and group discussion.

Free writing has been reviewed as an effective tool for generating content which was sometimes even new to writers (Elbow, 1973). This activity can boost ideas embedded in

each person to come out. The writers' personal stance, belief in an issue at stake, can be revealed through an act of personal free writing. Moreover, unstructured, informal free writing is expected to prevent as well as ameliorate possible writing difficulties caused by L2 formal language usage constraints. Free writing is found to have an effect (compared to structured writing instruction) on text quality (Hillocks, 1986; Gomez, et al., 1996), although generally with small effect sizes. In free writing, arguments are generated by students individually, without being shared in a peer group.

Group discussion is a way to share ideas in a peer group before individual writing. Group discussion and its positive effects on idea generation was discussed in many empirical studies: effects of text-centred discussion on higher-order thinking and critical literacy (Engler, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2006), of classroom discussion on development of subject knowledge and understanding (Corden, 2001; Reznitskaya, Anderson, & Kuo, 2007; Weber, et al, 2008), and of discussion and arousing multiple viewpoints about complex issues and problems (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). Moreover, positive effects of group discussion and collaborative discourse were also found for the quality of L2 writing in general (Mirzaei & Islami, 2015). Group discussion offers students the possibility to share their ideas in their mother tongue, which might be particularly beneficial for beginning L2 learners (DiCamilla & Antón, 2012). Yet as with other writing pedagogies group discussion pedagogy should align with the Asian context in which it is implemented. Phuong-Mai et al., (2009) examined collaborative learning settings in Hanoi, Vietnam. The authors concluded that students showed more effort in learning and higher grades when collaborative learning was organized in way that were considered to be culturally appropriate (i.e., group composition based on friendship grouping and a formal group leader appointed).

### **Problem of the study**

In a Vietnamese English L2 context, two prewriting tasks -free-writing and group discussion- might affect both the number and the quality of ideas in students' writing assignments. The main research question of this study was as follows: ~~What~~ **What** are the effects of the two prewriting content generation tasks, free-writing and group discussion, on the productivity and the quality of EFL argumentative texts of Vietnamese students?|| Three hypotheses were formulated:

- 1) Both group discussion and free writing result in an increase of students' productivity (indicated by the length of argumentative texts);

- 2) Both group discussion and free writing lead to an increase in quality of the argumentative text, and
- 3) Free writing results in a larger increase in productivity and quality of argumentative texts than group discussion.

## Method

The research design of this study was a two-groups pretest - posttest design with a triple pretest using switching replications, combining various quasi-experimental designs (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002; see Table 1). The design allowed us to examine the effect of the two treatments (i.e. prewriting tasks) twice, at Time 2 (T2) and Time 3(T3), with the triple pretest as baseline measurement.

**Table 1. Experimental design**

| Group          | Baseline<br>T1 | Panel 1             | Posttest 1<br>T2 | Panel 2             | Posttest 2<br>T3 |
|----------------|----------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| G-F<br>(n= 33) | O1-2-3         | Group<br>discussion | O4               | Free writing        | O5               |
| F-G<br>(n= 33) | O1-2-3         | Free writing        | O4               | Group<br>discussion | O5               |

Note: G-F = Group-discussion in panel 1 and Free-writing in panel 2;  
 F-G = Free-writing in panel 1 and Group-discussion in panel 2;  
 O = measurements (1 to 5).

### *Procedure and prewriting tasks*

The study was carried out in four weeks (three meetings of 2.30 hrs/ meeting for each group per week) in a large university in Southern Vietnam. Students received credits and grades for completing the course, a compulsory part of their Bachelor's degree. The teacher informed the students of the experiment's purpose and that the data from the course would be used for research and treated confidentially. She explained that all students would have exactly the same learning tasks and writing assignments, however, in a different sequence. Participation in this study was voluntary and although all students were offered the possibility to opt out at all times, no one did. All students had to do the assignments as part of their course work. Instead of a no-exposure/untreated control group in which the effect of intervention found in the experimental group would be simply attributed to the lack of treatment operation in the control group, we implemented two prewriting tasks, in which all students participated in, but in a different sequence. Time, the level of input materials and types of activities for each parallel operation in the sequence of the two prewriting tasks were

the same.

In Table 2, we summarize both tasks and present the sequence of all learning activities for both groups. After both groups swapped tasks, the same programme was implemented (panel 2). In the group discussion task, students were invited to look at two prompt pictures of their topic and note their immediate thinking (Stage 1. Topic involvement). Then they formed smaller groups of four members: each person shared his viewpoint and pros and/or cons of the issue in their group and noted the sharing on one large A3 paper (Stage 2. Exploring pros and cons). Students were asked to share individual ideas instead of judging or challenging their group members' ideas. In the free-writing task, students were invited to be involved in an argumentative topic with looking at the two pictures of their topic, and do the free writing on the topic through keeping on writing freely until time was up. After stage 2, both tasks were the same.

**Table 2: Six stages of the experimental course with two prewriting tasks (differences are written in italics)**

| Group discussion  | Free writing  |
|---|---|
| 1. Topic involvement (10 minutes)   |   |
| Looking at some pictures of the issue at stake  |   |
| <i>Jotting down the immediate thinking</i>  | <i>Free writing</i>   |
| 2. Exploring pros & cons (20 minutes)   |   |
| <i>Sharing and discussing each member's own viewpoint and pro and/or contra of the issue in group</i>   | <i>Forming a stance and figuring the rebuttals: examining pro and contra statements/arguments about the issue provided by the teacher, identifying the level of agreement to the statements and stating reasons</i> |
| 3. Elaborating the topic (30 minutes)   |   |
| Reading documents (students read and select information from provided sources)  |   |
| 4. Sample analysis (20 minutes)   |   |
| Reading and analyzing the context of writing, point of view of the writer, built-in audience, component and purpose of each component and what-could-be-improved of a sample text   |   |
| 5. Writing preparation (20 minutes)   |   |
| Planning individually the organization and content frame of the essay on the issue at stake with a text-element schema provided by teacher (a 5-element schema with 5 blank spaces for one introduction, two arguments, one counterargument and one conclusion); students are free in adding more elements in the basic schema. |   |
| 6. Writing (60 minutes)   |   |
| Writing a full argumentative text on the issue at stake in 60 minutes, at the expected length of 250 words.   |   |

### *Participants*

Participants were 66 students of EFL intermediate level and of two age groups (19-21 and 22-27) in a university in Vietnam. They were all from Mekong Delta Vietnam, sharing similar social, cultural, demographical and economic context. The proportion of females (69%) is common for language classes in Vietnam. Of the participants, 14% were from the ethnic minority group Khmer and they were equally represented in both intervention groups and both age groups. The younger age group included academic students who were full-time students of the undergraduate training programme of the university; the older group included post-academic students who had previously finished a part of the university undergraduate training programme and at the time of the experiment came back to the university, as part-time students in the evenings, to complete the undergraduate programme. From the two age groups students were randomly assigned to Group G-F (14 academic students and 19 post-academic students) and Group F-G (13 academic students and 20 post-academic students). Although there might be a difference in life experience, working experience, and problem solving ability between the younger students and the older students, both groups were ranked by the university as at intermediate level in EFL competence. Both groups were taught by the same teacher.

### *Data collection*

Data consisted of the final texts collected. Students wrote an argumentative text in 70 minutes. As shown in Table 1, data was gathered at three moments: just before the start of the course (pre-test scores were based on three essays on three argumentative topics per student, see Table 3), just after the experimental round 1 (panel 1; posttest 1) and after the experimental round 2, when both groups had swapped, at the end of the course (panel 2; posttest 2). Six students were absent at one of the pre-tests and one student was absent at the first posttest. In total, 192 texts during the pre-tests, 65 texts during the first posttest and 66 during the second posttest were collected. All handwritten texts were typed to reduce the effect of handwriting quality on raters' assessment. To create a replication as exactly as possible, two argumentative topics were assigned randomly to posttest 1 and posttest 2 (see Table 3). The two topics included Animal Testing (topic D) and Capital Punishment (topic E) and were considered as similar in the level of controversy. All assignments were from the course book used in English L2 writing classes.

**Table 3: Allocation of topic**

| Group       | Pretests 1,2,3 | Posttest 1 | Posttest 2 |
|-------------|----------------|------------|------------|
| G-F (n= 33) | Topic A, B, C  | Topic D    | Topic E    |
| F-G (n= 33) |                | Topic E    | Topic D    |

### *Productivity and quality of the argumentative texts*

*Productivity* was measured by the length of the end text produced in terms of number of words with a range from 0 to  $\infty$ . *Text quality* was the quality of the argumentative text. We adapted the scale for the measurement of text quality of Hamp-Lyons (1991). We revised the layout of the scale, de-emphasized the language skills, such as grammatical structure and vocabulary, and focused on *position/stance support*, *complexity of arguments*, and *rhetorical features* which were the three main components of a good argumentative text that we expected the students to get improvement in. Each text was judged according to the rating scale, using an anchor text, a better and a worse text, and scored between 0 and  $\infty$ . We first organized one trial rating session to establish the clarity of the analytic description of the anchor text, the better text, and the worse text, as well as to clarify the scoring rule of judging a text in comparison to the anchor text and in reference to the rating scale. Then the 192 argumentative texts were rated by 17 Master students in English of a Dutch university. Each text was judged by three different raters. We used the mean score per text as the score for text quality although the inter-rater reliability between the 3 raters per text was high ( $r = 0.80$ ).

### *Analyses*

To observe an effect of the two prewriting tasks in panel 1 and 2 separately, we applied repeated measures analyses of variance with time and condition (i.c. prewriting task) as independent factors, and text length and text quality as dependent variables. Pre-test scores of productivity and text quality were included as covariates in all analyses. As the correlations between the dependent variables at posttest 1 and posttest 2 were not significant (posttest 1:  $r = 0.22$ ;  $p = 0.08$ ; posttest2:  $r = 0.20$ ), univariate analyses were performed.

## **Results**

### *Productivity*

The results are presented in Table 4. With respect to productivity our hypothesis was confirmed. As hypothesized we found an effect of both prewriting tasks, in panel 1 ( $F(1,62) =$

6.07;  $p = .02$ ;  $\eta^2 = .09$ ) and in panel 2 ( $F(1,63) = 7.04$ ;  $p = .01$ ;  $\eta^2 = .11$ ). This means that both group discussion and free writing increased students' productivity in their texts. Yet, we also found an interaction effect of time by condition, which showed that free writing increased productivity more than group discussion, in panel 1 ( $F(1,62) = 6.01$ ;  $p = 0.02$ ;  $\eta^2 = .09$ ) and in panel 2 ( $F(1,63) = 12.28$ ;  $p = .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .16$ ). In all instances, the significant effects can be understood as medium to large effects (Cohen, 1988). The findings with respect to productivity are graphically presented in Figures 1a and 1b.

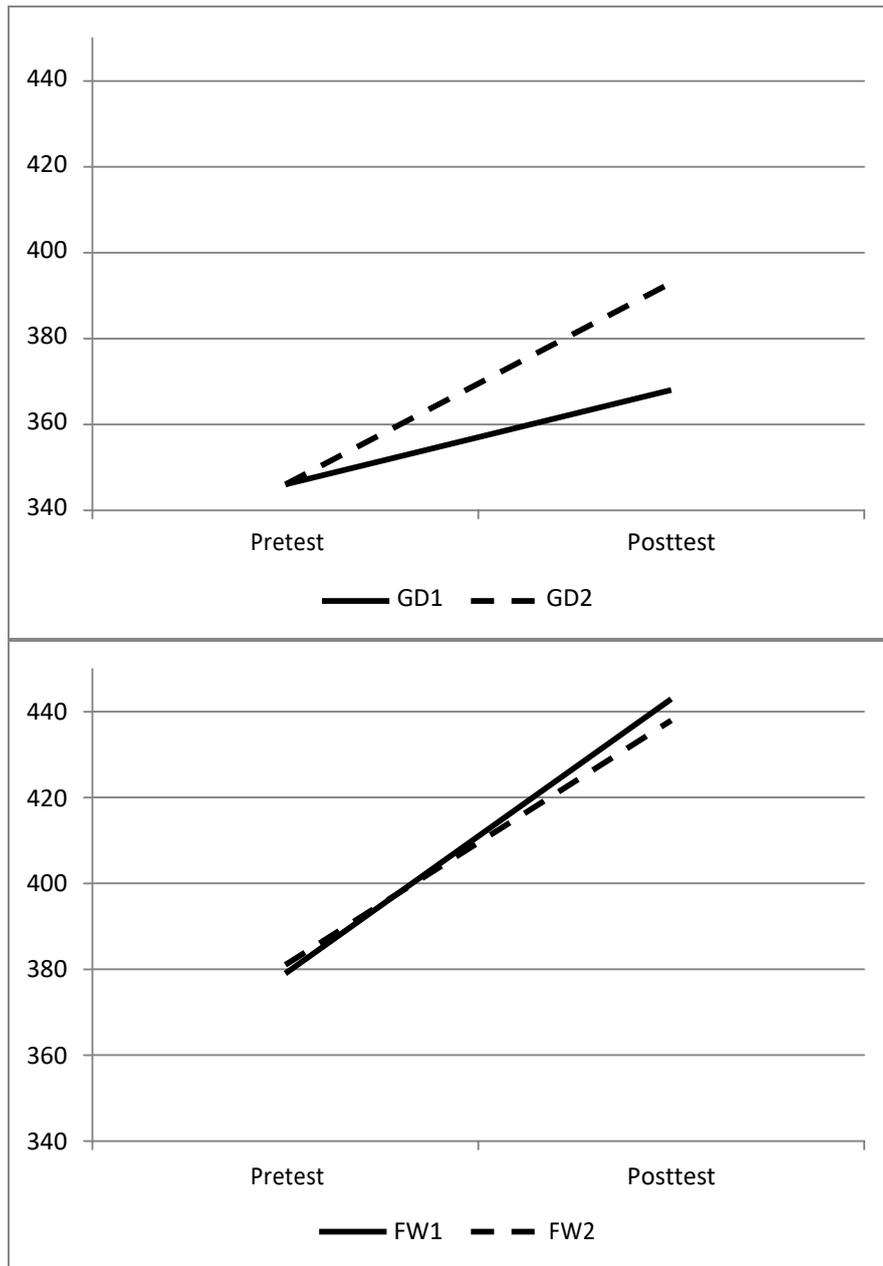
**Table 4: Results for productivity and text quality with means and standard deviations (in brackets)**

|              |     | Panel 1        |                 |
|--------------|-----|----------------|-----------------|
|              |     | Pretest        | Posttest 1      |
| Productivity | GD1 | 346.27 (77.07) | 367.94 (76.46)  |
|              | FW1 | 379.07 (93.33) | 443.28 (115.52) |
| Text quality | GD1 | 111.67 (39.44) | 151.29 (74.05)  |
|              | FW1 | 135.80 (60.17) | 160.81 (100.07) |
|              |     | Panel 2        |                 |
|              |     | Pretest        | Posttest 2      |
| Productivity | GD2 | 346.27 (77.07) | 392.70 (99.18)  |
|              | FW2 | 381.44 (92.87) | 438.36 (108.19) |
| Text quality | GD2 | 111.67 (39.44) | 163.18 (84.53)  |
|              | FW2 | 135.34 (59.28) | 142.65 (72.49)  |

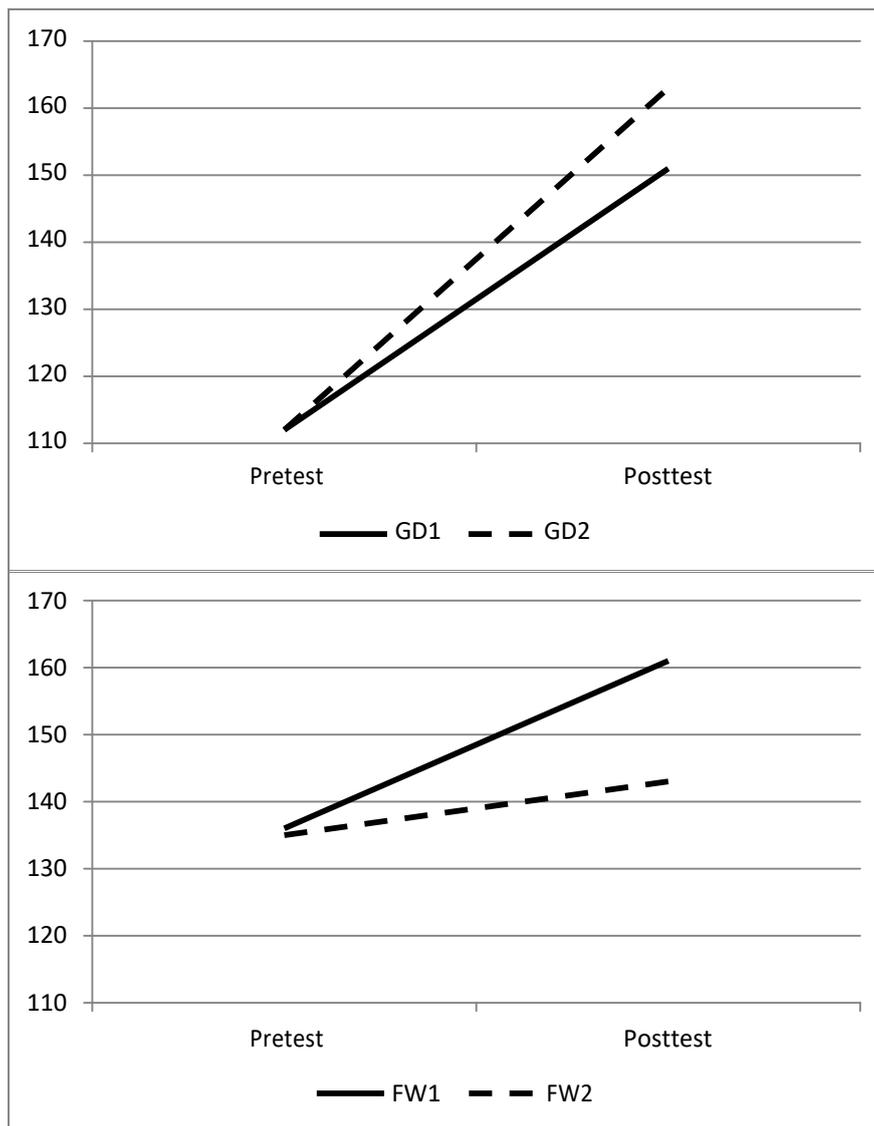
Note: GD = Group discussion and FW = Free writing

#### *Text quality*

With respect to text quality, our hypothesis was partly confirmed. As hypothesized we found an effect of both prewriting tasks, in panel 1 ( $F(1,62) = 8.43$ ;  $p = .005$ ;  $\eta^2 = .12$ ) and in panel 2 ( $F(1,63) = 6.88$ ;  $p = .01$ ;  $\eta^2 = .10$ ). This means that both group discussion and free writing increased the quality of students' argumentative texts. No significant interaction effect of time by condition was found, neither in panel 1 ( $F(1,62) = 0.06$ ;  $p = .81$ ) nor in panel 2 ( $F(1,63) = 0.07$ ;  $p = .79$ ). This means we cannot conclude that free writing and group discussion differed in their effects on text quality. In all instances, the significant effects can be understood as medium to large effects (Cohen, 1988). The findings with respect to text quality are graphically presented in Figures 2a and 2b.



*Figures 1a and 1b. Graphical presentation of the findings on productivity (with the two Group discussion groups (GD) in the figure on top and the two Free writing groups (FW) in the figure at the bottom)*



*Figures 2a and 2b. Graphical presentation of the findings on text quality (with the two Group discussion groups (GD) in the figure on top and the two Free writing groups (FW) in the figure at the bottom)*

## **Discussion**

Students' learning to write in English was studied in a university context in Vietnam. The effects of two prewriting tasks, free writing and group discussion, on students' productivity and the quality of their writings were examined. The first two hypotheses about productivity and text quality were confirmed: both group discussion and free writing had a positive effect on students' productivity and on the quality of their argumentative texts. These findings are in line with conclusions from literature on positive effects of prewriting (Joaquin et al., 2016) and of free writing and group discussion on idea generation in particular (Elbow, 1973; Englert, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2006) and text quality (Mirzaei & Islami, 2015). In

addition, we found an additional effect of free writing on students' productivity, which implies that an individual writing activity as a prewriting task leads to more extended final writings compared to sharing ideas with peers orally. Probably, the group setting directed students more to maintain group harmony instead of elaborating ideas, compared to the free - writing activity (cf., Phuong-Mai et al., 2005). Another explanation of this additional effect of individual freewriting compared to group discussion might be the way group discussion was implemented in the course of the current study. As Phuong-Mai et al. (2009) concluded in their study on collaborative learning, collaborative learning pedagogy should be aligned to the educational and cultural context in which it is implemented in order to be effective. According to the findings of their study, friendship grouping and formal leadership were two ingredients of effective collaborative learning settings. The way group discussion was implemented in the current study, without formal leadership in the groups, might explain the less positive effects of group discussion, compared to individual free writing.

#### *Limitations*

In this study, we opted for the research design with switching replication to replicate the findings as fair as possible: both free-writing treatments (in panels 1 and 2) were measured with the same writing task and same writing topic (topic E), and, similarly, both group-discussion treatments (in panels 1 and 2) were measured with the same writing task and same writing topic (topic D). This choice for replication might be at the cost of generalization as topic knowledge might affect text quality (McCutchen, Teske, & Blankston, 2008). However, one counter finding that a topic effect did not occur might be that text quality was not different between posttest 1 and posttest 2 within each experimental condition.

#### *Conclusions and implications*

Both prewriting tasks of this study -group discussion and individual free writing- positively affected students' argumentative writing in EFL classes. These two types of instructional tasks might help Vietnamese students to overcome their reluctance to put their ideas on paper and to achieve a better quality of their L2 argumentative writing texts. Free writing seems to have an additional positive effect on students' productivity, which might be an issue for Vietnamese students as illustrated by the quotation of student Linh in the beginning of his paper. While the result needs to be confirmed through further research, it may be interesting if we relate the finding of individual free writing and group discussion on

increasing productivity and text quality to what cross-cultural studies revealed of communication characteristics of Asian students: Asian students are reported to feel confident, certain in what is valued, suggested by the group, rather than what is individually valued and originated. Students seem to bring their L1 communication practice into L2 text performance, but a guided prewriting task that is closely connected to what is expected in L2 classroom might change this pattern.

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