



## **Echoes of Creativity: Investigating the Impact of Music Type on Pre-writing Idea Generation**

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Music has been found to be an effective aid in foreign language learning, but its potential use has yet to be explored. This study utilised a quantitative research method to examine the effect of music type on generating English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students' pre-writing ideas, which were moderated by gender. Fifty-three students from three classes without academic writing experiences were assigned to three different music types, including no music, instrumental music, and pop music. The results showed that female students outperformed male students, regardless of music types, in pre-writing idea generation tasks. In particular, female students significantly performed the best in instrumental music, followed by no music and pop music. On the contrary, male students obtained the greatest achievement in task when listening to pop music and the lowest performance when listening to instrumental music. The findings of the study imply the recognition of gender-specific preferences in using different types of music to enhance the processes of pre-writing idea generation, prompting tailored writing environments for EFL students' needs.

Keywords: gender, music type, EFL university students, pre-writing idea generation, instrumental music

### **INTRODUCTION**

Writing is a challenging task for English-as-a-second language (EFL) learners because it paves the way for mastering a foreign language (Sadeghi & Farzinzadeh, 2012). To optimize learners' writing performance, music has been adopted as one of the approaches (Goltz & Sadakata, 2021). Such an innovative strategy is based on Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993). Musical intelligence and linguistic intelligence are two key types of intelligence in this theory. Musical intelligence denotes the ability of creativity to facilitate thinking (Ritter & Ferguson, 2017), while writing is one of the creative representations of linguistic intelligence (Al-Anani & Masri, 2019). It has been found that music facilitates creativity in writing (Al-Anani & Masri, 2019). Previous research has adopted different types of music, such as

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pop music, instrumental music, and no music, to help with writing processes, while the findings are mixed (Aryanto, 2016; Ransdell & Gilroy, 2001; Resmana & Anggraeni, 2018). These researchers all found that the effect of music type on writing performance is influenced by several factors, such as learners' language proficiency and music preferences.

It has been agreed that writing is a process-oriented task, including the pre-writing, drafting, and revising process (Mogahed, 2013). The pre-writing process is the most fundamental stage at which learners spend time generating ideas before writing (Yunus et al., 2018). This stage resulted in the construction of an organized essay (Alemu, 2020; Yunus et al., 2018) with high writing quality (Novita et al., 2020). However, challenges such as slow speed in eliciting writing ideas (Harris, 1993), disorganization of thoughts (Sarabi & Tootkaboni, 2012), lack of writing resources (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022), and perceived worthless ideas (Vithuja, 2021) may hinder EFL learners' ability to unlock hidden ideas at this stage (Boyacı & Güner, 2018; Hung & Van, 2018; Sarabi & Tootkaboni, 2012).

The existing literature shows that both instrumental music and pop music stimulate learners' pre-writing idea generation (Sarabi & Tootkaboni, 2012; Zacharias, 2006). However, the discrepancies among instrumental music, pop music, and no music are still under-researched in this realm. Studying the impact of different types of music on pre-writing idea generation is urgently needed to unlock the potential use of music types for EFL students to enhance their engagement in pre-writing activities. Apart from the differences in music types, it is also unknown whether female and male EFL students call for similar performances on pre-writing idea generation when listening to the same type of music. The answers to both questions are important. The results may provide benefits for EFL students to make good use of different types of music and shed lights on how teachers can design effective pre-writing techniques for different genders of students. As such, there are two research questions in the current study to address the gaps: (1) How does the type of music affect EFL university learners' pre-writing idea generation and (2) Is there a gender difference in EFL university learners' pre-writing idea generation when listening to the same type of music?

## **Literature Review**

### **Pre-writing Idea Generation**

Pre-writing strategies such as brainstorming, journaling, and free writing have been frequently adopted by many writing researchers (Algharabali, 2023; Dhanya & Alamelu, 2020; Hashempour et al., 2015; Yusuf et al., 2019). For example, Dhanya and Alamelu (2020) and Hashempour et al. (2015) explained that brainstorming is a group creativity strategy that cultivates a stress-free environment for learners to quickly generate ideas. According to Dhanya and Alamelu (2020), journaling is an exploratory strategy that requires learners to discover the relationships between ideas to extend their mind maps before writing an article. As illustrated by Algharabali (2023), free writing is a non-stop writing strategy that directs students to a better imaginative level of ideas. However, Bommanaboina and Guduru (2021) argued that students' background knowledge is a prerequisite for using the aforementioned pre-writing strategies. Mickan

et al. (2000) and Ahmed (2020) proposed that thinking about linking words with a topic potentially helps students move a step forward at the beginning of a writing task. This method is more dependent on linguistic elements than on prior knowledge.

### **Types of Music in Pre-writing Idea Generation**

Although pre-writing idea generation in terms of linking words' thinking does not fully rely on learners' previous knowledge, it remains to be considered a cognitive activity since learners need to plan what to write at this stage (Novita et al., 2020). Previous research on different types of music, such as instrumental music and pop music, has supported learners' pre-writing idea generation (Sarabi & Tootkaboni, 2012; Zacharias, 2006). For instance, instrumental music acts as an idea builder to stimulate learners' personal experiences related to pre-writing tasks (Zacharias, 2006). As explained by Sarabi and Tootkaboni (2012), pop music cultivates a stressless environment that helps learners develop ideas by enjoying the lyrics of the melody. However, few studies have explored the comparison between the effects of instrumental music and pop music on pre-writing idea generation.

### **Gender by Music Type Interaction in Pre-writing Idea Generation**

A variety of differences in music preference naturally exist between genders due to the social-cultural distinction between males' toughness and females' emotionality (Boer et al., 2012; Dobrota et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2012). With the existence of different types of music, gender differences can be observed in language-related cognitive task performance, such as vocabulary recall tasks and pre-writing tasks. In the context of EFL university students, males outperformed females in vocabulary recall under different types of music, including pop music and instrumental music (Alipour et al., 2012). In terms of pre-writing tasks without music, Zhang and Vukelich (1998) identified a significant interaction between pre-writing activities and gender, which females generally outperformed males across different grades. Gender differences have been found in language-related tasks among EFL university students, and such differences also exist in the pre-writing idea generation task among primary school students, but the gender differences among EFL university students in pre-writing idea generation have yet to be explored.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Fifty-three EFL students (25 males, 28 females;  $M_{age} = 19.17$ ,  $SD_{age} = .64$ ) from three classes at a university in China volunteered to participate in the four-week study. They were all second-year undergraduate students majoring in Logistic Management. As reported, all participants did not have any hearing problems, and they were active music listeners. The reason for selecting these participants was due to convenience. All the samplings attended a compulsory course 'Academic Writing' to prepare themselves for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), learning how to write an academic essay.

Three classes were divided into one control group (Class A) and two experimental groups (Class B and Class C) based on the alphabetical order of classes. Students in Class A (6 males and 10 females) were assigned to complete the task of pre-writing idea generation without background music intervention. As for experimental groups, students in Class B (10 males and 9 females) needed to listen to instrumental music, while those in Class C (9 males and 9 females) were arranged to listen to pop music when completing the pre-writing idea generation task.

### Research Instruments

#### *Pre-writing Idea Generation Task*

The writing topics presented in Table 1 are the compulsory topics needed to be taught according to the university writing course syllabus.

Table 1  
Pre-writing topics from Week 1 to Week 4

	Topic	Keywords
Week 1	Some people spend a lot of money on wedding parties, birthday parties and other celebrations. Is it a waste of money or a social requirement? Include specific details and examples to support your choice.	party; celebration; social requirement
Week 2	School-age children and teenagers usually like to do the same things as their friends, but parents often have a different idea about what their children should be doing. Should parents always decide how children spend their free time?	children and their parents; children and their friends; leisure activity
Week 3	In some countries, people live with their parents and siblings until their old age. Do you think there are more advantages or disadvantages to these people's behaviour? Discuss your opinion and provide specific reasons and examples to support your answer.	living with parents; living with siblings; living alone
Week 4	Compared to the past, more people are now trying to learn a foreign language to increase their chances of landing a better job in their native country or to have better opportunities to work abroad. To what extent do you agree with this point of view?	foreign language; work opportunity in native country; work opportunity in foreign country

Two experienced EFL and qualified IELTS university teachers made agreements on extracting three keywords from each pre-writing topic. The keywords were printed in black-and-white on an A4 size paper and presented to students (Figure 1). They were asked to write down only nouns that were related to the keywords within a limited amount of writing time. This pre-writing strategy was adapted from Mah (2011). It has been found that thinking nouns in the initial step successfully helps students from building up their mental lexicon to writing an essay (Mah, 2011). In addition, nouns play a central role in EFL learners' semantic networks (Dóczy & Kormos, 2015), since their ratio is the highest compared to other words in the corpus (Wu et al., 2021). For students with lower-level writing proficiency, the breadth of vocabulary helps them write (Wu et al., 2021). When they are equipped with accurate word choices, they can generate more writing ideas (Berninger, 2000). To ensure students' understanding of

completing the task, an example was shown on the top left in the four-week task papers, while the selected keywords were individually presented at the bottom of those papers (Figure 1).

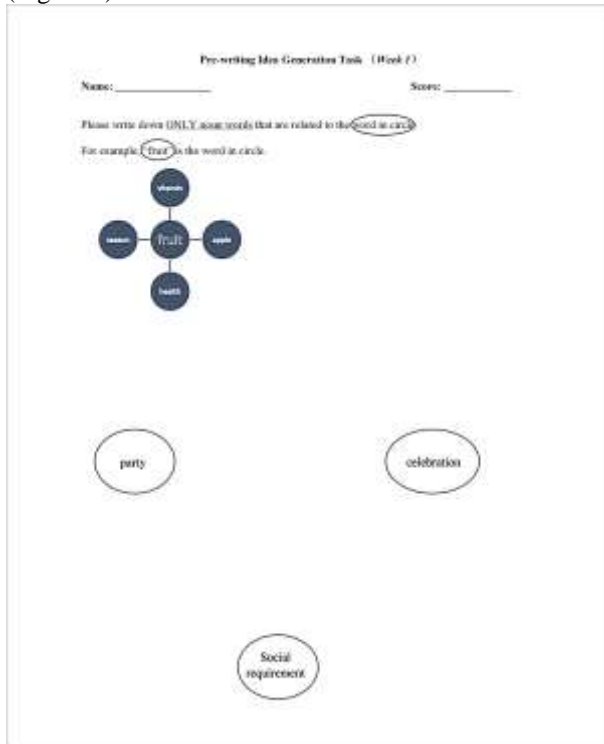


Figure 1  
Pre-writing idea generation task

Since ‘*Academic Writing*’ was held only once every week (80 minutes per class), pre-writing idea generation within a limited time in class has been a challenge in a true experiment environment for the selected three groups of students. To solve this concern, a quasi-experimental study was conducted over a four-week period during an academic term to explore the effect of music on pre-writing idea generation. The purpose of the research in the first three-week was to provide training sessions for all the participants, which allowed them to get familiar with the task mode and get used to completing the task in Week 4 along with the assigned music type. The training sessions and the final task were all arranged at the beginning of each class. Students were given five minutes to complete the task in both training sessions and the final task. After completing the task in Week 4, all task papers were collected and marked by the same two teachers.

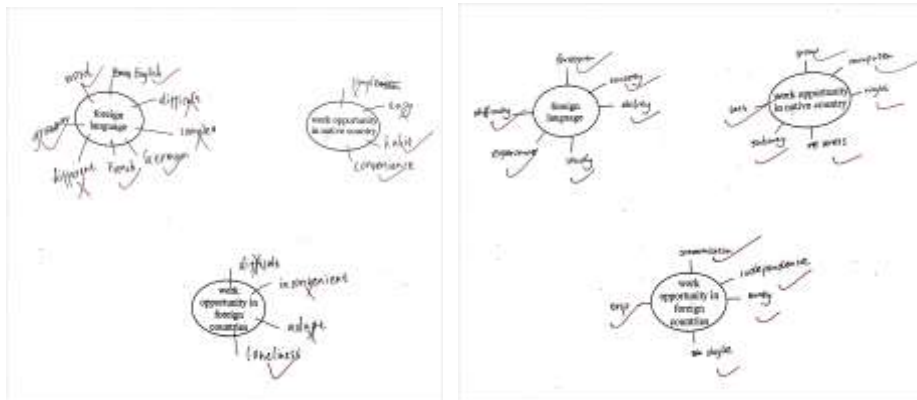
#### *Music Stimuli*

The uses of music stimuli were different for the two experimental groups. For the instrumental music group, *Mozart Effect Volume III – Unlock the Creative Spirit* was

adopted. It has been found that Mozart's music helps undergraduates perform on a cognitive-based intelligent test (Schellenberg et al., 2007). Since the whole length of this piece of music lasted for one hour and nine minutes, it was split into four pieces, and each piece lasted for five minutes to fit with the length of the task in this study. For the pop music group, the top-ranked songs with emotional themes were selected, including *On My Way* (Alan Walker, Sabrina Carpenter, & Farruko), *Memories* (Maroon 5), *Dusk Till Dawn* (Zayn Malik), *When I Look At You* (Miley Cyrus), *Thinking Out Loud* (Ed Sheeran), *You Are the Reason* (Calum Scott), *I Love You 3000* (Stephanie Poetri), and *This Is My Kingdom Come* (Imagine Dragons). Since the lengths of each song varied, each of the two songs listed above in sequence was combined and edited into a five-minute single song.

### Grading Criteria

Since students were asked to write down only nouns that were linked to the keywords, they would not be granted any score if they did not write nouns (Figure 2). Each relevant noun was given a score of "1", and irrelevant nouns were scored as "0". The minimum score was zero, and unlimited maximum score was applied to this task. The pre-writing idea generation tasks were double-blind-marked by the same two teachers. The final score for each student's performance was calculated by adding up the scores from two teachers, then dividing by two to get the mean score for the task.



(Left: graded with a score of "8")

(Right: graded with a score of "17")

Figure 2

Examples of grading for the task performance from students

### Procedure

Figure 3 presents the research procedure. The task began when the teacher played the music with a counting-down digital clock on the screen. In addition, the piece of music was played at an appropriate volume to ensure students can hear clearly regardless of sitting at any place in the classroom.



Figure 3  
Research procedure

**Data Analysis**

The collected data were organized by using Microsoft® Excel (version 16.63.1) for Mac. SPSS Statistics (version 26.0.0.0) was employed for descriptive and inferential statistics, including means and standard deviations. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to explore the effects of gender and music type on pre-writing idea generation among a control group and two experimental groups.

**FINDINGS**

This section presents results related to gender, music type, and their interactions on pre-writing idea generation tasks.

**Gender**

As presented in Table 2, females’ task performance on pre-writing idea generation (M = 11.50, SD = 5.28) was higher than that in males (M=7.96, SD = 4.50). In addition, an ANOVA was performed to examine whether gender difference exists in task performance. The *F* value for males and females was significant ( $F(1,47) = 9.01, p < .01$ ). Thus, it means that gender difference has a statistically significant effect on pre-writing idea generation in the task.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations, and gained scores with minimum and maximum between males and females in pre-writing idea generation task

Gender	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
Males	25	7.96	4.50	1.00	20.00
Females	28	11.50	5.28	5.00	22.00
Total	53	9.83	5.20	1.00	22.00

### Music Type

As shown in Table 3, students in instrumental music (experimental group) gained remarkably higher mean scores ( $M = 12.13$ ) than those in no music (control group) ( $M = 8.62$ ), followed by pop music (experimental group) ( $M = 8.56$ ).

Table 3

Means, standard deviations, and gained scores with minimum and maximum among three groups under different music types in pre-writing idea generation task

Group	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
No music	16	8.62	3.89	1.00	16.00
Instrumental music	19	12.13	6.25	3.00	22.00
Pop music	18	8.56	4.51	2.00	20.00
Total	53	9.77	4.88	1.00	22.00

Based on the result of pairwise comparison (Table 4), there was a significant difference ( $p = .02$ ) on pre-writing idea generation task scores between no music (control group) and instrumental music (experimental group). A significant difference ( $p = .02$ ) on task scores was also found between instrumental music (experimental group) and pop music (experimental group). However, there was no significant difference ( $p = .97$ ) on task scores between no music (control group) and pop music (experimental group).

Table 4

Results of different music types in pre-writing idea generation task

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean differences (I – J)	Std. Error	Sig.
No music (control group)	Instrumental music	-3.52*	1.49	.02
	Pop music	.06	1.51	.97
Instrumental music (experimental group)	No music	3.52*	1.49	.02
	Pop music	3.58*	1.42	.02
Pop music (experimental group)	No music	-.06	1.51	.97
	Instrumental music	-3.58*	1.42	.02

Notes. \*  $p < .05$

### Gender by Music Type Interaction in Pre-writing Idea Generation Task

The results for the two-way ANOVA (Table 5) indicated a significant moderating effect for gender ( $F(1,47) = 9.01, p < .001$ ) and a significant effect for music type ( $F(2,47) = 4.06, p = .02$ ). The results of the main effects analysis meant that gender moderating music type had a statistically significant effect on pre-writing idea generation. The results revealed a significant interaction between gender and music type,  $F(2,47) = 5.56, p = .01$ , indicating that any differences between the music type were dependent upon which gender the subjects were and that any differences between males and females were dependent upon which music type they were in (see Figure 3 for a graph for this interaction).



Table 5  
Two-way analysis of variance

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Gender	168.35	1	168.35	9.01	.00
Music type	151.72	2	75.86	4.06	.02
Gender x Music type	207.68	2	103.84	5.56	.01
Within (error)	877.86	47	18.68		
Total	1403.47	52			

Figure 4 shows that male students' pre-writing idea generation task scores under three music types were all lower than those in female students under the same type of music. As it could be seen, females obtained slightly higher mean scores than males in no music (control group). However, females gained remarkably better performance when they were in instrumental music (experimental group) than males. For pop music (experimental group), the performances of males and females were approximately the same.

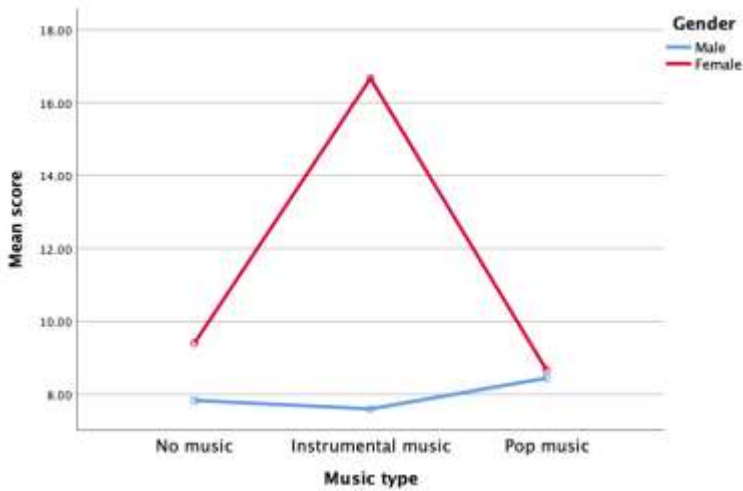


Figure 4  
The performances of male and female students in no music (control group), instrumental music (experimental group), and pop music (experimental group) on the pre-writing idea generation task

**DISCUSSIONS**

The first research question examined the influence of music type on EFL university students' pre-writing idea generation. The results indicated that there were significant differences among the three music types (i.e., no music, instrumental music, and pop music). Listening to instrumental music (M = 12.13, SD = 6.25) shows the greatest benefits to participants in the pre-writing idea generation task, followed by no music (M = 8.62, SD = 3.89) and pop music (M = 8.56, SD = 4.51). The result on instrumental music generating pre-writing ideas is supported by Zacharias (2006), while it

contradicts the previous finding claiming that pop music enhances pre-writing skills' performance (Sarabi & Tootkaboni, 2012). The potential reason to explain is that the participants in Sarabi and Tootkaboni (2012)'s study were all majoring in English, while participants in the present study were non-English majors.

The second research question examined whether there was a difference in gender in EFL university learners' pre-writing ideas generation when listening to the same type of music. The result revealed that females outperformed males across different types of music (instrumental music: female ( $M = 16.67$ ), male ( $M = 7.60$ ); no music: female ( $M = 9.40$ ), male ( $M = 7.83$ ); pop music: female ( $M = 8.67$ ), male ( $M = 8.44$ )). This finding was different from Alipour et al. (2012) who found that males outperformed females in listening to pop music and instrumental music. The opposite result might be affected by investigating the influence of music type on different language tasks. In terms of no music, the result of this research was in accordance with Zhang and Vukelich (1998), who claimed that females generally gained better performance on pre-writing stage than males. This also indicates that females and males may have their own gender-related preferences on music type, which in turns implies that their pre-writing idea generation is likely to be influenced by listening to different types of music.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this research have several implications. First, female students were found to be greatly influenced by the type of music than male students, regardless of no music, instrumental music, or pop music. In particular, female students gained a significant difference when they listened to instrumental music compared to male students. This implies that female students' pre-writing idea generation performance tends to be better than that of male students. With a specific type of music (i.e., instrumental music), the difference in performance can be observed. Therefore, female students could try to listen to instrumental music to stimulate their imagination on writing ideas or other cognitive tasks when they are in need. Second, instrumental music was the most influential music type for females, whereas pop music was the most influential music type for males in pre-writing idea generation. These results shed lights on the music types that EFL writing teachers could offer students. Both female and male students are suggested to assign instrumental music and pop music independently in practicing pre-writing idea generation. In addition, the findings on instrumental music and pop music could serve as references for musical professionals and researchers to develop such types of music to promote task performance.

### **CONCLUSION**

The research revealed that listening to instrumental music has the greatest potential to boost EFL undergraduate students' pre-writing ideas. However, this finding is moderated by gender. Female EFL undergraduate students generally outperformed males in generating pre-writing ideas across different types of music. Their highest achievement was notably observed when exposed to instrumental music. For male EFL undergraduate students, instrumental music is the most distracting type that hinders their performance in generating ideas for pre-writing tasks.

The strength of the current study highlights the potential use of music on pre-writing idea generation, but its effect varies by gender. Although this study was confined to Chinese EFL university learners, it is believed that certain music type could stimulate female and male students' pre-writing idea generation based on previous studies and the current analysis. The length of intervention is the limitation of this research. Student were only familiar with the pre-writing idea generation task for three weeks before participating in the tasks. If the training session could be expanded to an entire academic term, different results may be yielded from this research.

As this is the Phase 1 research on exploring a strategy to help EFL university learners complete an academic essay, we initially adopted different types of music and investigated whether gender moderates the overall effect on university students' EFL pre-writing idea generation. It is suggested to find out whether gender remains a moderating factor in the overall effect of music type on the remaining writing process including drafting and revising.

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