Using Freewriting to Increase Student Written Fluency

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Abstract: Although university students are typically required to take academic writing classes, there tends to be more focus on process writing than written fluency. However, a successful English program requires fluency practice in all four skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing). One way to easily incorporate a written fluency component into a class is by introducing a regular freewriting (FW) session. This paper describes how a weekly timed FW session was implemented and received by two first-year reading and writing university classes at a Japanese university. Analysis of student FW output as measured in words per minute and the results of a post-course questionnaire on student attitudes toward FW both provide support for this particular approach to improve written fluency. Recommendations based upon student feedback have also been provided.

Keywords: *freewriting, fluency, writing*

Introduction

Nation's (2007) principle of the four strands urges language curriculum designers to allocate an equal amount of time to each of the "four strands" of meaning-focused input (reading and listening), meaning-focused output (speaking and writing), language-focused learning (deliberate study of grammar, spelling, etc.), and fluency development. However, as Herder and King (2012) point out, high-school English teachers have a tendency to focus overly on accuracy at the expense of fluency and complexity. This is, in part, due to the backwash effect of university entrance exams and often results in students relying on L1-L2 translation, which further hinders their fluency. With a focus on accuracy, and the associated anxiety of whether they are right or wrong, student confidence and motivation to use or even study English can also suffer (Herder & King, 2012). To address this imbalance with regard to writing, teachers should strive to incorporate the missing fluency development strand into their syllabus by incorporating a variety of fluency activities. Nation (2007) suggests that fluency activities should have the following four characteristics: a focus on meaning over accuracy, familiar topics and language, some pressure to perform at speed, and a focus on a large amount of output. Written fluency can be defined as being able to produce a "steady flow of language for a short period of time without any self- or other correction at all" (Brown, 1994 as cited in Patterson, 2014). This is where freewriting (FW), also referred to as quickwriting, can play a role and has been shown to have a positive influence on EFL student written fluency over as few as eight sessions (Hwang, 2010; Herder & King, 2013).

What is freewriting?

FW simply requires students to write continuously on a topic without stopping or worrying about spelling, grammar, or organization. Elbow (1998), widely credited as being the first to advance the benefits of FW, urges students to "(not) stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing." Essentially, it strives to separate the creative stage of writing from the editing stage.

The main requirement of FW is that students do not stop writing. This raises the question of what students should do if they experience writer's block. One suggestion put forward by Jacobs (1986) to deal with this is to have students simply repeat the last word or phrase, or to write a phrase like "I can't think of anything to write" continuously until they can think of something else to write. In keeping with the "never stop writing" requirement, dictionaries are typically not permitted during FW. When students do not know a word, Jacobs (1986) suggests they simply leave a blank, or write the word in their L1, and continue; They can consult a dictionary once FW has concluded. Furthermore, students' compositions should not be evaluated as this will shift their focus from fluency to form which negates the goal of FW.

Topics can be provided by the teacher (guided FW) or students can choose their own topic (unguided FW) (Fontaine, 1991). Bonzo (2008) found that student written output increased when they were given autonomy in topic choice. Although Bonzo's study looked at American university students studying German, more recent studies (Sponseller & Wilkins, 2015; Ottoson & Crane, 2016) have replicated Bonzo's study with Japanese EFL university students with similar results. Contradictorily, although their output was greater during guided FW, many students in these two studies expressed a preference for guided FW. For instance, in Sponseller and Wilkin's study (2015), 22 of the 51 participants preferred teacher-selected topics (i.e., guided FW). Commonly-cited reasons for this were that it was difficult for them to generate topics or that it took time to do so.

How long students should do FW is another consideration. FW can be timed where students write for a set amount of time (10 minutes seems to be typical) or untimed in which case students determine when they want to stop such as when writing a journal outside of class. FW, in the context of this paper, refers exclusively to timed FW. Depending on the students' level, allowing a short period of thinking time prior to FW can be beneficial.

FW can also be further categorized depending on the intended audience. Elbow (2008 as cited in Patterson, 2014) makes a distinction between private FW, where students are writing for themselves, and public FW, where they are writing with the intention of

sharing their compositions.

Although increasing written fluency is the primary goal of FW, other benefits include encouraging students to think in the L2 as there is little time to translate from their L1 (Lane & Perrin, 1984 as cited in Jacobs, 1986); improving their ability to write under time pressure which could be an important exam-taking skill (Lane & Perrin, 1984 as cited in Jacobs, 1986); and, potentially assisting in vocabulary acquisition by providing an opportunity for students to use recently-learned vocabulary. Morevoer, FW can also act as a barometer of their English progress in general which could be a motivational tool.

How freewriting was implemented in this study

Each FW session consisted of two parts and required approximately 20-25 minutes of class time. Part one was the actual FW component whereas part two involved students sharing and discussing what they had written with a partner. This is what Elbow (2008 as cited in Patterson, 2014) would describe as "public" FW. The rationale behind this was three-fold. First, if the purpose is simply to count the words and record it, students may be less motivated to push themselves. However, if they know they will have to share and discuss it with a partner, they may be more motivated to do their best each time as there is some accountability. The second reason was to create a more balanced activity following Nation's (2007) four strands approach by introducing meaning-focused listening and speaking. Third, through personal observation, alternating writing activities with speaking activities seems to keep students more motivated.

Part 1 (FW - 10 minutes)
Students participated in a weekly ten-minute FW session at the beginning of class for the duration of the spring semester (14 weeks) except for one class. During the first class, students were introduced to FW including how to do it as well as the rationale behind it. Although the FW sessions were unguided, possible topics were suggested orally prior to each FW session for those who lacked inspiration. The only restriction on topic choice was that students were asked to not choose a topic which they had previously written about. Before each session commenced, students were asked to look at their previous effort/s and were reminded that the goal was simply to write as much as possible, hopefully improving on their previous effort/s. It was also stressed that they should not worry about spelling or grammar mistakes. Dictionaries were not allowed. To help them remain focused on the task, the timer was not made visible to them, and talking was not permitted.

Post-FW data collection
When the ten minutes were over, students were asked to count how many words they had written and then divide the total by ten to calculate their words per minute (wpm)

(e.g., 227 total words = 22.7 wpm). Each student had a personal FW performance sheet where they would plot their speed (wpm) on a graph. This allowed them to visually see any trends as the semester progressed. To avoid a loss in motivation, students were told not to expect a constant upward trend, but to expect highs and lows depending on the difficulty of their chosen topic or their condition on the day. For accuracy in data collection, students also recorded the exact speed to one decimal point above or below the plotted point. Finally, they recorded the topic they had written about.

Part 2 (Sharing and discussion - 10 minutes)
Students were then paired up, generally with a different partner each session. One student (Student A) in each pair would then read their FW composition aloud to their partner (Student B). Student B was instructed to ask for repetition or clarification whenever there was something they did not understand. Once finished, Student B was required to ask a minimum of three follow-up questions on the contents of Student A's FW. Following this, students then changed roles and repeated the activity.

Post-course questionnaire

Students were asked to compete a short questionnaire via Google Forms at the end of the semester to investigate their attitudes towards FW itself as well as to the post-FW sharing and discussion session. The questionnaire consisted of a variety of Likert, closed, and open questions (See Appendix A for the questions as well as the results).

Participants

Two advanced first-year reading and writing classes (N = 37, 9 Male, 28 Female, 1 Prefer not to say) at a Japanese university participated in this study during the Spring semester (April to July). Although 40 students took the classes in total, one student requested their data not be included, while two others were excluded due to being absent from multiple sessions. Although it is a mandatory course, all students (tourism and sociology majors) were highly motived and approached the FW sessions conscientiously.

Results of the freewriting analysis

Figure 1 reports the initial descriptive statistics analysis of student FW output, measured as words per minute (wpm) per session. Although there were 13 FW sessions in total, complete data sets were only available for 11 sessions due to students being absent or late to class. To avoid having incomplete data sets, two sessions were excluded.
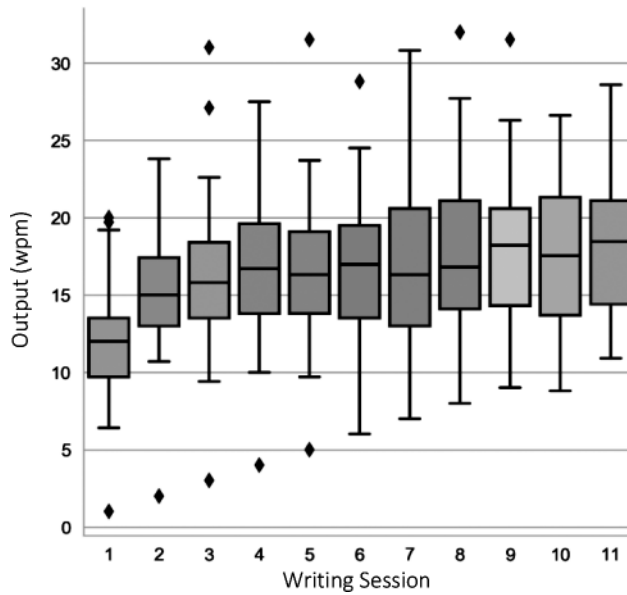
Figure 1. Box chart depicting FW output measured as words per minute (wpm) by writing session.

Although performance fluctuated session to session, there was an overall increase in the writing output from session 1 (M=12.51 wpm, SD=3.80) to session 11 (M=18.59, SD= 4.62). The relatively large increase between session 1 (M=12.51, SD=3.80) and 2 (M= 15.86, SD=3.71) was attributed to students not being familiar with FW during the first session. As a result, the week 1 dataset was redesginated a training session, and week 2 was used in lieu of week 1 in the subsequent analysis.

In order to determine whether there was a significant increase in FW output (wpm) over the duration of the semester, student FW output in sessions 2 and 11 were analyzed using Python. Levene's test was conducted on both groups to verify equality of variances in each group. As the variances of both groups were not significantly different (p=.234), a one-tailed, paired sample t-test could be performed without violating assumptions of normality. The t-test indicated that student output (wpm) in session 11 (M=18.59, SD=4.62) was significantly higher (t= 4.54, p<.001) than in session 2 (M=15.86, SD=3.71). The results exhibited a medium effect size (Cohen's d = 0.612).

Throughout the semester, students produced 474 FW compositions. With one exception (global warming), students chose topics directly related to them and their lives. Topics were categorized according to general themes (e.g., "yesterday", "this week", and "Last weekend" were categorized as recent past) and then ranked in order of popularity. Fourteen themes accounted for 70% (299 compositions) of all compositions (Table 1).

Table 1. The 14 most commonly chosen themes ranked by popularity.

Theme	Popularity
Hobbies and Interests (sports, music, movies)	56
The recent past (yesterday, last weekend, this week)	44
Future vacation plans (Golden week, this summer)	32
Past travel experiences/vacations	47
Part time job	21
Family or a family member	21
Friends	17
Hometown	16
High school or junior high school life	14
University life	13
Extracurricular activites (clubs and circles)	13
Next weekend	12
Festivals (university, city)	10
Pets	8

Results of the student questionnaire

Students still seem to lack confidence with FW, however more than half of students (60%) reported that FW has become easier for them since the first session. Likewise, 63% of students felt that their thinking fluency has improved. The great majority of students (77%) indicated support for the post-FW share and discuss session.

The majority of students (91%) liked being able to choose their own topic. The three students who answered in the negative stated that they struggled to think of suitable topics and requested the teacher provide easy topics. Regarding the length of the FW session, all but two students (94%) expressed satisfaction with ten minutes. The two remaining students suggested writing times of 5 minutes and 7-8 minutes, respectively.

Finally, students were asked to share what they thought about FW. Their responses could be sorted into a few main categories. Some representative responses (unedited) are categorized and listed below.

Some students wrote about the effectiveness of FW.
- *I don't have many opportunities to write long sentences in English except SNS, so it helps me to improve my English writing skill.*
- *It seemed not so difficult, because we can write any topic we want. However, I came to realize there are some phrases or words that I cannot interpret into English. So I came to paraphrase these words. I think it is really good to improve English skill.*
- *I think it is a good opportunity to improve my writing skill little by little.*
- *That can be good practice.*
- *I can improve my English skill by freewriting.*

- *Freewriting is effective to improve my writing skills.*
- *It improves our English skill.*
- *I could organize my thinking through freewriting.*
- *I think it is a good way to output my English words and to improve making a sentence with my own words.*

Many wrote about the difficulties of choosing a topic.
- *Sometimes, it is difficult to find a good topic to write about.*
- *When I have no good topic, it's a little bit hard to do freewriting, but it's fun.*
- *It is really fun to write about topic that I interest, but sometimes I don't have any topic that I want to write. In that case, I'm really tough to do freewriting.*
- *Stressful, because there is nothing to write*
- *It makes me feel like I am concentrating on my English, but sometimes I have no idea of topic*
- *Sometimes it is difficult to decide what I should write.*
- *Sometimes it's difficult to write because I have no good topic…*

A few students wrote about the post-FW sharing session.
- *I am not good at freewriting, but I like to talk with my friends after, so I enjoy freewriting time.*
- *It gives me a good topic for freetalking with my partner.*
- *(It is difficult to think about the topic), but sharing is very enjoyable.*

Other expressed an affective relationship with FW.
- *I can remind what I did or what I felt so it make me feel kinda refresh.*
- *I like it because it reminds me of my memory when I see my note.*

One student expressed a worry and made a request.
- *I enjoyed writing, but I'm worry about tending to use typical and easy phrases. So, I want my teacher to check my writings and lecture new phrases once a half of the year or less than it.*

And, one student acknowledged the effectiveness of FW even though they dislike it.
- *I don't like it, but I'm doing good, I think.*

Discussion

These results indicate that the written fluency of students increased significantly following 11 weekly sessions of 10-minute unguided FW. This is consistent with what has been found in previous studies on FW and written fluency (Bonzo, 2008; Sponseller & Wilkins, 2015; Ottoson & Crane, 2016). The majority of students (60%) claimed that FW had become easier for them and many acknowledged an improvement in their

writing skills with some specifically citing improvements in paraphrasing, writing longer sentences, and organization. Many students also said they enjoyed FW, even those who found it challenging at times. This is similar to findings on student satisfaction with FW in previous research (Herder & King, 2012; Hwang, 2010; Ottosan & Crane, 2016 Patterson, 2014). Moreover, 63% reported feeling that their thinking fluency had increased. This would likely suggest a shift from thinking in their L1 and translating to the L2 to thinking in the L2. However, the fact that students were also taking other English classes throughout the semester cannot be ignored and the possibility that these classes also contributed to improvement cannot be discounted. Nevertheless, it could be put forth that FW acts like a barometer of their overall English progress which can be a source of motivation for students.

Overall, students also showed support for unguided FW, with a possible caveat. Although many students reported having difficulty thinking of a topic, all of the students (91%) in this study reported liking the ability to choose their own topics. This is in contrast with previous studies (Sponseller & Wilkin, 2016; Ottosan et al., 2018) where 43% and 69% of students respectively preferred to be given topics even though they wrote less when doing guided FW. With regards to topic selection, students showed a clear preference for writing about themselves and what is happening in their lives. Although the method of categorizing the topic themes was different, the most popular topics in this study are not dissimilar to those found by Ottosan et al. (2018) which indicates some universalness, at least for Japanese university students. Since one of the four characteristics of an effective fluency acivitity (Nation, 2007) is "familiar topics and language," these would therefore be suitable suggestions for guided FW.

All but two students were in agreement that ten minutes was a suitable length of time for FW. From personal experience, this length of time appears to be in the "Goldilocks zone." That is, it is not too short, not too long, but just the right amount of time for students to generate a decent amount of content without fatiguing or losing focus.

The post-FW share and discuss session proved to be popular with students with roughly three-quarters of students reporting that they enjoyed the opportunity to do so. Three students wrote further support for this in the final open-ended question on the questionnaire.

Recommendations

Evidence suggests that regular FW is a worthwhile addition to English language classes as it is an effective way to improve students' written fluency. Moreover, the following recommendations can be made regarding FW.

1. Ten minutes is an appropriate amount of time. Not only did most students find this

time suitable, but it is also easy to calculate wpm and also does not consume too much class time.

2. Although most students enjoyed the autonomy of choosing their own topic, many did feel stress from having to come up with a topic on their own. To alleviate this stress and to avoid unproductive writing time, the best recommendation could be to provide some suggested topics each session, while also allowing autonomous topic choice. It seems that such an approach could accommodate both kinds of student. When considering potential topics, it is important to remember that "familiar topics and language" is one of Nation's (2007) four characteristics of fluency activities. Refer to Table 1 for a list of the most popular topic themes for potential ideas.

3. Adopting a two-part approach to FW is strongly recommended. Almost all students in this study said they enjoyed the ability to share and discuss their FW compositions with a partner. Not only does this add an additional purpose to their writing, but it may increase their motivation to write more. It also provides students with time to practice the three message-focused strands; namely, meaning-focused input (learning through listening to their partner's composition), meaning-focused output (reading their composition to their partner), and fluency development (they can focus on reading their composition to their partner rather than thinking of what to say). Although the third language-focused strand requires "deliberate attention to language features" such as spelling and grammar (Nation, 2012), which is antithetical to the goals of FW, students could be allowed time to look up any unknown words/phrases between the FW session and subsequent share session.

Acknowledgements

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