【論文】

The Benefit of a Ten-Minute Writing Fluency Exercise in an English Writing Course

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Abstract: Building writing fluency is a beneficial skill for ESL learners. However, there is some debate on what activities prove effective. We investigated the use of a fluency activity that emphasises word output over accuracy. Over ten weeks, two experimental groups of first and secondyear students at a private university in Japan completed 20 writing fluency exercises. Two equivalent control groups completed the same activity: once at the beginning and once at the end of the same ten-week period. A Mann-Whitney U test was utilised to determine whether the experimental group experienced any significant fluency gains over the control group. To the researchers' surprise, the results proved contrary to our expectations, with the control group outperforming the experimental group, albeit not to any significant degree. These findings promote the careful consideration of effective class activities that promote fluency, the possibility of diminishing returns with regard to writing fluency gains when other activities focusing on writing are already present in the course, and the importance of control groups in future studies when measuring activity efficacy.

Introduction

Teachers of second languages are limited by the finite time they have with students in the classroom. Knowing which activities are suitable is paramount to ensuring the effective use of class time. One such activity is the writing fluency exercise, designed to increase the speed at which students can produce written English. Research suggests that consistent use of a writing fluency exercise will increase students' ability to write faster and more accurately (Nation, 2013). A number of studies generally focusing on one or both of these approaches have claimed that frequent use of writing fluency activities has been shown to increase writing fluency in learners, most notably Fellner and Apple (2006), Hwang

(2010), and Dolan and Newbill (2019). Each of these studies used some variation on a typical 10-minute writing fluency exercise, repeated at consistent intervals throughout a course. However, as none of these studies has employed a control group, it is unclear how much of an effect the activity had on the students involved, particularly within a course where they may have already been engaged in frequent writing activities. This paper aims to address this gap in the research. By using experimental and control groups, this study will determine how effective writing fluency exercises are in a curriculum already containing numerous writing activities, and compare the results to extant studies.

Literature Review

Ten-Minute Writing Fluency

The 10-minute writing activity has been advocated by Bonzo (2008), Nation (2013), and Dolan and Newbill (2019). The crux of the exercise is for the learner to write as much as possible on a chosen topic for ten minutes. The exercise should be undertaken as often as possible throughout a writing course, with results plotted on a graph to determine whether learners' output has increased. The graph has an added function as a motivational tool as students compete with themselves and, if they so wish, with each other. However, it may be necessary to warn students of the inevitable peaks and troughs in their output so as not to become demotivated (Farmer, 2020). This approach was adopted by Hwang (2010), who revealed the graph to their students at the end of the study and claimed the motivation gained from the results of the free writing practice was evident in a subsequent guided freewriting activity. However, Nation recommends that the students plot their results on the graphs themselves (Nation, 2013).

While the results on these graphs simply indicate

the number of words produced, some studies have also focused on measuring lexical complexity in writing fluency research (Fellner & Apple, 2006; Leblanc & Fujieda, 2013; Dizon, 2016), with some research using it as part of their fluency measure (Sponseller & Wilkins, 2015) as previously mentioned. However, the concept of fluency itself has seen many iterations and is the subject of debate, mainly between the speed at which writing can be produced (as mentioned above) and the accuracy or lexical complexity therein (Muhammad & Mahmoud, 2013). In other words, the debate centers on whether the emphasis should be on quantity or quality (Briere, 1966).

Regarding the activity itself, Nation (2013) suggests providing the learner with a list of possible topics at the outset of each activity or allowing students to repeatedly write on a chosen topic in what is referred to as a guided fluency exercise. The method of topic selection (teacherprovided or student-created) has been the focus of several studies to date, initially by Bonzo (2008) and subsequently by Leblanc and Fujieda (2013), Cohen (2013), Dickinson (2014), and Sponseller and Wilkins (2015). These studies found that student-selected topics were more likely to improve writing fluency than teacher-selected topics. Although Bonzo' s (2008) research was outside of the Japanese context, the other studies mentioned involved Japanese students enrolled in English courses. However, the students were often not English majors, and the extent of possible influence from other writing activities included in each course was unclear.

Use of Control Groups

Dolan and Newbill's (2019) research is one of the few recent writing fluency studies that focuses on the timed writing task rather than the medium used. They concentrated on the legitimacy of the 10-minute writing task as a method for fluency improvement and found significant improvements in two groups of Japanese students who completed the exercise 11 and 12 times over 15 weeks. However, as has generally been the case regarding writing fluency research, there was no control group implemented to support this conclusion. This is pertinent to the validity of the results. Dolan and Newbill's students completed three essays of unspecified length during the allotted period, which may have contributed to their improved fluency.

Although control groups were used in research that focused on student-created topics versus teacher-selected topics (Leblanc & Fujieda, 2013; Bonzo, 2008) and typed versus handwritten fluency exercises (Leblanc & Fujieda, 2013), none implemented a control group to determine whether students might have improved equally well through their mandated writing course and without use of a specific fluency exercise. Without a control group to better eliminate confounding variables influencing writing fluency, such as

course content focused on writing, the efficacy of additional fluency activities remains debatable.

Current Study

The overall aim of the study was to record how a 10-week, 10-minute free-writing activity impacted writing fluency over time for students enrolled in a writing-focused course. For the purposes of this paper, a decision was made to follow Nation's (2007) definition of a writing fluency exercise and treat fluency as the speed at which one can produce the language that one already know and not focus on the lexical complexity of that language. The rationale for this was that other components of the participants' course (e.g., essay, paragraph, and journal writing activities) already focused on these elements to some extent. As mentioned above, previous studies have not utilized control groups and our research sought to fill that gap in the literature. Therefore, the research question was as follows:

Does the addition of a consistent 10-week, 10-minute writing fluency activity twice a week in a reading and writing course impact student writing fluency versus students who do not participate in the activity over the 10-week period?

By creating two groups of students taking the same courses and of comparable ability in writing fluency, we aimed to reduce confounding variables. Only one group (the experimental group) would be exposed to the 20 writing fluency exercises over 10 weeks, whereas the other group of students (the control group) would complete the exercise only at the beginning and at the end of the 10 weeks. We expected that the experimental group should significantly outperform the control group in a final writing fluency exercise. This resulted in the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis: English learners completing a 10-week, 10-minute writing activity twice a week will significantly increase their writing fluency (words written) over those that do not engage with the activity.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

The participants were 30 first-year and 22 second-year undergraduate students from a private university in Japan. All students were English and Communication Studies majors, with only the above-mentioned compulsory course focused on English writing. We used convenience sampling from two compulsory first-year and two compulsory second-year reading and writing courses. Consent from students was gathered via Google Forms in both English and

Japanese. Ethical approval was gained from the university administration and students were briefed on the purpose of the study verbally and within the online forms. The activity was built in as a mandatory part of the course, but students were informed that collection of their data for the study was voluntary. The data of any student in the experimental group who did not complete at least 14/20 of the writings as their scores were deemed unreliable, resulting in a total of 58 students in the study. No students declined to participate.

Student Proficiency

Average TOEIC scores for each of the classes were used as an indicator of the students' general writing ability. Students' TOEIC ranges across the courses are indicated in Table 1; the first-year experimental group (E1), first-year control group (C1), second-year experimental group (E2), and second-year control group (C2). C2 had an average TOEIC score considerably higher than the other students. Although it was assumed that a student's starting point regarding proficiency would not affect how much they would improve, an attempt was made in the final selection to ensure the groups were as close as possible in ability, which can be seen in the results section.

Table 1
Number of Participants (n=58) and
Average TOEIC scores for each group

Group	Year	n	Average TOEIC Score
$\mathbf{E}1$	1	15	370.79
C1	1	16	370.33
E2	2	10	363.53
C2	2	17	448.15

Student Grouping

The initial four groups of students were combined into two groups: one first-year and one second-year group as the combined experimental group, and one first-year and one second-year group as the corresponding, combined control group. The experimental group received the writing fluency exercise, while the control group did not. This resulted in an experimental group with a total of 25 students and a control group of 33 students. Since the content of the courses in each of the first and second years with their corresponding control groups were the same in terms of textbooks, requirements (apart from the fluency activity), assignments, and grading, this helped to reduce confounding variables. For example, the teachers were not utilising any other consistent fluency activities.

Teachers

Teachers of the reading and writing course were briefed on the procedures of the 10-minute writing activity, including a timetable and a script of instructions. Students completed their writing fluency exercises on the form shown in Appendix 2. Writing exercises already extant in the course during the semester were as follows; the first-year students wrote three journal assignments and four paragraph assignments, and the second-year students wrote four journal assignments and two essay assignments. Although the journal assignments were not strictly fluency exercises, they contained similar elements, however, each course utilised them in a consistent manner.

Writing Content

To avoid problems surrounding student knowledge of a given topic affecting the amount of writing they could produce, our students were given 50 topics selected from an internet source plus an extra eight topics for the first-year students (created by the students themselves) and an extra ten for the second-year students (created by the students themselves). Each student, therefore, had roughly 60 choices. Some of these topics and titles were purposely more complex than others to cater to the individual levels of students.

Activity Administration

The students in the experimental group completed the activity twice a week for ten weeks resulting in 20 exposures to the activity. The control group only completed the activity once at the start of the ten weeks and once at the end. The first and last 10-minute activity administered to the control group was within 1-2 days of the experimental group. As the research in this paper is primarily focused on the increase in word output facilitated by the fluency exercise, accuracy was not considered paramount. Nevertheless, students were encouraged by the teachers to write using basic sentence construction while not focusing on spelling or more complicated grammar.

Task Timing and Data Collection

In the second week of the first semester, the activity was administered to both groups. Students were given a list of topics to choose from (Appendix 1) with a corresponding handout (Appendix 2) and instructed to decide on a topic of their choice. After about five minutes to decide on their topic, they were instructed to write for 10 minutes. At the end of the ten-minute writing task, students were asked to count and write their total words at the bottom of the page,

which the teacher collected. The experimental group had their results plotted on their progress graph by the teacher. Each student could track their progress on their graphs using the course learning management software Google Classroom. Each week, the graphs were updated with new data for the experimental group, whereas data for the control group were only collected twice, eliminating the need for graphs. At the end of the data collection period, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was utilised to compare the means of the differences between the two groups for writing fluency (words written).

Results

Eliminating Outliers

To ensure that the ability of the students in each group was as comparable as possible, the mean value of the experimental group's word scores on the first writing fluency exercise was obtained (62.76), and the 8 participants who lay outside one standard deviation (25.74) were eliminated. This left 19 students in the experimental group. The 19 students from the control group whose scores on the first writing fluency exercise were closest in value to the mean of the experimental group were selected for parity. The final number of participants (Table 2) was 19 in the experimental group and 19 in the control group (n=38). These students' word counts ranged between 44 and 83, inside one standard deviation from the experimental group. The distribution of the control groups scores can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Table 2
Student Distribution in the Control and
Experimental Groups (n=38)

	Experimental Group	Control Group
First Year	8	8
Second Year	11	11

Figure 1
Distribution of Experimental Group Word Counts for the First
Writing Fluency Exercise (before final participant selection)

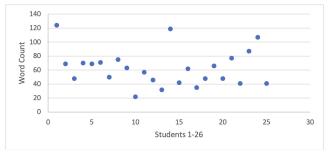
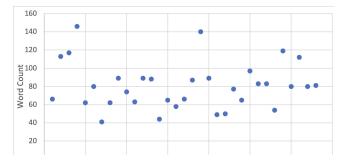


Figure 2

Distribution of Control Group Word Counts for the First Writing Fluency Exercise (before final participant selection)



First and Final Week Writing Comparisons

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviation of the words produced by each group on the writing fluency exercises in the first and final weeks. The table illustrates that in the first week, although the control group performed better on average, the consistency of scores from student to student was almost the same, as illustrated by the standard deviation. This consistency became more variable for both groups on the final week's writing fluency exercise.

Table 3

Mean and Standard Deviation for the Writing Fluency

Exercises in the First and Last Weeks

	Experimental Group		Control Group		
	First Week	Final Week	First Week	Final Week	
Mean	59.47	86.21	67.16	109.36	
Standard Deviation	13.85	25.85	12.54	36.05	

Mann-Whitney U Test: Assumptions and Testing

To determine whether the difference between the word count improvement of the students was significant, a single-tailed non-parametric Mann-Whitney U Test was performed on the fluency increases of the experimental and control groups with the assumption that the experimental groups would outperform the control group. This test was selected as our data groups utilised a dependent variable at the continuous level (word count) and dichotomous independent variables (experimental and control groups). Before performing the test, further assumptions were tested. First, the hypothesis called for one dependent variable, writing fluency measured in continuous number of words written and one independent variable consisting of only two categorical "experimental" and "control" group categories, fitting the requirements of the test. Second, each group was observed separately, with different participants in each group also fitting the requirements. Finally, the distribution of the differences in first and final week word count data for both

experimental and control groups was shown to be normally distributed according to Q-Q plot testing and Levene's test of equality of variances (p = 0.07) where P-values above 0.05 are assumed to have equality of variances.

Table 4

Mann-Whitney U Test

Result Allocation	U Value	P Value
First Exercise	122.00	0.09
Last Exercise	105.00	0.99
Student Differences in Fluency	227.00	0.92

The results of the Mann-Whitney U Test (Table 4) indicated that there was no significant increase in fluency (words written) in the experimental group over the control group (U =227.00, p = 0.92) according to the median values of each data set. The results present evidence contrary to the initial hypothesis in that we expected that the experimental group would significantly outperform the control group due to the additional writing fluency exercises they completed. This resulted in us rejecting our hypothesis: English learners completing a 10-week, 10-minute writing activity twice a week will significantly increase their writing fluency (words written) over those that do not do the activity.

Discussion

The initial results of our study, having utilized a control group, showed that writing fluency exercises may not be beneficial for students where a substantial number of writing activities already exist. It was expected that the experimental group would notably outperform the control group. This assumption was based on previous studies without control groups that showed considerable improvements in students' ability to produce larger amounts of comprehensible writing when utilising consistent writing fluency exercises, particularly the studies of Fellner and Apple (2006), Hwang (2010), and Dolan and Newbill (2019). Although our experimental group also increased their output, surprisingly, they were outperformed by our control group, demonstrating the importance of control groups in future studies. While this result was startling, when the improvement differential was subjected to a Mann-Whitney U test, the result was insignificant, suggesting that despite the introduction of the 20 writing fluency exercises for the experimental group, the ability of both groups remained roughly the same.

Importance of Control Groups

If the experimental group alone is considered, mimicking the research of extant studies, similarities with those studies are easily identifiable. This demonstrates the importance of a control group in studies measuring the effectiveness of activities in the language classroom. Fellner and Apple (2006) conducted a similar freewriting activity through 20-minute blogging exercises over six classes. The test group contained a similar number of students to our experimental group, although these were students of considerably lower ability according to their TOEIC scores. It is unclear what other writing activities these students undertook that may have contributed to their increased output. Still, just as with our experimental group, the average number of words increased. In fact, the average number of words increased considerably more than either our experimental or control group, but this may be at least partially attributed to the time differential in which they had to complete the exercise. Without further details of Fellner and Apple's class regarding other writing activities, it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of the freewriting blogging exercise, but our research shows how a control group could have helped to clarify this.

Per the literature review, Hwang (2010) also saw increases in output with their students which were expressly attributed to the writing fluency exercises. Although the allotted time for the exercise in Hwang's research was 15 instead of 10 minutes, the group was markedly smaller, and the number of exercises was considerably greater. However, the nature of the course within which this research was conducted was significantly similar to ours, with tasks that included essay writing, paragraph construction, brainstorming, and peer editing. In this regard, it is strongly comparable to our research. Had we not included a control group, we may also have been satisfied that the improvements made by the students in our experimental group could be attributed to the writing fluency exercise, again demonstrating the importance of our control group. However, it must be noted that unlike Fellner and Apple (2006) and Dolan and Newbill (2019), Hwang's (2010) research was not conducted in the Japanese context.

Considering Confounding Influences on Fluency

Our experimental groups showed a clear increase in writing speed after completing the 20 exercises over a tenweek period, with an average increase of 26.74 words. This result was comparable to the gains made by one of Dolan and Newbill's (2019) groups. Dolan and Newbill's group returned an improvement score of 29 words and completed writing fluency exercises that were similar to our group's exercises (other than how the topic choices were presented and the

presence of a single persuasive writing activity that replaced one of the usual writing fluency activities). Furthermore, Dolan and Newbill's group contained a comparable number of students to our combined experimental group who completed roughly half the number of 10-minute writing fluency exercises and also undertook concurrent writing exercises in the form of three essays. Judging by the results in our study, these essays may have had a considerable effect on the increased word output for the students in Dolan and Newbill's group, reducing the confidence with which their improvement could be attributed to the writing fluency exercise.

It appears that other influences, such as concurrent additional writing exercises, may impact the effect of writing fluency exercises more than previously taught. Differences in the assignments of the experimental and control groups could be significant. The writing exercises in each course during the semester were as follows; the first-year students wrote three journal assignments and four paragraph assignments. The paragraphs had a 150-word target and involved brainstorming, peer review, and first, second, and final drafts. The secondyear students wrote four journal assignments and two essay assignments. The two essay assignments had word targets of 450-650 words and were typically five paragraphs in length, involving brainstorming, peer review, and first, second, and final drafts. Where the two groups differed in terms of writing assignments was in the composition of their journals. For the experimental group, the journals were written based on a series of structured, reflective questions and had no word limit or target. However, the control group's journals were completely free-form and had a target of about 150 words. Both resembled the writing fluency exercises regarding leniency on grammar and spelling. However, the free-form journals were more comparable due to the absence of any specific structure or prompts.

It is possible that this variable had more of an influence than initially expected. To determine whether this was the case, it would be necessary to conduct statistical analysis specific to this variable. This would also have to be the only variable. One experimental group would employ this freeform method of journaling, and a control group using a method involving structured, reflective questions, with both groups completing a writing fluency exercise at the start and end of the period, as in this study, to determine the journal' s effect on writing fluency. This effect could be determined using a Mann-Whitney U test, as we have used in our study, to determine the statistical significance of the results. It would be expected that the experimental group completing the freeform journals would produce higher writing fluency scores in the second writing fluency exercise due to its similarities in writing conditions. However, although the journals may have had a significant impact on the outcome of this study, such an analysis would require a separate study to investigate

and validate this variable's influence thoroughly. The same can be said of the other writing activities already extant in the classroom, the effect of each requiring a comprehensive study of its own.

Student Proficiency (TOEIC)

As shown via the results, the second-year students, who, after final selection, comprised 11 of the nine students in the control group, had a considerably higher average TOEIC score than any of the other first or second-year groups. This high TOEIC score most likely represents a higher general English ability. As such, more than half of the control group started this experiment from a position of higher proficiency. This may contribute to the explanation as to how, while not statistically significant, the control group outperformed the experimental group. To greater or lesser degrees, the research conducted for this paper had significant similarities to previous studies. Each study saw increases in the writing speed of their subjects, as did we. However, our control group revealed that the reason for this increase might not be as simple as the introduction of a repeated writing fluency exercise, supporting the importance of such a control group.

Limitations

There are some notable limitations to the finding of the study. First, the teachers in charge of both the experimental groups and control groups were different and slight variations in teaching style and course content may have played a part in student success. Additionally, topic/title selection could have played a role in the outcome. More student-generated topics may have benefitted those students of a lower ability. Furthermore, in contrast to Nation's suggestion (2013), our students were asked not to repeat topics, which may have affected their performance. It is also possible that students with higher abilities will start to see diminishing returns in their writing speed more quickly than lower-level students as they progress, as discussed in the passage about TOEIC scores. This is possibly due to the fact that, even with the necessary vocabulary or grammatical structures to express themselves, higher-level students cannot physically write any faster.

Also notable is that this activity was used in a reading/ writing-focused class where each class had either essay or paragraph writing assignments which may have rendered the exercise null. The results do not show whether this activity could prove useful in classes that are more focused on verbal/ listening skills or writing courses without other significant writing assignments. Finally, the study did not collect any qualitative data for this activity. Even if the activity was found to provide little effectiveness in increasing writing fluency, there may be other factors worth investigating, such as enjoyment by the students, in future studies.

Conclusion

Although the present study was somewhat inconclusive regarding the value of the writing fluency exercises, there are still valuable conclusions to consider. First, the impacts of individual writing activities, such as the fluency activity we employed, may largely be affected by the volume and aims of other assignments in a writing course. There may be a limit to the amount of fluency gains possible, or in other words, simply adding more fluency activities to existing writing activities may add no significant value to the students. Another conclusion of this study is that all future studies investigating the effectiveness of activities in the classroom (speaking, writing, reading, listening, etc.) are largely inconclusive without the use of a control group.

In summary, our findings support the idea that future studies focusing on measuring activity efficacy should consider utilising larger groups with comparable proficiency levels (or as close as can be accomplished). Researchers also need to account for the influence of other activities on their students or how that may in turn influence the exercise they are measuring. Even if students are showing improvement, it may not necessarily be directly from the measured exercise, and the use of experimental and control groups is crucial in this regard. Finally, getting student feedback may also provide insightful considerations the researchers did not consider which may be affecting students' performance.

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Appendix 1

Titles, topics, questions, and prompts

Internet sourced	Student created
Your favourite childhood vacation	My favorite movie.
The last words of your novel are, "As night became day, he started to understand the truth." Now, go write the rest.	My favorite artist.
Turn one of the last texts you sent into a story.	My favorite subject.
Add an original scene to the last movie you watched.	What three things would you bring to a desert island?
Two friends have a disagreement.	Would you prefer to travel into the future or the past? Why?
Write about your favorite teacher.	What would the world be like without covid 19?
Outside the window, you see something you can't believe.	When I entered University.
Write about the first time you held someone's hand.	Pets I have had in the past.
Write about the last thing/person that made you smile.	If you could have a superpower, what would it be?
Write about a time you were lost.	What did you do during spring vacation?
Write about your first job.	What new hobby do you want to try?
Write a letter to your 14-year-old self.	Write about your dream for the future.
Write about your dream vacation.	In what order do you eat your food?
Do you like to be alone or with company?	Memories of my freshman year.
You have \$300 and a Prius, describe the 2,800-mile road trip from NYC to LA.	Why are you attending this college?
Write about your biggest goal.	If you were to travel around the world, which country would you visit first and why?
Write about your biggest fear.	

A conversation you and a stranger have on a plane.
A time you or someone you love was scammed
Turn the last song you listened to into a story.
Describe the life of your favorite singer.
Write about a piece of furniture in the room you're in.
If I knew then what I know now.
If you could travel back in time, where would you go?
You live on an abandoned island, describe your morning routine.
You're in a foreign country and don't speak the native language.
Describe how you think your grandparents met.
Write about a time you failed.
You wake up today with the superpower of your choosing.
You're a dog, describe your interaction with a human.
Write about someone you admire.
Go to Twitter or Facebook and write about the first post you see.
Write about a time you were uncomfortable.
She tried to forget him, but never could.
Just as your flight takes off, you discover a shocking note under your seat.
None of your friends remembers you, describe yourself to them.

An island rose from the sea.
Out of the ashes, arose a hero.
The whales grew feet.
I open the last book on Earth.
You knock louder and louder on the door, but nobody answers.
The door you had locked, is wide open.
Just as you fall asleep, the phone rings.
She had the perfect party planned, only to have it ruined by her ex.
She said her final words and left, there's no turning back now.
A blind man falls in love, describe his feelings.
You have the power to stop time, what do you do?
The sun rose for the final time.
You discover that your partner is a robot.
You have 10 days to live.
How will cars look in 50 years?
This needs to be cleaned, the police will be here any minute.
For years, he carefully planned out this day.
The birds didn't go south for the winter.
It's June 13th, the snow won't stop falling.

Appendix 2

Exercise Handout

Number of Words _____

Choose a topic and write as much as you can for ten minutes.				
Name:	Class:		Date	
Writing Fluency				
Witting Fluchey				