

Word Count Matters : Increasing EFL Learner's Writing Fluency through Freewriting

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EFL 学習者のライティングにおける流暢性の向上 :

フリーライティングを通して

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Abstract :

This paper looks at the effect of freewriting on EFL learner's writing fluency. Two groups of first year university students wrote for ten minutes over a 9-week period and recorded their word counts. The results show that a 9-session freewriting practice had a big influence on learner's writing fluency. The students were also surveyed about their experience, and the responses suggested an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards freewriting. This paper concludes that freewriting has a positive influence on the writing fluency among EFL learners within the higher education in Japan.

要旨 : 本稿は、EFL 学習者のライティングにおける流暢性に対しフリーライティングが与える効果を考える。大学生 1 年生の 2 つのグループが、9 週にわたる授業で毎回 10 分間のライティングを行い、その単語数を記録した。その結果、9 回のフリーライティングが学習者のライティングにおける流暢性に大きな影響を与えることがわかった。また、同じ学生を対象にこの経験についての調査を行ったところ、学生たちがフリーライティングに対し非常に前向きであることが示された。本稿は、日本の高等教育機関で学ぶ EFL 学習者のライティングにおける流暢さに対し、フリーライティングがポジティブな影響をもたらすと結論付ける。

Key words : freewriting, fluency, EFL writing

Introduction

For the purpose of this paper, freewriting means learners are free to choose the topic of their writing and for ten minutes they can write anything they like and their writings are not assessed (Hillocks, 1986). It also means that they are free to share their writings or keep them private. They were, however, encouraged to write as fast as they could and as much as they could within ten minutes. The teacher instructed them not to focus on spelling or grammar, but only focus on writing more and faster with the prompt, "Let your thoughts and feelings come and go as they please and you are merely there to record what goes through your mind, as best as you can and as fast as you can." El-

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bow and Belanoff (2000) define freewriting in terms of recording one's thoughts (which is often associated with rational thoughts) in the moment, but it is also important to consider emotions in that particular moment. As Nelson, Lott, & Glenn (1993) argued that writing should touch the heart before it reaches the mind (p.13). The same argument can be made that writing should come from the heart before being censored in the mind to be truly free expression and have an emotional impact. With this in mind, the instructor mentioned that if they felt they disliked English writing, or a particular person or thing, it was a good time to let those feelings out. Studies by Graves, 1982 and Staton, Shuy & Kreeft 1982 suggest that prescribing learners topics to write about could hinder learner expression. Therefore in this study, the students were left to choose their own topics to write about.

EFL students increasingly find writing a difficult skill to acquire. This is especially true for the current generation of students, the so-called digital natives, who find it hard to concentrate over a significant enough period of time to go through the process of academic writing. Knapp (2009) argues that especially for those who are beginning to write rhetorical and academic pieces, writing has to be an attainable goal; therefore, fluency should come first. MacGowan -Gilhooly (1991), also, observed that when the focus of writing was on fluency, students felt more confident of their ability and there was a visible decrease in learners' fear of writing. Hwang (2010) also demonstrated that over a period of eight weeks, freewriting practice greatly increased students' fluency as well as their confidence in writing.

Introducing freewriting also allows learners a venue for their freedom of expression. Studies have shown that some learners see the classroom as stifling and stripping them of their autonomy. Pintrich (1994) looked at the individual differences among learners in relation to classroom and remarked that there is a clear link between students entering a classroom and their loss of autonomy and confidence, as they are required to follow other peoples' rules, i.e. the teacher's and their peers'. Freewriting, no matter how long or short a time it takes, allows them to escape the classroom and daydream freely. It is also therapeutic for those living in big, crowded cities. Spending ten minutes freewriting allow them to let out their stress from the noise and urban madness. It can also help to calm a class down. Skier (1977) used freewriting to channel students' excess energy into words, turning the loudest class into the quietest class in a matter of minutes.

Having taught EFL in Japan over the years, I have come to realise that for the majority of learners there are limited avenues for output. For the most part, the Japanese education system emphasises input. Hirasawa (2010) argues that focusing too much on grammar and reading is a major problem for the English education system in Japanese high schools. It is no surprise that after six years of English education, the vast majority of Japanese high school graduates cannot speak or write well enough to be able to communicate effectively. Freewriting reverses the focus from input to output. This is especially relevant for university students in Japan. For the majority independent writing is a new territory, so they find it extremely hard to express their thoughts and feelings. Freewriting trains students to allow themselves to make mistakes. Learning a new language is a process of self-creation and development (Azizi, 2014) and allowing students to express themselves in the process of learning, not only make them better and more autonomous learners, but also more confident and responsible individuals.

Method

Participants

36 first year students in a private university in Japan were selected for this study. They were from two different classes, each with 18 members. Their TOEIC scores ranged from 450 to 650. None of the students had any prior experience of freewriting. The students were asked to freewrite for 10 minutes in the class over a period of 9 weeks. Since they met once a week in a computer room for their usual academic writing class, they were asked to type their writing using a computer. It should also be noted that the majority of the students had no prior training in typing. They relied on their limited ability to type as best as they could.

Process

On the first day the teacher explained the concept of freewriting to the students and demonstrated it by freewriting for five minutes as students watched this through a projector. The teacher did not pause to correct any mistakes and wrote the random thoughts that went through his mind during those five minutes. Once finished, the teacher went through to point out that it was okay to make mistakes, and that it can be about anything, from the sound of typing one hears to the unusual silence in the classroom. Every week for nine weeks, the students wrote for ten minutes. They saved their writings in a designated folder that was only accessible to each student. The instructor had no access to the folder, so students felt completely free to write any thoughts or feelings they had during those ten minutes since whatever they wrote remained private. At the end of the 9-week period, the instructor created a Google document online and students entered the number of words for each session. The instructor compiled all the data from both classes. At the end, the students were also surveyed about their attitude and experience of freewriting.

Results and Discussion

Since learner fluency was of primary interest, the number of words each learner wrote was the main area of interest of this study.

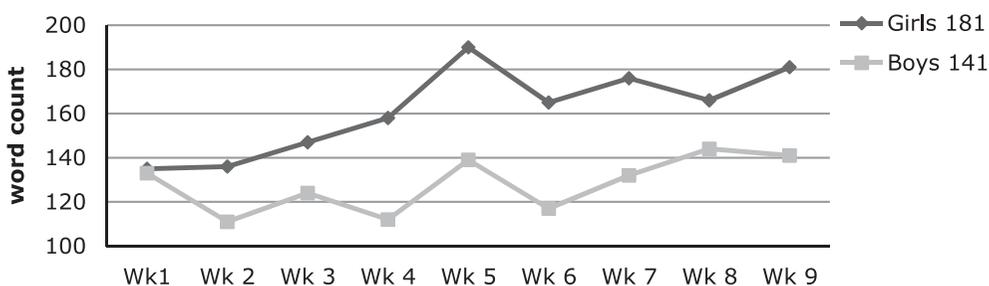


Table 1 Class A progress over 9 weeks

The results (Table 1) show that the number of words went up steadily. When looking at the class as a whole, the average word count for Week 1 was 134 words, while in week 9 it rose to 163 words. On average students wrote 30 words more in ten minutes by the end of Week 9. While the boys' average rose from 133 words in Week 1 to 141 words in Week 9, the girls' results showed a more

dramatic increase, as their average rose from 135 words to 181 words, an increase of 46 words. As Table 1 shows the results for male students fluctuated throughout the entire 9 weeks, with a minor increase in the number of words at the end. The results for female students show a steady increase. It indicates that girls are better at finding things to write when in a reflective mode, or perhaps they were more focused and had more things to write about.

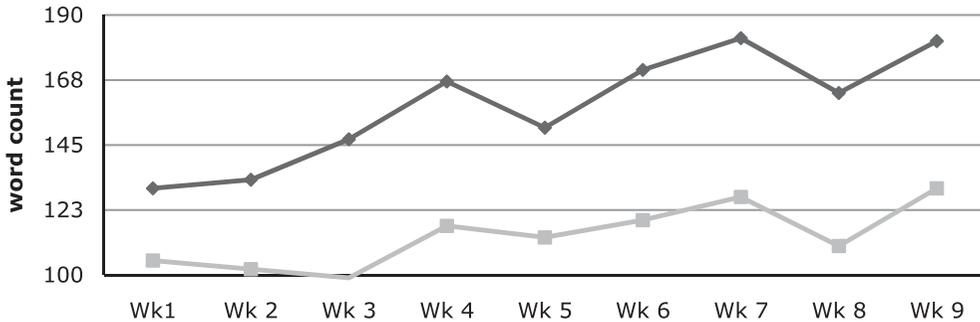


Table 2 Class B progress over 9 weeks

In class B the results (Table 2) show the same steady progress. However, in this group the increase in number of words was consistent among boys and girls. The boys on average wrote 25 more words by Week 9 compared to Week 1. Again, the average number of words for girls increased from 130 to 181, an increase of 51 words. The instructor anticipated a modest increase or no increase in the final weeks, thinking students might find it hard to come up with topics to write about. The results of both groups, however, show that it was not the case. They managed to increase their output in spite of topics drying out as weeks went on. Or they managed to compensate the lack of topics with their speed of writing.

Table 3 Combined Results

	Wk1	Wk2	Wk3	Wk4	Wk5	Wk6	Wk7	Wk8	Wk9
Girls' average N = 24	133	133	147	164	171	169	178	165	183
+/- words		+0	+14	+31	+38	+36	+45	+32	+50
Boys' average N = 12	108	95	100	105	119	112	125	119	137
+/- words		-13	-8	-3	+11	+4	+17	+11	+29
Combined N = 36	125	123	133	145	153	151	163	151	168
+/- words		-2	+8	+20	+28	+26	+38	+26	+43

Now combining both classes, we can see (Table 3) that the girls' average word count increased by 50 words. As for the boys, on average they wrote 29 more words in Week 9 compared to Week 1. However, the weekly results for boys were very inconsistent. For instance, in weeks 2, 3 and 4 their averages fell by thirteen, eight and three words respectively. The girls' results show a clear, consistent increase as the weeks progressed. These results show that freewriting had increased fluency among these students. They started from 12.5 words per one minute in Week 1 and ended up with

16.8 words per one minute in Week 9, which is a significant gain in a little over two months.

When at the end of the study students noted the number of words on a week-by-week basis, they were surprised by their own progress. It was an eye opener for them. For the majority of the students, freewriting was a fun activity and when they saw the results they were very pleased. For the very few who seemed less willing to do freewriting, the results were also surprising, and appeared to answer their scepticism. This is a good way of encouraging struggling students who do not identify themselves with English learning to write, as it allows them to see their achievements in a short period of time.

Survey

At the end of the study all the participants were surveyed about their experience. The survey was conducted prior to compiling the number of words for each week to make sure that the word count did not affect their responses. The survey results show an overwhelmingly positive response to freewriting, with 84% of the students saying that they enjoyed it. As far as their views on freewriting being helpful or useful for their English learning, 59% thought it was very helpful, and with 31% saying it was a little helpful, and 10% thought it did not contribute in their English writing ability. The survey also asked them whether they discovered something through freewriting, following Hill-ocks's argument that freewriting is a way of self-discovery and exploration of what one wants to write about (1986). It was interesting to see that nearly 20% of them responding that through freewriting they learnt things about themselves. And nearly 30% of them thought it made them more creative in their thinking as they had to come up with things to write without any planning. Over 25% of them answered that due to freewriting they could now write faster in English. 23% of the respondents stated that thanks to freewriting they came to enjoy learning English more. Only one respondent said that freewriting made him or her dislike English even more.

The survey also asked them whether it was challenging to find topics to write. The majority of them (55%) said it was hard to find things to write about, and the rest of them saying that it was somewhat easy or very easy to find topics. It was also interesting to see what the students wrote about, because freewriting is said to bring a cathartic and reflective elements to language learning. In other words, it allows learners to personalise their acquired language through self-expression. A lot of them wrote about their daily lives, with 33% about the happenings of the previous day or week, and 17% about their plans later that day or the next day. And 40% of them wrote things that they considered were not about a single topic or a theme, they were, therefore, considered random thoughts in the moment. This was expected as the teacher had instructed them in the first week that they should let their thoughts flow. 10% of them said that they wrote from their imagination, and were surprised by the ideas they could come up with through freewriting. This is an important discovery as freewriting is also associated with creativity. Through the act of writing one is able to generate ideas that otherwise would not be possible or very difficult. Different learners have different ways of generating ideas for their writing. Freewriting offers an alternative method of writing that might better suit some learners.

Students were also asked to write their general comments about the experience and what they thought about the process and outcome of their freewriting. Here is a selection of what students wrote :

Positive

It makes me write faster
It is easy, so anyone can do it
I can write anything I like
It makes me think faster
I learn about myself
So much better than writing essays
Always wanted to keep a diary
I know it will end in a few minutes

Negative

It gets boring after a few times
My typing is too slow
Nothing to write about
I care too much for grammar and spelling
Quantity, not quality
Teacher doesn't correct my mistakes
Writing is not free, it is just a name

Conclusion

As this study shows that freewriting has an impact on the writing fluency among EFL students. There is no doubt that it increases learners' writing fluency. As we saw in this study the increase in the number of words was consistent between the two groups and the increase in the number of words among female students in particular was significant. This is important within an education system that primarily focuses on input. Freewriting may also help learners avoid internal translation when writing in a second or foreign language. It is common practice among EFL students that when they want to write or speak they tend to translate the thoughts formed in their native language. When the focus shifts from quality in communication to pure quantity, the chance of internal translation is significantly diminished, as there is simply little or no time for it. The aim of this study was to improve learners' writing fluency and it showed that freewriting was an effective method for that purpose.

One of the key questions that most students were asking was how they were going to be assessed for their freewriting. In other words, is external feedback necessary or not? Since this was a first in a series of studies on the effect of freewriting on EFL writing fluency, it was beyond its scope to give feedback. There was also the issue of interference of such feedback. Critical feedback can affect learners' output; therefore, it could have changed the results of the study, a subject for future studies. Another issue that needs to be further looked at is the issue of typing skills among students; it might be beneficial to look at the effect of hand-written freewriting as opposed to typing. Further research is also needed to see whether freewriting has any effect on critical academic or creative writing among EFL students.

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