〔論文〕

Effectiveness of 10-minute EFL Writing Activities in a University Classroom

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Abstract

This study attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of 10-minute writing activities as a fluency development exercise at a medium-sized private university in Japan by analyzing low-level freshmen students' writing logs over a 15-week semester. Firstly, it will explain the setting in which the activities were implemented, followed by the activity procedure itself, and finally the paper will present an analysis of the activity and future considerations.

1. Introduction

The research in this paper took place at a medium-sized private university in Japan, using data gathered from low-level freshmen students in two English Reading/Writing classes. The classes consisted of 25-27 students who met once per week for three hours over a 15-week semester. Over the 15-week semester the students were tasked with producing three assessed essays, however no other writing tasks or activities were specified in the set curriculum. In previous years, it was observed that students needed more fluency development exercises to practice producing language. Based on current research, the instructor applied Paul Nation's concept of the "Four Strands," specifically Fluency Development (Nation, 2013), and his 10-minute writing activity to these two classes of low-level students. These two classes will be referred to as "Class A" and "Class B" in this paper.

1.1 Fluency Development and 10-minute Writing

When researching methods to improve students' writing fluency, the authors found a distinct lack of literature focusing on fluency development exercises or timed writing. Instead, the bulk of the literature that incorporated timed writing exercises had a tendency to focus on the medium used rather than the task itself, and the literature also acknowledged the lack of a standard definition of "writing fluency" in the ESL/EFL community. Currently, writing fluency is generally accepted as a student's ability to produce understandable language within a set period of time (Fellner & Apple, 2006).

Of two studies that looked at improving writing fluency, both focused on the viability of blogs as a medium rather than the actual task of timed writing. The first study by Fellner and Apple (2006) assessed students' writing speed and "lexical richness" through 20-minute timed blogging sessions in a CALL-focused, seven day intensive English program. "Lexical richness" is defined as the students' ability to use a varied and large vocabulary (Dizon, 2016), and was added as an assessment criterion for writing fluency, as it was determined that by assessing word count alone, it is possible a student could write the same simple sentences, or a string of words, over and over again to artificially increase word count and give the appearance of having writing fluency. The results of this first study show that students' writing speed and lexical richness improved, but the researchers also concede that the improved writing speed could have been affected by an improvement in students' typing abilities (Fellner & Apple, 2006).

The second study took a similar approach and focused on developing lexical complexity through 10-minute blogging sessions conducted twice weekly over the course of 12 weeks. While the paper does not take into

account students' typing abilities, it corroborates the findings of Fellner and Apple, and postulates that blogs are effective in improving writing fluency. It also questions whether it is blogs as a medium or the timed writing tasks themselves that promote writing fluency (Dizon, 2016).

Considering this research, the authors looked at Paul Nation's fluency development activities, including timed writing, in his "Four Strands" theory of language learning. Those Four Strands are meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Fluency development, according to Nation, specifically has four qualities. The first quality is that the exercise is relatively easy for the students, so that they can process or produce language smoothly. The second quality is a pressure to complete the task at faster speeds, ideally a speed close to that of a native speaker. The third quality is that the students are focused on conveying or understanding meaning without excessive focus on grammatical structure. The fourth and final quality of a fluency development exercise is that the exercise is repeated frequently (Nation, 2013).

The 10-minute writing activity functions as a fluency development exercise by giving the students repeated opportunities to write about easy topics while under the pressure of a 10-minute time limit. The end-purpose of the activity is to gradually increase the number of words a student can produce in 10 minutes while simultaneously maintaining some degree of grammatical accuracy so that the produced writing can be understood without difficulty.

2. Procedure Adopted in Class A and Class B

As for the target of this study, the 10-minute writing activity was given 11 times in Class A and 12 times in Class B over the course of a 15-week

semester. The slight discrepancy in the frequency of the activity between the two classes was due to scheduling issues during the semester. During each activity, the students were given an easy topic to write about, and were then given 10 minutes to write without additional time given for brainstorming. After 10 minutes had passed, students exchanged writings with a partner to count how many words had been written, and conducted light peer review. The results were recorded in a log and handed back to the partner student. These logs were collected by the instructor at the end of the semester.

In previous years it was determined that due to the students' low level and relatively low motivation, peer review would not be effective unless the students were given simple and clear guidelines. At that time, it was noted that many students often produced sentence fragments in which either the subject or the verb were omitted from the sentence. Thus the light peer review focused on fragments, and students were instructed to underline the subject and circle the verb of each sentence, noting whether or not every sentence contained both a subject and a verb.

Upon completing the peer review, students recorded in a writing log the date, topic, number of words written, and if each sentence was a complete sentence. This log was brought to every class and collected by the instructor at the end of the semester. See Appendix 1 for a sample of the writing log.

The topics given for the 10-minute writing activity were primarily easy topics calling for reflection on daily life or recent events such as holidays or seasonal festivals, however one topic was persuasive in nature and adapted from a topic in the students' reading textbook. While the typical 10-minute writing activity does not give additional time for brainstorming, this persuasive writing activity was scaffolded with brainstorming activities in-

volving the class as a whole before the actual writing activity began. The topic of this activity, "Should children have smartphones?" was scaffolded as follows: First, the topic was introduced by instructing the students to ask each other how old they were when they first had a smartphone. Second, useful vocabulary was introduced by instructing the students to brainstorm, with a partner, advantages and disadvantages to children having smartphones. The students then started the timed writing activity and were encouraged to use the language and information generated during scaffolding.

Initially, students were only given one topic for the writing activity. The instructor noted a large discrepancy in individual students' ability to produce content on a certain topic, not because of language difficulties, but because a student may not have any relevant content to produce at all. For example, if the class is given "Summer Vacation" as a writing topic, some students would have adequate content to write about because they traveled or did some other activity over the summer, while other students may not have traveled or done anything at all because of a part-time job or other circumstance, and therefore would not have adequate content to write. In order to resolve this, the instructor gave students three topic options, and the students were allowed to choose one topic of those three to write about. The list of topics used can be seen in Appendix 2.

3. Analysis

Upon reviewing the writing logs at the end of the semester, it could be seen that the students' overall writing speed had notably increased. Due to outlying students whose writing fluency was higher than average, the classes' median scores were analyzed to ensure more accurate data. Class

A showed an increase from 41 words in the first activity to 70 words in the last activity, an increase of 29 words, or 70.7% over 11 activities (**Figure 1**). Class B, which had a total of 12 activities, showed an increase of 43 words, or 91.5%, starting with 47 words on the first activity and finishing with 90 words on the last activity (**Figure 2**). The combined median words of both classes shows a clear upward trend indicating that the students indeed increased their writing speed (**Figure 3**). It was also noted that both classes experienced a drop in writing speed on the seventh activity. This corresponds to the persuasive writing activity, which differed from the other activities and possibly reflected students' difficulty with that particular topic, a typical example of fluctuations that were seen over the semester. Dizon (2016) described a similar variation in writing speed, and noted that a student's familiarity, or unfamiliarity, with a topic impacts the student's writing speed. By giving students a choice of three topics during each session, the instructor hoped to mitigate the degree of this variation. When
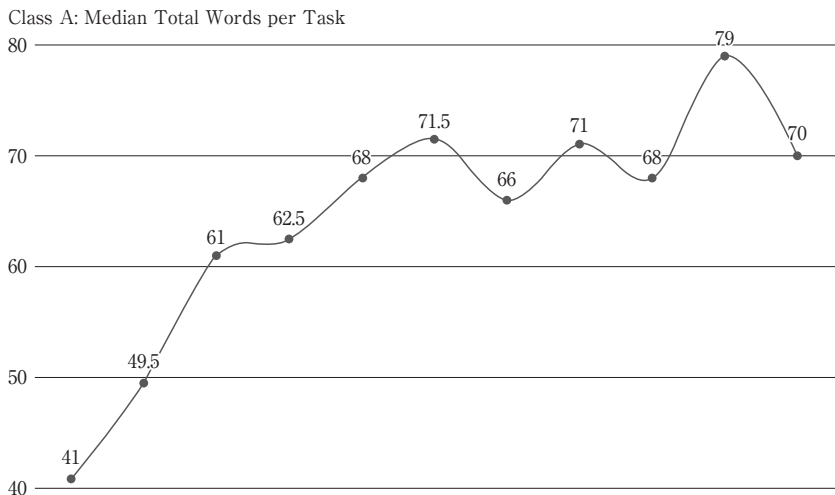
Class A: Median Total Words per Task

Figure 1. Class A median words per activity across 11 activities.
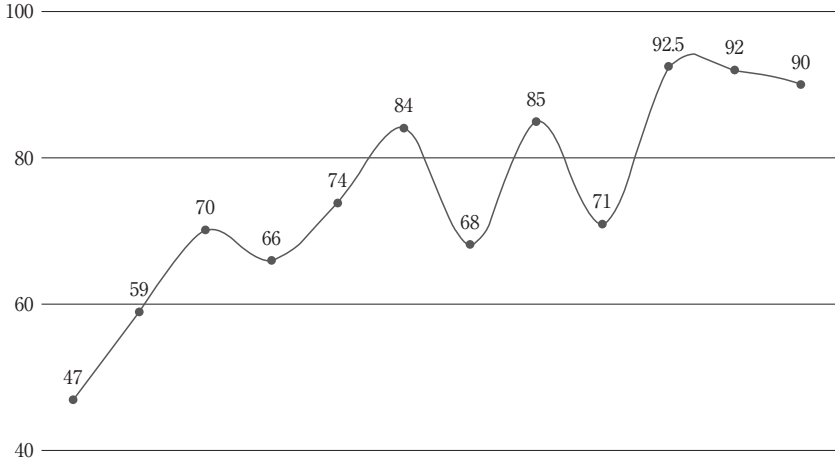
Class B: Median Total Words per Task

Figure 2. Class B median words per activity across 12 activities.
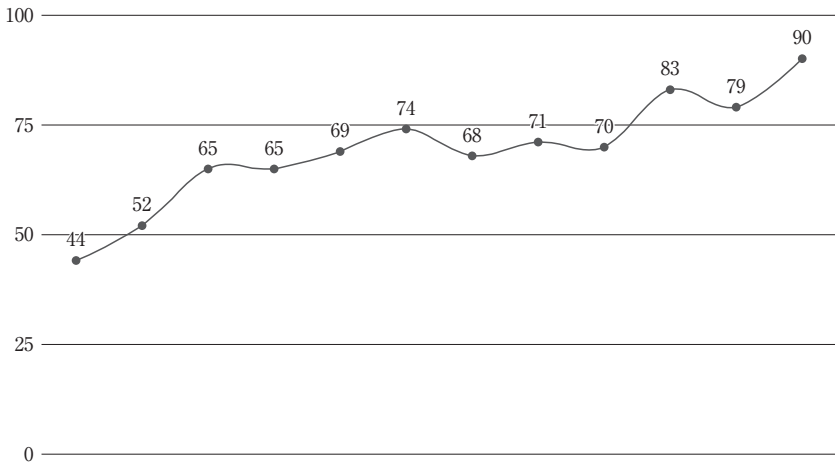
Combined Median Total Words per Task

Figure 3. Combined median words per activity across both Class A and Class B, showing an upward trend line.

graphically represented, the writing speed of both Class A and Class B showed a steady increase. This agrees with the findings of Fellner and Apple (2006); however, Dizon (2016) did not see a consistent improvement despite his students showing up to an 86% improvement between his pre-test and post-test.

3.1 Individual Student Progress

While the classes overall showed improvement in writing speed, individual student progress varied. Some students improved greatly while others improved very little, or remained at the same level, as seen in the three sample students from Class B in **Figure 4**.

Stdt	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
S1	39 wds	77 wds	74 wds	94 wds	95 wds	110 wds	92 wds	112 wds	106 wds	157 wds	114 wds	139 wds
S2	64 wds	85 wds	77 wds	89 wds	119 wds	116 wds	99 wds	132 wds	128 wds	148 wds	130 wds	156 wds
S3	99 wds	115 wds	96 wds	96 wds	94 wds	94 wds	60 wds	94 wds	80 wds	125 wds	110 wds	93 wds

Figure 4. Sample of three students' log data from Class B.

Students 1 and 2 (S1 and S2) showed marked improvement over the 12 activities given: Student 1 (S1) experienced an improvement of 256.4%, and Student 2 (S2) showed an improvement of 143.8%. Student 3 (S3) did not show consistent improvement and tended to remain steady at around 90 to 100 words. No students showed a notable reduction in writing speed. This was typical across both classes, which overall experienced a 104.5% improvement in writing speed.

3.2 Writing Quality

Due to the large amount of student work, it would be impossible for the instructor to reasonably check all of the students' writings. As a compromise, during peer review students marked the subject and verb of every sentence, and if every sentence contained a subject and verb the student would indicate so on the writing log; however, the accuracy of the students' peer review assessments was not checked by the instructor. Although somewhat anecdotal, as this data was not quantified, the instructor did feel that the students' writing quality in the three assessed writing tasks was better than that of the previous year's students who did not do the 10-minute writing activities, especially in that incomplete sentences were a rare occurrence. In support of this observation, research on Iranian ESL students posits that writing fluency is an indicator of final writing quality (Alemohammad & Alavi, 2014).

4. Limitations and Considerations

This research is not without limitations. Firstly, the data was collected over the course of a single 15-week semester, and due to class scheduling issues one class had one fewer writing activity than the other. Continuing with the 10-minute writing exercises and collecting data over two semesters may give more conclusive results. In addition, out of 50 students, four or five students did not have perfect attendance and may have completed fewer tasks than other students due to absences. While these missing entries were not counted in the class median, they are unlikely to have skewed the numbers as there is no way to ensure that all students completed all the activities. Secondly, the quality of students' work was not assessed by the instructor due to the large quantity of work. It may be effec-

tive to instruct students to search for more specific and common errors that they can easily identify, such as spelling or agreement errors, and note in the writing log how many errors they could find. While this is not as accurate as having the works checked by the instructor, it may be an effective compromise. Because of the large volume of works, it is understandable that Fellner and Apple (2006) and Dizon (2016) used blogs as a medium for timed writing activities with lexical richness as the main assessment criterion, as lexical complexity can be automatically analyzed by computer programs. Grammar and understandability, however, cannot be analyzed so quickly or easily.

Surveying the students on their perceptions of the activities and how they feel about their own writing may give more insight into the efficacy of the activity. Student confidence in their own abilities, and confidence in knowing that a particular activity is not a waste of their time, can also be influential factors in language learning.

It may also be productive to scaffold the activity by allowing the students time to brainstorm and organize their thoughts before beginning the timed writing task, while gradually shortening their brainstorming time throughout the semester until it is eliminated completely. Fellner and Apple (2006) noted that when students were given time to research their topics before writing, their writing speed increased considerably.

5. Conclusion

After 15 weeks of 10-minute writing activities as a fluency development exercise, the students displayed a steady improvement in their writing speed. Class A showed a 70.7% median increase in writing speed from 41 words to 70 words in a 10-minute period. Class B showed a 91.5% increase

in writing speed from 47 words to 90 words in a 10-minute period. Combining the median words per task of the two classes, the students showed a 104.5% increase in writing speed, with some individual students experiencing much greater growth, as with S1's 256.4% improvement. The exercise also potentially improved their writing quality, though writing quality was not directly assessed in this evaluation. This research will continue, taking into consideration the lessons learned from classroom practice and this evaluation, with emphasis on quantifying the accuracy of students' work. It is expected that this objective component will promote student confidence in their efforts towards language learning.

References

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Appendix 1: Sample Writing Log

10-minute Writing Log
Name: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮
Class: ▮▮▮

Date	Topic	Words	Subject/Verb in every sentence?
4 / 13	Spring Vacation	39	Yes / No
4 / 20	Hanami	77	Yes / No
5 / 11	Country	74	Yes / No
5 / 25	My favorite sports	94	Yes / No
6 / 1	My favorite music	95	Yes / No
6 / 8	Travelling	110	Yes / No
6 / 15	Should children have smartphone?	92	Yes / No
6 / 22	Part-time job	112	Yes / No
6 / 29	Exercise	100	Yes / No
7 / 5	Summer vacation	157	Yes / No
7 / 13	School uniform	114	Yes / No
7 / 20	My family	139	Yes / No
/			Yes / No
/			Yes / No

Write as much as you can in 10 minutes. Write the date and the topic in this Writing Log.
Exchange notebooks and this Writing Log with a classmate. Record the number of words.
Underline the subject and circle the verb in every sentence. If every sentence has a subject and a
verb, circle "Yes." If a sentence is missing a subject or a verb, circle "No."

Appendix 2: 10-minute Writing Topics

1. Spring vacation
2. Summer vacation
3. My favorite season
4. My favorite festival (matsuri)
5. My favorite foods
6. Cooking
7. My family
8. My favorite music
9. My favorite movie
10. Sports
11. Travelling
12. Countries that I want to visit
13. The beach/ocean
14. Hanami
15. My hobbies
16. Golden Week
17. Fireworks
18. Should children have smartphones? Why or why not? (brainstorm as class)
19. Video games
20. Theme parks
21. School uniforms
22. Favorite high school teacher
23. Rainy season (Tsuyu)
24. High school clubs
25. Part-time job
26. Pets
27. Exercise