

A SELHI high school 'writing' course: Chances for free production and the use of Criterion

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As part of the SELHI program at Ikeda High School attached to Osaka Kyoiku University, chances for free production were added to the standard syllabus for 11th grade *writing*. Free production has the advantage that it will occur exactly at the individual learner's unique state of interlanguage development and promotes fluency. The activities centered on exchange journals and the use of *Criterion*, an online evaluation software system for essay writing. The feedback provided by the software was flawed in many respects, but provided motivation. For the essay writing portion of the class, rather than let the software dictate the syllabus, it was deemed necessary to add the procedures of *process writing*, instruction on the structure of this type of essay, input of the same genre and on the same topic as to be written, and consciousness-raising activities aimed at grammar beyond the sentence level. The course was successful both in terms of improvement made by the learners, and student preference for the procedures employed. This paper presents the procedures used along with survey results from the students who took part in the course.

SELHIの取り組みの一環として二年生のライティング授業の検定教科書に含まれているシラバスに加えて、エッセイや交換日記を書くことにより学習者が自発的に第二言語で意味を作り出す場をより多く与えました。これは学習者の中間言語の習熟度に合った練習と実験的に第二言語を使う機会を増やすためです。また、こういった授業内容の中に、オンラインソフトを大いに活用しました。学習者のエッセイを評価するオンラインソフトのフィードバックにはいくつかの問題点がありましたが、動機付けという点では機能を果たしました。エッセイライティングの各授業の始めに、次のような事を行いました。プロセスライティングの方法の指導をはじめ、エッセイと同じジャンルの文章やトピックに関連する語彙、頻出構文のインプットによる紹介。また、談話的文法やエッセイの形の説明などです。学習者から得たいくつかの調査結果では、この学習方法はおおむね好評で、1年の間で英語力の向上もみられました。

The *Super English Language High School* program, or SELHI is a program under the auspices of Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) that promotes research on methodology, syllabus design, and program innovations in high school English language education by providing special funding to select schools that agree to commit to experimentation and research in an approved area of their choosing. This paper will describe experimental course design changes made to a one-credit writing class for 4 classes of 11th graders (161 students) by myself and team-teaching partner Masatsugu Higuchi as part of the SELHI program at Ikeda High School Attached to Osaka Kyoiku University. In our experimental course, timed argumentative or opinion essay writing utilizing the online evaluation software package *Criterion* and exchange journal writing were added to the standard syllabus. Our aims were to use expressive writing as a platform for comprehensible output, provide a much-needed chance for such free production, and to foster fluency.

Strengths and shortcomings of the standard syllabus

The typical textbook designed for high school *writing* classes in Japan consist of units comprised of:

- 1) An explicit presentation, in Japanese, of one or more grammatical items or features.
- 2) Several controlled-practice exercises focusing on them.
- 3) A series of sentence-level translation problems that utilize the focused items or features, some of

which are reproduced from past university second level (niji) entrance examinations.

As consciousness-raising tools, these activities are useful in that they may encourage noticing target language features later where a more natural acquisition process may ensue (Schmidt 1990), but such limited presentation and practice is not sufficient in and of itself to bring about mastery of the features in relation to the rest of the learner's developing interlanguage (Rutherford, 1987). Moreover target features may be outside learners 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1934) given that acquisition of features occurs in a somewhat fixed order (Dulay and Burt, 1973), and at the same time every learner has, to a large extent, a built-in syllabus of what is to be learned next (Skehan, 1996). The individual's learning process is holistic and unpredictable (Willis, forthcoming) and teaching which emphasizes an explicit focus on form does not and cannot determine the way a learner's interlanguage will develop (Ellis, 1985). In other words, the textbook may be aimed at features of little relevance to, or out of reach of individual learners and their current interlanguage state.

Furthermore, while these activities are often thought necessary in preparation for university entrance exams, at present these isolated, de-contextualized, sentence level translation problems are "not as common as they used to be...becoming increasingly rare...and probably (account for) less than 5% of the test content." (Guest, 2006).

Lastly, while translation problems do create a context that obliges use of target features by using L1 as a starting point, they suffer the flaw of encouraging a mental dependency on L1 when creating meaning in English and may even

complicate the process. During the course, a student with experience living in an English speaking country pointed this out. Apparently frustrated by the translation problems, she said, “*I could never make a good English sentence with a Japanese-language head*”. What she obviously means is that it is more difficult to produce English via Japanese than directly from meaning because one tends to make an attempt to transfer structure and other L1 systems along with meaning. (see Fig. 1 below)

Proposed solutions

In order to balance out the problems outlined above, it was thought that chances for free production needed to be added to the syllabus. By *free production*, we mean tasks where the language a learner uses is not specified or restricted; meaning is central. Justification for using classroom time for free production is evident in the concepts ‘comprehensible output’ or the ‘Pushed Output Hypothesis’ (Swain, 1985). As Swain states, by producing language,

“...learners can ‘stretch’ their interlanguage to meet communicative goals. They might work

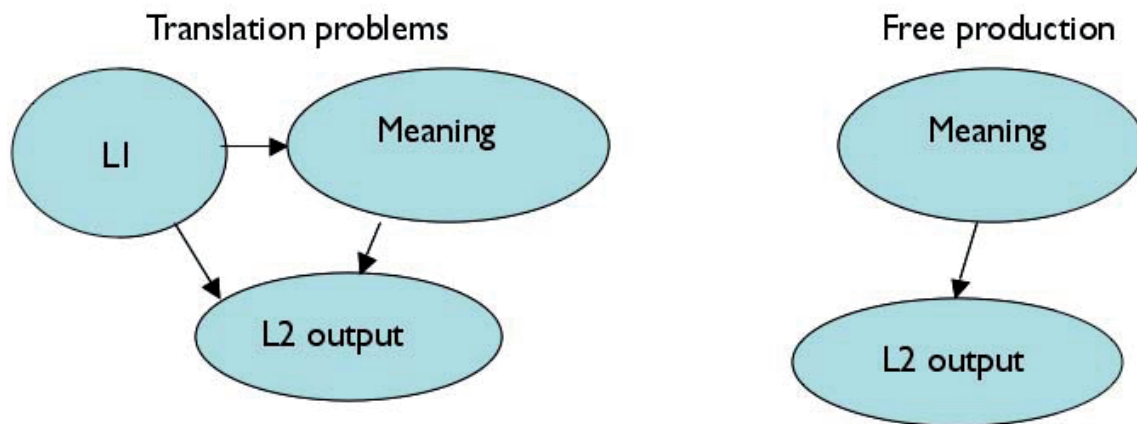


Figure 1. “I could never make a good English sentence with a Japanese-language head”

towards solving their linguistic limitations by using their own internalized knowledge, or by cueing themselves to listen for a solution in future input. ... [T]o produce, learners need to do something; they need to create linguistic form and meaning and in doing so discover what they cannot do.” (Swain 1995: 127)

As is evident, this interlanguage stretching will occur at the learner’s individual and unique level of development, which is impossible in the aforementioned controlled practice and translation problems. In addition to this interlanguage stretching, Swain (1995) also points out the ‘fluency function’ that free production enables. As summarized by Izumi,

‘[i]n order to develop speedy access to extant L2 knowledge for fluent productive performance, learners need opportunities to use their knowledge in meaningful contexts, and this naturally requires output.” (Izumi 2003: 170)

Also, such free production should encourage learners to produce language directly from intended meaning to the target language, bypassing translation from L1 and thus avoiding the confusion and frustration expressed by the student previously. Lastly, a further reason for adding free production to the syllabus is that chances for production are rare in the high school curriculum, save the 2001 addition by MEXT of the two credit *oral communication* courses in the first year of high school.

With these goals in mind, activities such as *original sentences* and peer-to-peer exchange journals were peripherally added to the syllabus, but the main additions

to the course involved timed essay writing using online evaluation software. The following sections will explain the procedures and issues involved in implementing the main course innovations.

Essay writing

Reasons for including essay writing in a high school EFL curriculum include the fact that it is a required skill in standardized tests such as the TOEFL, which is sometimes required for admission into U.S. universities. For universities in Japan as well, depending on the faculty of studies, an essay in English is often a key part of alternative admissions procedures.

However, as discussed earlier, we were not interested in essay writing solely in a product-oriented fashion, to be applied to university entrance procedures, but as a platform for free production and a means to provide students with the opportunity to experiment with their foreign language and use it communicatively while also developing fluency.

The software package Criterion was used as the centerpiece of the essay writing part of our course, but it was necessary to supplement it with other activities and sometimes shift focus away from the software itself because of its shortcomings as will be described in the following sections.

The Criterion software: features, strengths, and weaknesses

Criterion, a web-based writing evaluation software program is offered as a service of TOEFL and TOIEC’s Educational

Testing Service (ETS). After a timed writing session on topics similar to those found on the TOEFL, learners submit their essay and, among other types of feedback, they receive a *holistic score* of 1 to 6 just as on the TOEFL test. This holistic score was the best feature of the software. The desire to improve this score gave students a concrete goal and motivated them to improve their essays. This feeling among the students was verified by a survey (see Fig. 2 below), and the motivation lasted throughout the year. Furthermore, when the instructor had examined the text before the learner clicked 'Submit', the returning holistic score did more or less concur with the instructor's estimate, and therefore seemed somewhat accurate.

Q. Having the score of 1,2,3,4,5,6 is important. I always try harder because I want to get a better score.

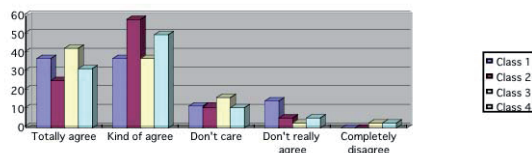


Figure 2. The holistic score of Criterion as a motivational factor

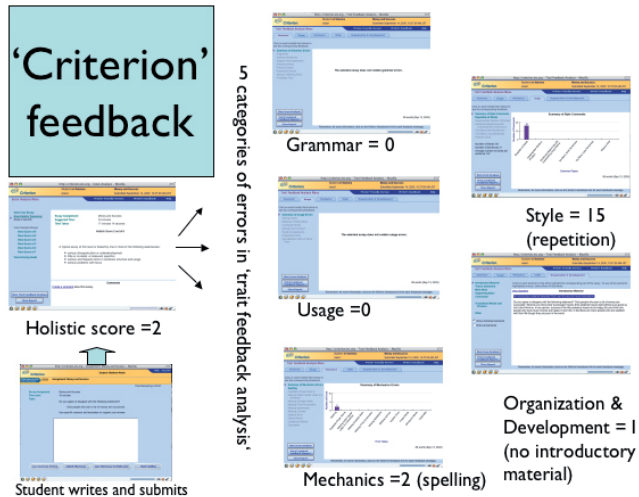
Along with the holistic score students receive a *trait feedback analysis* that points out surface errors in five different categories, but this is where some problems with the software became evident. Two examples are illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Trait feedback analysis can provide a certain amount of useful advice and provides a justification of the holistic score. However, as can be seen above, many surface errors are missed. Also, the details of the feedback (which appears when the mouse is rolled over an error) can often be vague, and/or unintelligible to the learner. We found the *style* section particularly troublesome, as it tended to simply point out that the same word had been used more than once in an essay. This included words such as pronouns and determiners, which would be very hard not to use more than once. In general so-called errors of this type were much more numerous than other sections of the feedback analysis leading the students to believe that in order to improve their essays, these were the main problems to be dealt with, a conclusion the instructors did not agree with.

To remedy this, the style section of the feedback analysis was disabled (see Fig. 4)

Other troublesome areas included the software's inability, in spite of it having a *usage* panel, to detect inappropriate lexical items on either a level of collocation or semantic restriction, or its *organization & development* panel missing elements of an essay (such as introduction or thesis). It was thought that software of this type would have shortcomings in terms of detecting errors because the text, when examined by the software, would lack data about parts of speech, parsing, and intended message. In order to prevent students from getting too caught up in attempting to interpret such feedback from the trait feedback analysis panes, they were instructed not to overly examine, depend on, or trust it, but to use its advice if readily understandable.

The essay evaluated below received a holistic score of two. Fifteen out of eighteen errors were 'repetition of words'.



This short and unfinished text got a holistic score of one. The essay question asked the writer to predict what changes will occur in the 21st century:

The 21st is a new year. We are living in the piece age. Almost all of us was born after the World War†U, and this are is developing and inventeing and destroyinf centry. Our technology has been developed. It is not dream to invite the robot of Atom.

The feedback analysis panes pointed out these select errors: a total of seven:

No introductory material detected – ('Organization & Development' -)

The 21st is a new year. We are living in the piece age. Almost all of us was born after the World War†U, and this are is (grammar) developing ('style'-repetition) and inventeing and destroyinf centry. (previous 3: 'mechanics'- spelling) Our technology has been developed ('style'-repetition). It is not dream to invite the robot of Atom.

Figure 3. The trait feedback analysis panes of Criterion and the feedback it offers

Figure 4. The administrator's window, allowing adjustment of feedback

Regardless of this advice, the students did express desire to have more time to analyze the feedback as is shown by survey results below (Fig. 5).

Students' desire to more fully understand trait feedback analysis corresponds with research proposing learners prefer to receive feedback on grammar (Leki 1991). The instructor placing a high value on feedback on form would also be disappointed by Criterion in this respect. However, its unreliability may have been a blessing in disguise when one considers, in contrast to learner preference, the ineffectiveness of too much focus on surface errors in initial feedback and research into the nature of effective feedback as reviewed below.

Q. We need more time to understand the 'feedback analysis' part of Criterion. I can't understand what my mistakes were.

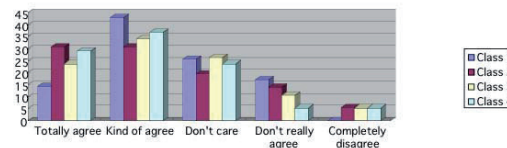


Figure 5. Desire to fully understand the 'trait feedback analysis' pane

Criterion's weakness a strength: the nature of effective feedback

Even if Criterion's trait feedback analysis was accurate, solely focusing on form as a basis for a rewrite is dangerous. The writer would assume the message they wanted to convey was clear barring such superficial problems or worse yet, never know if it was or not. What is needed, and what Criterion lacks is contact between writer and reader and the writers need comments on substance and content.

Research supports the effectiveness of feedback on content over form. Kepner (1991) shows written error correction and rule reminders are ineffective while meaningful commentary is more useful to learners. A similar study by Fathman and Whally (1990) on feedback on content verses form shows that of three groups, one receiving grammar and error correction only, one receiving feedback on content only, and one receiving both, the group receiving feedback on content alone generated better end products in terms of grammar and content than the group that received only grammar correction. This is perhaps evidence that when

focus is more firmly placed on meaning, choices in language to be deployed become more evident. In this way, feedback on content can serve as a sort of automatic error detector. In order to provide this type of feedback, a framework for peer-response was set up within a set of process writing procedures, as described below.

It is useful to stress that when using Criterion there is a danger of letting it dictate the priorities of the syllabus. The motivational rewards of the 'holistic score' are an ally, but the superficial nature of 'trait feedback analysis' could lead learners and instructors down a path of focusing on form only to be disappointed by the shortcomings of the software. More importantly, texts need to be developed in terms of content. Thus we shifted focus away from Criterion feedback and toward process writing.

Process writing

Process writing is a set of compositional strategies that comes from research on how skilled writers actually write. It was used as a teaching tool in high schools and universities in the U.S. in the 1960s and has been adapted to EFL/ESL writing courses more recently (Walsh, 2004). It aims to help learners create a more communicative text by clarifying the message they wish to convey. *Process writing* consists of three stages, which can be used recursively (See Fig. 6 below).

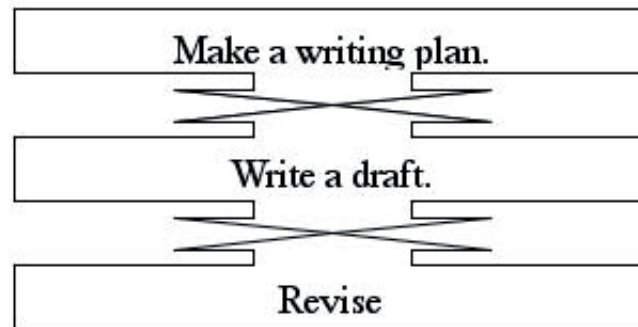


Figure 6. Process writing

The third stage, revision is said to be the most important because of the advantages gained through feedback on content. Ideally, the text goes through major revision as the writer creates a new, clearer text in reaction to the feedback. For this reason, each Criterion topic was written twice, once as a draft after a planning activity, and once as a revision after receiving feedback.

However, the issue arose of whether or not having learners write each Criterion assignment twice was an efficient use of time since developing fluency was a main goal. We experimented by having students answer a topic question only once, but immediately felt this was dangerous to motivation because there was no chance to improve holistic scores. The students also perceived a need for revision as expressed in the survey results below (Fig. 7).

Q. We can make a lot of progress when we have time to rewrite our essay. I think rewriting is necessary.

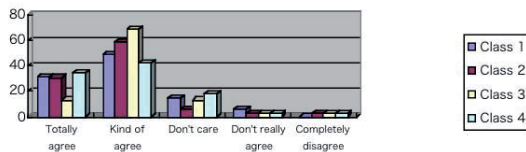


Figure 7. Perceived necessity of a rewrite

Learners also reported often being able to improve their holistic score through revision, again reinforcing our postulation regarding motivation (See Fig. 8 below).

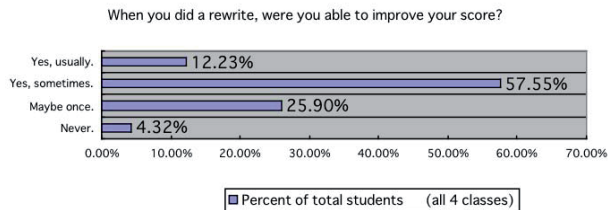


Figure 8. Improvement through revision

Peer response

As a basis for a rewrite, a framework for peer response was set up to provide writers with feedback on content, which was lacking in Criterion. Students were asked to give advice to the person sitting next to them about their essay. A pull-

down tab that allows the viewing of any other student's completed essays facilitated this process (Fig. 9 below).

Assignment	Submitted
Changes in the 21st Century	Nov 06, 2005 06:34:07
Experience of Books	Jul 22, 2005 07:21:06 P
Natto, Friend or enemy?	Apr 20, 2005 12:34:11 P
Natto, Friend or enemy?	Apr 20, 2005 10:33:23 P

Comment to Student	Holistic Score
1	4/6
2	N/A
3	N/A
4	N/A

Figure 9. Peer work can be viewed

A sheet to fill out about their partner's essay was then given to the students to provide a framework for feedback (see appendix 1). The students filled out the sheets and proceeded to rewrite their essays but some difficulties were observed.

Difficulties with peer response

There were two main problems with using peer response. One was that it took quite a long time for the students to produce the feedback. Another problem was that the students were nervous. A survey discovered a contradiction of sorts. While the students perceived value in reading their partner's essay, they did not like having their essay read by their classmate. (see Fig.10 and 11 below)

Q: *It is important for us to read our classmates' essays. It gives us a chance to read something very close to what we have written.*

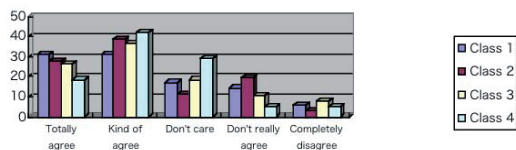


Figure 10. Perceived importance of reading peer work

Q: *I want one of my classmates to read my essay. I need a reader to tell me what they think.*

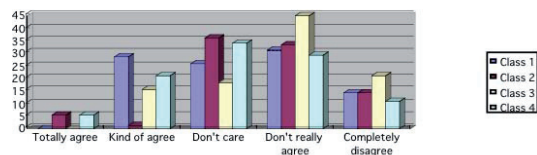


Figure 11. Resistance to having one's work read

Another problem was the occasional unwillingness or inability of learners to provide substantial criticism to their peers. Armstrong (2004) finds similar difficulties and lists possible causes as social dynamics, informal verbal feedback pre-empting the written feedback, or beliefs that only the teacher can act in such a critical role. It could also be possible that learners were simply at a loss to find fault in the substance of their partner's essay since the views expressed were a matter of opinion.

Regardless of the difficulties, we had learners give peer

responses whenever time allowed. The benefits, such as a heightened critical awareness and exposure to writing of the same genre and on the same topic, outweighed the problems. This type of input is vital and we engineered other activities with this in mind as explained in the following sections.

Pre-writing activities: focus on genre, grammar beyond the sentence level, and vocabulary through input.

At odds with our goal of adding free production to the writing syllabus is the fact that attention needs to be pulled to genre conventions inherent in the type of text Criterion asks for if learners are to produce those types of essays. Also, learners in high school typically lack formal instruction in grammar beyond the sentence level. But above of all, learners said they felt unprepared with relevant vocabulary. In order to minimize teacher-dominated presentations or requirements imposed on learner essays, we created pre-writing activities that allowed learners to see discursive features in use, and the textual content of the exercise concerned the topic they would write about, thus activating relevant vocabulary. Learners were not obliged to use the exercise language in their essays, but were encouraged to apply it if they thought it would aid their essay.

Using the online software program *Quiz Lab*, the instructor created online quizzes embedded with relevant content. Following a short presentation, learners read a brief explanation on the instructor's website that illustrated a point relevant to the structure of these essays. From there, learners entered the quiz program and upon completion wrote essays using Criterion. Some areas focused on in these enhanced-input embedded exercises follow.

Knowledge of essay structure in English

Criterion and the genre inherent in most standardized writing tests ask for an introduction, a thesis, body, and conclusion. Japanese learners typically have difficulty with a thesis statement as this can contradict L1 conventions. The technique of *Loop Writing* (White, & Ardnt, 1991) was introduced where free writing on a topic is followed by a one-sentence summary of the writing, which can then be used as a topic sentence or thesis statement. On Quiz Lab learners were asked to choose an appropriate thesis statement for a block of text.

Grammar beyond the sentence level

Cohesive linking between sentences was also a topic of focus. One such type of cohesion was the use of pronouns, substitute words, general terms, or specific examples to refer across sentence boundaries. An example follows in Figure 12.


Being a leader has many advantages. One of them is learning how to make decisions for yourself.



Figure 12. Example of cohesive linking

Another type of cohesive linking covered concerned the movement of constituents within a sentence, or the “given-new principle” (Rutherford, 1987). Previously introduced rhemes become the theme of following sentences to allow the information to flow forward. An example of this type of linking follows in Figure 13.

My father lives in an old house. There is a large garden in front of the house. (Somewhat awkward)



My father lives in an old house. In front of the house, there is a large garden. (Not awkward)




Figure 13. Example of constituents within a sentence conforming to given-new

Quizzes consisted of a list of sentences that form a paragraph when re-ordered in a certain way. Linking devices determined the proper order.

Another example of supra-sentential grammar focus was words of transition used to show the relationship of ideas between sentences such as *furthermore*, *however*, or *firstly*. Also, other common connectives signifying clausal relations were a focus. Quizzes asked learners to choose appropriate connectives to be placed within a text. As explained before, the content of all the sentences used in the quizzes outlined above was related to the topic to be written that day.

Final survey results and Criterion score analysis

Through an end of course survey students indicated that Criterion was their favorite part of class. They also expressed a desire to be given more chances for free production rather than grammar instruction and felt their ability to write had improved which concurred with Criterion score changes during the year (Fig. 14 below).

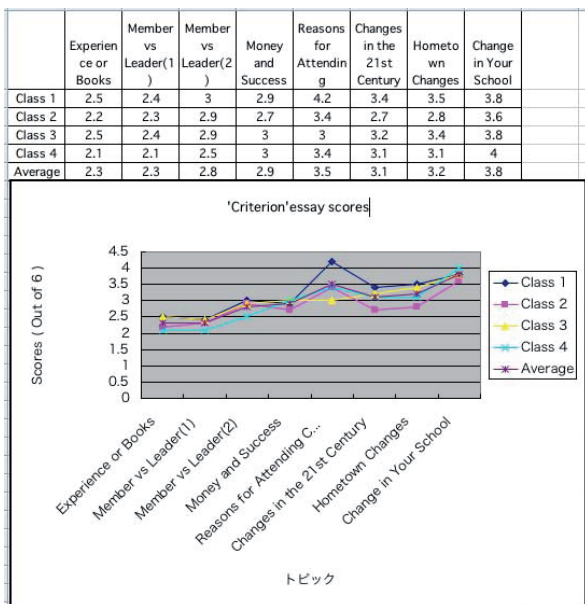


Figure 14. Progress on the holistic score throughout the year

The table and graph reflect only the highest score attained on a given essay topic. All of the essays with the exception of *Changes in the 21st Century* and *Hometown Changes* were written twice. This explains the apparent dip in progress in the 2 topics that were written only once.

Conclusion

This paper detailed the addition of chances for free production to the standard syllabus for *writing*. Such practice will by nature occur at learner's individual level of interlanguage development, stretch it, and improve fluency. These activities are necessary for and preferred by the learners. The activities centered on Criterion, but its feedback had shortcomings. Focus needs to be placed on content as well as aspects of writing in general. The software's main advantage was that it provided a goal to work towards (the holistic score), which provided motivation throughout the year. Introducing the tenants of process writing was also beneficial. Additionally, crafting consciousness-raising activities that contained input of the same genre and on the same topic as the essays allowed useful items and discursive features to be highlighted with a minimum of explicit presentation. Considerable progress was achieved and it would be reasonable to assume more chances for free production would lead learners on a further process of self discovery, transforming their language into a more durable, readily deployable, and communicative tool.

Matthew Walsh has been in Japan since 1985 and teaches at 2 highschools in Osaka. His interests include task-based learning, ESL/EFL writing pedagogy, and the use of computers for language teaching/learning

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Appendix 1

Format for peer-response (adapted from White & Arndt, 1991)

Please read your partner's first draft and give them some advice.

After you receive the advice from your partner, use it to re-write your essay.

Change your essay as much as possible

If you have any questions for your partner, please ask them

1) What is the main point of your partner's essay?
Please find the following things:
(A) Something that you liked
(B) Something you disliked or found unnecessary.
(C) Something you found unclear.
(D) Something you would like to know more about.
Do you have any general advice for your partner?