

The effect of music on false beginners' writing

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This paper discusses an effective teaching methodology of using music in a writing class for false beginners. The false beginners in this study are a group of Japanese EFL university-level learners whose language skills are low proficiency. It is the hypothesis of this paper that the students have not acquired production skills such as speaking and writing because of their anxiety about making mistakes caused by accuracy-oriented instruction at high schools for six years. In order to help them free themselves from inhibition, the researcher suggested an activity in an English writing class in which she used heart-healing music, *Tempo116*, before giving students a timed writing task. In order to justify the use of *Tempo 116*, a survey on students' feelings about music was conducted in advance. This was a nine-week experiment done in English writing classes that were held once a week.

外国語として英語を学ぶ日本人学習者の内、英語熟達度下位者を対象にしたライティングの授業実践について論じる。彼らはとりわけ表出技能を要するスピーキングとライティングが苦手だ。中学校と高等学校の、正確さを中心にした英作文教授法で、間違いをすることを恐れて自分の考えを表現することが出来ない傾向にある。彼らの心の抑制状態を緩和するためにタイムド・ライティングの前に音楽を聞かせ、その効果を見た。実験に使用した音楽「テンポ116」の妥当性を検証するために事前に大学1年生を対象にして音楽に関する調査をした。週1回のイングリッシュ・ライティングの授業で、9週間の成果を検証した。

This study suggests a class activity about how teachers can help lower-level students write essays by introducing heart-healing music before a writing activity. Common practice in high schools in Japan is the use of vocabulary first, then grammar or sentence structures, and finally practices in spoken or written discourse. However, the researcher conjectured whether false beginners might learn essay writing in a reverse order of tasks to compensate for their limited level of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. In the activities suggested in the study, students' spelling and grammatical mistakes were not evaluated. Instead, students were encouraged to write as much as they can.

In this research, lower-level students, called false beginners, are defined as a group of EFL learners aged 19 to 22, whose language proficiency remains limited despite six years of formal English courses. With the decrease of the 18-year-old population, universities have begun to accept more lower-level students than ever before. Language teachers have to respond to the challenges and problems that have resulted from this situation. One response is to seek more effective teaching methodologies for the lower level students.

The aims of this writing activity were to use a multi-sensory learning method (Nakamura, 2005), including music listening, for lower proficiency students, and to free learners from inhibition, and/or excessive tension, which hinder their productive skills of English. The tendency for nervousness or stress to impede learning was found in a survey of new first-year students' attitudes towards English learning. Before the experimental lessons with the added music time, a survey was conducted on the appropriateness of *Tempo 116*, heart-healing music on English writing class.

Preliminary Survey

Music Choice

Students listened to music for 5 minutes before writing. It is generally said that classical music composed by Mozart, or Vivaldi is effective for learning (Raucher et al., 1993). In the writing classes, the researcher has tried to use various kinds of classical music since the introduction of this teaching method that was suggested by Miller and Yamanaka (1997). Students, however, tended to get tired of this kind of music

when they listened to it in class. For this reason, it was felt that young adults might prefer more modern music to classical music. *Tempo 116*, which was chosen as a candidate for this purpose, is a more modern type of music composed by Shinsuke Kataoka. Research by Kataoka (2002) with people with handicaps, has suggested that music such as *Tempo 116* activates the right side of the brain, which produces alpha waves, helping the listener to gain powers of concentration under relaxed conditions.

In order to confirm the Kataoka's (2002) claims, a questionnaire was given to 131 first year university students (71 males and 60 females) prior to using this music in class. The questionnaire was based on Terasaki et al., 1992 (See Appendix 1). The participants answered questions about how they felt before and after listening to the music. One section consists of 30 questions concerning the students' physical condition before and after class. The students were asked to respond to each question, and to tell how much their physical condition had improved on a four-point scale, from "4-improved" to "1-not improved." The other section consisted of 40 questions concerning their feeling after listening to the music on a four-point scale, from "4-very impressed" to "1-not impressed."

Results of the Survey

It turned out that students had various complaints concerning their physical fatigue before listening to the music; i.e., even before the class had started, the students already felt exhausted, would yawn, feel sleepy or feel like lying down.

After listening to the music, the majority of students said that they were in a good mood, they felt relaxed, had a peaceful feeling and reported thinking pleasant thoughts (See Appendix 2). The results concerning their physical and mental conditions before and after the music showed the improvement of their physical and mental fatigue. It was assumed that listening to *Tempo 116* might have activated unconscious functions of the participants; i.e., removing their tensions. The condition seemed to help effective language learning. As Stevick (1980) found that learning involves the unconscious functions of the learner, as well as the conscious functions, and requires psychic relaxation.

This music was used as the pre-activity for false beginners' timed writing introduced in a 90 minute writing class given once a week. In addition, it was assumed that it would not be a waste of time for underachievers to listen to music for five minutes at the beginning of a lesson if they could recover from exhaustion and sleepiness and gain a readiness to learn.

Experimental Lessons in False Beginners' Writing Class

About the Timed Writing

Timed writing was adapted from Miller and Yamanaka (1997). The aims of this method are to help students feel free from their anxieties while writing essays in English, and encourage them to produce as many English sentences as possible within a certain period of time. Before the timed writing, the teacher explains the purpose of the activity: to practice thinking in English and putting those thoughts immediately on paper without worrying about all the other

aspects of writing (Miller and Yamanaka, 1997, p.81). Also, the teacher explains the following rules: When doing timed writing, they have to write as fast as they can, write as much as they can, can change the topic as often as they like, and are encouraged to write whatever comes into their head. They should not, however, stop to think about what to write, stop to erase, use a dictionary, talk to someone, or worry about proper grammar or correct spelling since their writing is not being evaluated.

Participants

Only the data of those who attended every writing class for nine weeks was used (15 males, and 13 females). All participants in this study share Japanese as a mother tongue. Their knowledge of English has been mainly acquired through compulsory, formal instruction at school since they started taking English courses at the age of twelve or thirteen. False beginners are still taking general English courses at university after having taken approximately 800-900 hours of formal English classes since starting at junior high school.

Class Procedures of the Timed Writing with Music Time

The timed writing was introduced in the following order:

1. The teacher gave the students the topic of timed writing.
2. Students listened to *Tempo 116* for five minutes.
3. Students participated in the timed writing for ten minutes.

4. Students counted the number of words they used in ten minutes, and wrote that data on a progress graph.

Topics for the Timed Writing

The teacher gave the students the topic of timed writing before the music time. While listening to music, students could think of what they should write about. As mentioned above, students did not have to write about the topic exclusively, but could write anything that came up in their mind when they were writing. In order to compare the improvement of the students' production, the same topic was given on the 1st and the 9th weeks.

Table 1. Topics for the Timed Writing

Weeks	Topics
1 st week	Let me tell you about myself (1)
2 nd	My five day holiday
3 rd	What I like to do in my free time
4 th	My family
5 th	My best friend
6 th	What I don't like about this university
7 th	My favorite store
8 th	The best day in my life
9 th	Let me tell you about myself (2)

Results

The numbers of words produced by English writing class on the 1st and the 9th weeks were compared. This is shown in Fig.1 below.

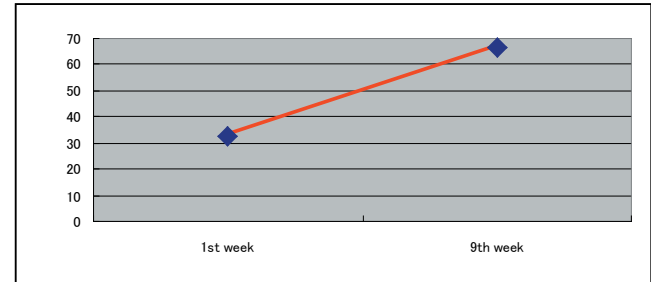


Figure 1. Average number of words for 1st and 9th week English timed writing sessions

The data of the number of words the students used in timed writing sessions were analyzed using one factor (pre and post-writing results) analysis of variance. The difference of the average numbers of words students used in pre- and post-writing was significant, $F(1, 27)=75.139, p<.0000^{****}$.

The average number of words used in the 1st writing session was then compared with the average number of words used for nine weekly lessons for this writing course. The data was analyzed in one factor (pre writing and average number of words) analysis of variance. There was a significant difference between the two figures, *i.e.* average number of words used in the 1st writing and that used for nine week lessons, $F(1, 27)=196.992, p<.0000^{****}$.

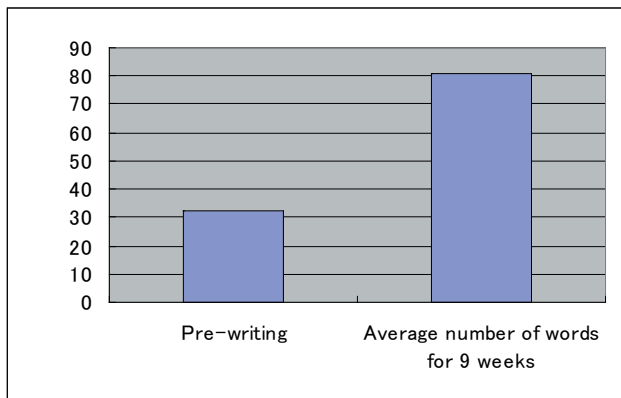


Figure 2. Average number of words for pre-writing session and average for nine weekly sessions.

Conclusion

The results of our experiment clearly show that the teaching methodology of using timed writing following heart-healing music with a false beginner level class helped increase the volume of students' writing. It was found that the students significantly increased their production of English words in timed writing during the nine weeks of study: on average, over two and a half times the amount of words written in a pre-writing session held upon students' entrance to university.

Factors such as increased motivation or increased confidence may be responsible for this increase in the volume of students' writing. Another likely factor is the interaction between listening to the music and the non-evaluative nature of this task, which led to a "relaxed

working" condition (Stevick, 1980, p.230), freeing the students from the inhibition of feeling they had to write error-free sentences.

The impressive data obtained through this study are a product of the two conditions of listening to relaxing music prior to writing and the evaluation-free nature of the writing task. This study demonstrates that the combination of these two factors led to substantial increases in the volume of students' writing. It is true that the study does not give any indication of which factor was most influential, or whether either factor might be less effective without the other. What the study has shown us, however, is that there are practical and effective means of helping the "hopeless" gain new-found interest and ability in the study of the language.

Limitations and Foreseeable Extensions of this Research

This paper focuses on how English teachers can help unsuccessful Japanese EFL learners reduce their anxieties in order to increase the production of words in essay writing. The experimental lessons proved the effectiveness of this methodology; however, certain limitations to this experiment are apparent.

Firstly, the results do not provide an explanation of which activity was the main factor accounting for the learner group's improvement, the music time or the timed writing method. In addition, the results of the experimental lessons need to be compared with those of other lessons based on other teaching methodologies, including accuracy-oriented instruction. Another experiment should be conducted for

three comparable learner groups with different learning conditions: a group who do the timed writing together with the added music time, a group who do the timed writing without the music time, and a group who only take accuracy-oriented writing lessons.

Secondly, although the preliminary survey concerning music choice confirmed the suitability of *Tempo 116*, and the experiment results suggested that this choice was justified, other pieces or types of music may also be effectively used for the music time. Further, we should not assume that one music type may be best suited to each person, regardless of their state of mind or physical condition. Therefore, the appropriateness of using the same music in every class every week should be further explored.

Finally, the comparison is done only from a fluency-oriented aspect: looking at volume of production of written English but with no concern for accuracy. This data should serve as a starting point to seeking more effective teaching methodologies for false beginners' writing classes than sticking to the traditional ways of teaching writing. Using a traditional method, teachers' main roles are correcting grammatical and mechanical mistakes. The future direction of this study will be one that encompasses both fluency- and accuracy-oriented aspects; i.e., we need to investigate how a non-evaluative style of timed writing may be interconnected to increased achievement in terms of accuracy.

Tomoko Nakamura has been with Hiroshima International University since 2002. She lives in Hiroshima, and is currently creating English textbooks and e-learning programs for false beginners. <tnakam@he.hirokoku-u.ac.jp>

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Appendix 1: A Survey about the Music used in the study

Before and After Listening to Music

Before listening to the music, how do you feel now?

1. I have too much on my mind.
2. I feel tired.
3. My feet are tired.
4. I tend to yawn.
5. I feel sodden.

6. I am sleepy.
7. My eyes are tired.
8. My body movements are uneasy.
9. I feel unsteady on my feet.
10. I feel like lying down.
11. I cannot think clearly.
12. I would rather not talk.
13. I feel irritated.
14. My attention is distracted.
15. I have no enthusiasm.
16. I cannot remember simple things.
17. I have no confidence in what I do.
18. I have something on my mind.
19. I feel out of control.
20. I am impatient.
21. I have a headache.
22. I have a stiff shoulder.
23. I have a backache.
24. I feel like I am choking.
25. My mouth feels dry.
26. My voice cracks.
27. I feel dizzy.
28. My eyes and muscles twitch.
29. My hands and legs tremble.
30. I feel bad.

After listening to the music, how do you feel now?

1. I feel anxious.
2. I feel uninterested.
3. I am in a good mood.
4. I am deep in thought.
5. I feel hostile.
6. I am lovely.
7. I have a soft and relaxed feeling.
8. I am surprised.
9. I feel inferior to others.
10. I feel ill-tempered.
11. I feel relaxed.
12. I feel well mannered.
13. I feel aggressive.
14. I feel energetic.
15. I feel romantic.
16. I am surprised.
17. I feel uneasy.
18. I think it is ridiculous.
19. I have a peaceful feeling.
20. I have a respectful feeling.
21. I feel like I am getting meaner.
22. I am enthusiastic.
23. I feel lonely.
24. I am surprised.
25. I am worried.

(Adapted from Japan Society for Occupational Health, 1970)

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|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 26. I am tired. | 33. I have no confidence in myself. |
| 27. I am feeling gentle. | 34. I feel bored. |
| 28. I am thoughtful. | 35. I feel easygoing. |
| 29. I have a defiant attitude. | 36. I am cautious. |
| 30. I am lively. | 37. I have a grudge. |
| 31. I am cool. | 38. I am in good condition. |
| 32. I am disturbed. | 39. I feel pleased. |
| | 40. I am inspired. |

Appendix 2: Summary of the Survey, shown in Graphs

Before and After Listening to Music

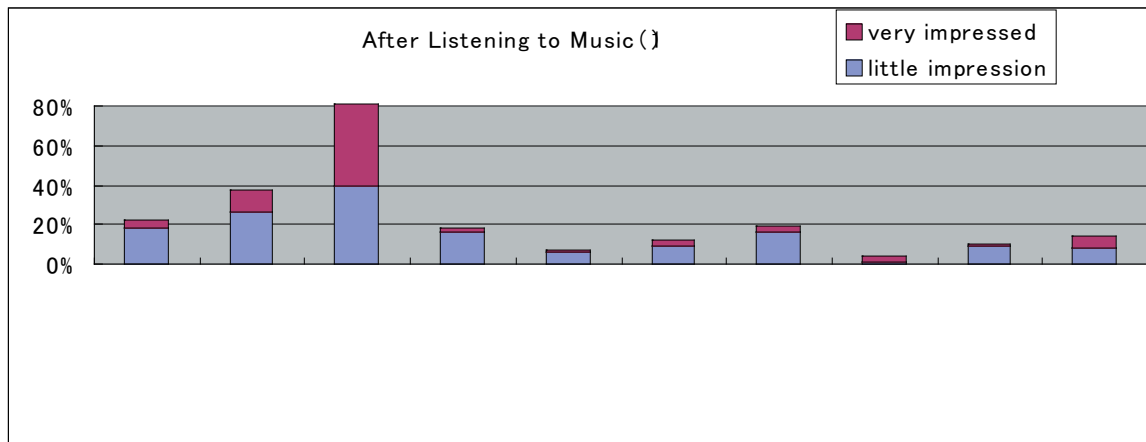


Figure 1. Students' feelings after listening to music (1)

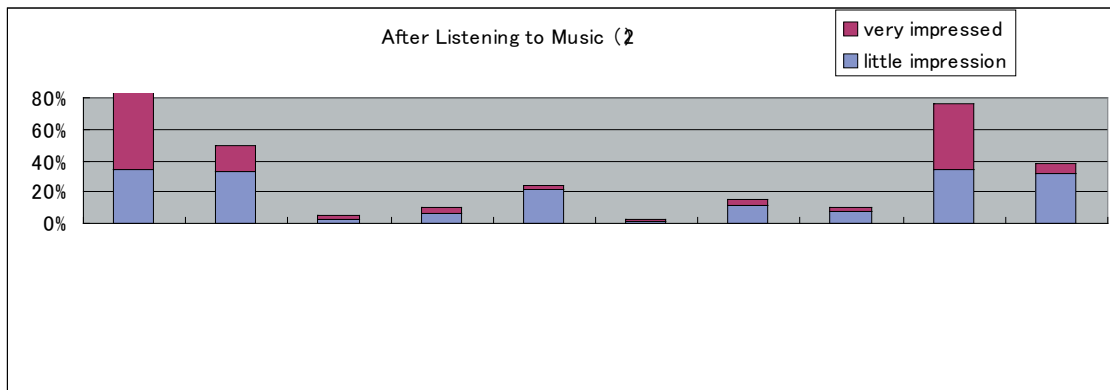


Figure 2. Students' feelings after listening to music (2)

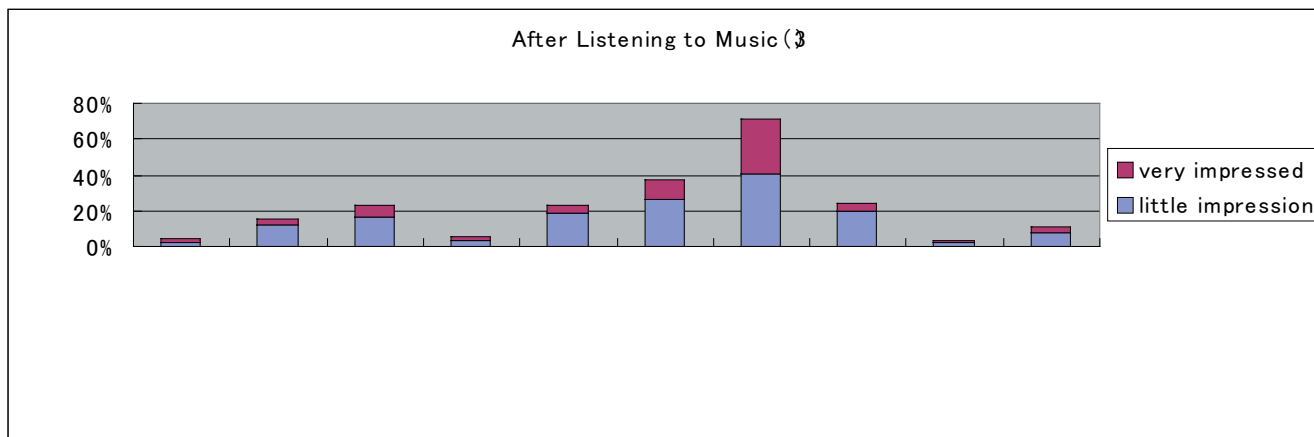


Figure 3. Students' feelings after listening to music (3)