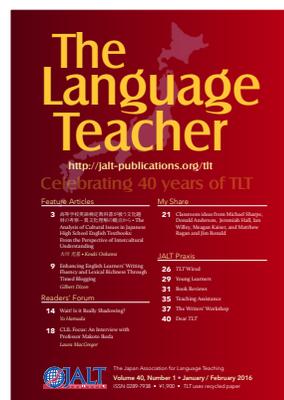


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Enhancing English Learners' Writing Fluency and Lexical Richness Through Timed Blogging

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This study looked into the effects of timed blogging on L2 writing fluency and lexical richness, i.e., the degree in which a student is able to use a varied and large vocabulary (Laufer & Nation, 1995). The participants consisted of nineteen low-level and intermediate EFL learners at a university in Japan. The students wrote timed blog entries twice a week on a wide-range of topics over the course of 12 weeks. Pre- and post-tests were administered to determine the impact the blogs had on the students' writing development. Results of the analysis revealed that the blogs had a positive effect on both writing fluency and vocabulary use. Not only do these findings confirm the results found in previous studies concerning blogs and vocabulary enhancement (Fellner & Apple, 2006; Nakatsukasa, 2009), but they also clarify conflicting research regarding the effect that blogs have on writing fluency (Fellner & Apple, 2006; Nakatsukasa, 2009).

本論は、第2言語のライティングの流暢さと語彙の豊かさ、すなわち多様で広範囲な語彙を用いることができる度合(Laufer & Nation, 1995)が、限られた時間内でのブログへの書き込み(timed blogging)に与える影響を調査した。被験者は英語を外国語として学ぶ初級から中級レベルの日本の大学生19名である。学習者は限られた時間内、ブログに週に2回書き込みを行った。書き込むトピックは多岐にわたり、コース期間中の12週間続けられた。ブログへの書き込みが学習者のライティング力向上に与えた影響を測定するため、事前試験と事後試験を実施した。分析の結果、ブログへの書き込みはライティングの流暢さと語彙使用の両方において、非常に良い影響を及ぼしたことが明らかとなった。これらは、ブログへの書き込みと語彙の増加に関する先行研究(Fellner & Apple, 2006; Nakatsukasa, 2009)の結果を立証するだけでなく、ブログへの書き込みがライティングの流暢さに与える効果に関しては、先行研究(Fellner & Apple, 2006; Nakatsukasa, 2009)の相反する研究結果をより明らかにした。つまり、本研究の結果がその効果を明らかにした。

Blogging has become one of the most popular ways to incorporate computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in the L2 classroom. According to a review by Wang and Vásquez (2012), blogs were found to be one of the most researched web 2.0 technologies. The relative simplicity of blogs allows students to write in the L2 without advanced computer proficiency, making them an effective tool for teachers and students alike because of their ease of use (Richardson, 2010). While blogs have been reported to improve L2 students' vocabulary use (Fellner & Apple, 2006; Nakatsukasa, 2009), there

seems to be contradicting results regarding their use to improve L2 writing fluency. As a result, this study aims to clarify this discrepancy in the research to determine the effect that blogs have on both writing fluency and lexical richness.

Research has shown that L2 learners have positive perceptions of blogging. Lee (2011) investigated the opinions of university Spanish language learners from the U.S. who blogged during a semester-long study abroad in Spain. The results of her study revealed that the majority of the participants found the task to be stimulating, further enhancing the autonomy of the students. Similarly, blogs helped increase the motivation of the Vietnamese language students in Ho's (2009) study. Moreover, many of the learners in Ho's research expressed that the blogs enhanced their reading skills, writing skills, vocabulary usage, and their knowledge of the target culture. Vurdien (2013) also looked at learners' opinions of L2 blogging in her study of advanced EFL students in Spain. The participants found the peer feedback gained through the blogs to be useful and motivating, which helped support their writing and collaborative skills. The tertiary ESL students in Nepomuceno's (2011) study stated numerous other benefits of blogging, such as the ability to gain new friends, writing in a low-stress environment, and increased confidence.

Not only do L2 students think positively of the use of blogs, but blogs can also have a significant impact on the writing development of learners. Armstrong and Retterer (2008) found that Spanish language students who blogged substantial amounts were able to improve their use of verb tense and aspect in the L2. In a study of graduate EFL students, Sun and Chang (2012) discovered that collaborative dialogues via blogs helped students develop their critical thinking skills and academic writing. Fellner and Apple (2006) utilized blogs in a seven-day study involving Japanese university EFL students with low levels of L2 proficiency and found that all of the learners improved their writing fluency as well as lexical complexity. However, while the students in the study were able to write a greater number of words at the 2000, academic (AWL), and

off-list (OL) word-levels, the actual percentages of these words at each vocabulary level were nearly identical. Moreover, the relative short length of the study makes it difficult to generalize their findings. In another study examining writing fluency and academic word use, Nakatsukasa (2009) implemented blogs in a low-intermediate ESL class at an American university. The results of her study reinforced the positive effect that blogs can have on vocabulary use, with all four groups in her study making academic vocabulary gains of between 1 and 4%. With that said, the majority of the students did not show steady increases in the length of their blogs. Furthermore, unlike Fellner and Apple's (2006) study, the learners in Nakatsukasa's (2009) research were allowed to choose how much time they spent blogging, and this could have affected her results.

Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, and Kim (1998) define writing fluency as "a measure of the sheer number of words or structural units a writer is able to include in their writing within a particular time" (p. 14). However, as Fellner and Apple (2006) point out, writing fluency alone is not a good indicator of true writing development as students could conceivably write the same simple sentence repeatedly while being timed in order to make artificial gains in fluency. Thus, by including lexical richness or the degree in which a student is able to use a varied and large vocabulary (Laufer & Nation, 1995) as one of the measures in this study, a better reflection of the effects of blogging on the learners' writing development is obtained. This paper aims to clarify the conflicting results between Fellner and Apple (2006) and Nakatsukasa's (2009) research concerning L2 blogging and writing fluency as well as provide support to the positive influence that blogs have on vocabulary enhancement.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to measure the impact that blogs had on the English learners' writing fluency and lexical richness. Given this, the following research questions were established:

- *RQ1: What effect did the blogs have on the students' writing fluency?*
- *RQ2: What effect did the blogs have on the students' lexical richness?*

Methodology

Participants

The participants consisted of 17 English learners who were taught by the researcher at a university in Japan. The students were enrolled in two classes according to their TOEIC scores. One group

consisted of eight 1st-year students with a low level of English proficiency while the other was made up of nine 2nd- and 3rd-year students with an intermediate level of English ability. Both groups met with the researcher three times a week in their respective classes.

Blog Rationale

The learners involved in the study were enrolled in two courses which focused on communicative skills. Therefore, the blogs served as a way to satisfy the writing component of the classes. According to Zhang (2009), blogs provide five distinct benefits for L2 English writers (pp. 68-69):

1. Facilitate the students' critical thinking skills
2. Provide examples for students to model and learn from
3. Affect the students' quality of writing
4. Facilitate meaningful learning for students
5. Give students a purpose for writing

By engaging the students in online discussions, the learners' critical thinking skills were enhanced because they had to evaluate their own writing and the writing of their peers. Therefore, they had to justify their opinions in order for their views to be understood and accepted. Also, the students' own writing served as models for other learners to follow, thereby enabling them to scaffold each other's writing. As aforementioned, blogs have been shown to improve students' writing skills. Furthermore as Zhang (2009) states, blogs can influence the quality of students' writing via the feedback they receive from others. Another benefit of the blogs was that they gave the students opportunities to communicate and learn from each other. A variety of topics were discussed, with each student contributing their own unique perspectives and experiences to the blogs. In other words, the blogs engendered meaningful learning by encouraging the learners to become active readers of each other's works. According to Pinkman (2005), blogs provide students with an authentic environment to learn outside of the classroom. Similarly, the blogs used in this study gave the learners a purpose for their writing with a community of other writers.

Blog Procedure

Over the course of 12 weeks during the spring semester of 2014, the students wrote twice a week via class blogs. Participation in the blogs was mandatory and served as a medium for the students' writing activities. Wikispaces.com was the designated blogging platform for the study (Figure 1). While the name of the site implies that it is used for wikis, students

can also post entries to the site and reply to others, much like a traditional blog. Each class page was set to private; thus, only blog members could access the site. Students were introduced to the blogs prior to data collection in order to familiarize them with the task. As Hubbard and Romeo (2012) note, learners must understand how to operate a computer tool or learning application and become comfortable with its use before becoming effective users. Following the initial training period, a timed pre-test was administered. Students were given 10 minutes to write about their upcoming plans for Golden Week, a series of holidays in the spring (April/May). Students were not allowed to use dictionaries, thereby providing an accurate picture of L2 use. The topic of the post-test, summer vacation plans, was thematically similar to the pre-test to allow for a direct comparison of the two assessments. The 12-week treatment and the post-test followed the same procedure. Writing topics varied during the treatment and were based on both teacher- and student-selected themes. In addition, after the completion of the timed blogging task, students were either given time in class to read and respond to others' entries or were assigned to do this as homework.

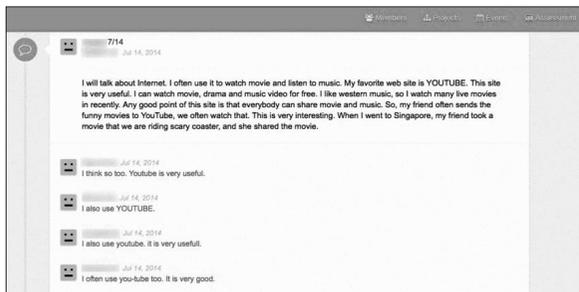


Figure 1. Wikispaces class blog.

It is also important to note that emphasis was placed on fluency rather than grammar or spelling. In fact, while feedback related to spelling errors was provided, grammar correction was not given for any of the writing done through the blogs. According to Truscott (1996), grammar correction is an ineffective way to develop students' writing skills. He asserts that it may actually be harmful to the development of L2 writing because it increases students' stress, promotes more simplistic writing, and takes time away from more productive learning activities. In a subsequent meta-analysis, Truscott (2007) reiterated his claim that grammar correction has a harmful effect on accuracy and argued with 95% confidence that it results in very small gains when beneficial. For these reasons and because explicit grammar instruction was provided in both classes, students were encour-

aged to focus on meaning to communicate with their teacher and peers rather than accuracy.

Data Analysis

A descriptive analysis of the students' blog writing was conducted to determine the effect that the treatment had on their writing development. The learners' pre- and post-tests were compared in relation to writing fluency and lexical richness. Moreover, the daily number of words written by the students was analyzed to identify if the students' writing fluency improved incrementally throughout the treatment. An online program called VocabProfile (<http://www.lexutor.ca/vp/>) was used to assess the students' lexical richness at four vocabulary frequency levels: 1-1000 most frequent words, 1001-2000 most frequent words, the Academic Word List (AWL), and Off List (OL). The measure used in VocabProfile, Lexical Frequency Profile (LFP), was developed and validated by Laufer and Nation (1995). Smith (2005) did a subsequent study of LFP to assess its validity and found it to be appropriate in four research designs, one of which is appropriate for this study, "focus on group differences rather than on individual differences unless the latter are large" (p. 448). All proper nouns were removed prior to LFP analysis as VocabProfile views them as OL vocabulary (i.e., their inclusion could result in skewed data).

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the results of the pre-and post-tests in terms of writing fluency. The low group was able to make a significant improvement, nearly doubling the number of words written in the allotted time from an average of 31.8 to 59.1. Similarly, the intermediate group also demonstrated a positive gain in terms of word count, increasing from a mean of 84.1 to 139.4. These findings clarify the differing results related to blogs and writing fluency in Fellner and Apple's (2006) and Nakatsukasa's (2009) research, thereby supporting the former's claim that blogs can have a positive effect on writing fluency.

Table 1. Pre- and Post-Test Word Count Results

Group	Pre-test <i>M</i>	Pre-test <i>SD</i>	Post-test <i>M</i>	Post-test <i>SD</i>
Low (<i>n</i> =8)	31.8	6.1	59.1	18.5
Intermediate (<i>n</i> =9)	84.1	26.7	139.4	25.8

Concerning the word counts per blog entry however, the learners in both groups did not make

steady improvements. Figure 2 reveals that the word counts varied depending on the type of entry. When students were given a familiar and fairly simple topic to write about, word counts were relatively high, for example, hometown (entry 2 of low group, 48.6) or part-time job (entry 7 of intermediate group, 105.4). Conversely, more complex topics such as the pros and cons of university life (entry 8 of low group, 29.9) and life challenges (entry 6 of intermediate group, 76.9) saw a decrease in word counts. These results coincide with research showing that topic unfamiliarity can have a negative impact on L2 output and fluency (Rahimpour & Hazar, 2007; Robinson, 2001)

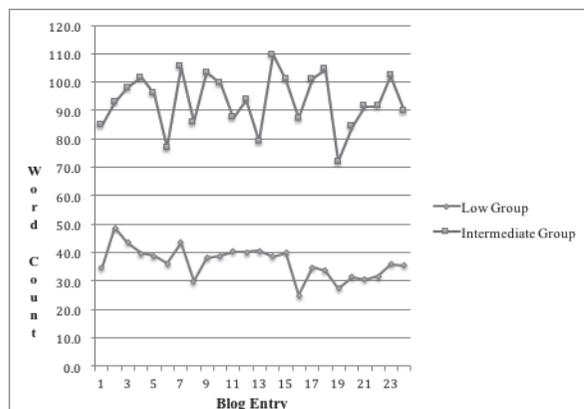


Figure 2. Blog-entry word counts during the 12-week study.

The percentage of words used at each vocabulary level is shown in tables 2 and 3. Students in the low group were able to use words at the 2000, AWL, and OL word-levels more frequently. While the intermediate learners’ use of lexical items in the AWL decreased slightly from 1.2% to 1.0%, this was offset by an increase in both 2000 and OL vocabulary usage. In addition, the students’ use of words at the 1000 vocabulary-level declined, thus illustrating their ability to use a more varied vocabulary.

Although the learners in the present study were able to use a more varied vocabulary compared with those in Fellner and Apple’s research (2006), the students in Nakatsukasa’s (2009) study developed their academic vocabulary to a greater degree. Nevertheless, the findings in this study underscore the positive influence that blogs can have on L2 students’ use of English vocabulary. Not only do blogs provide learners with an outlet to express themselves in the target language, but they also afford them additional opportunities to incorporate newly learned vocabulary in their writing.

Table 2. Results of LFP Analysis for Low Group

Word-level	1000	2000	AWL	OL
Pre-test	90%	4.2%	0.0%	5.8%
Post-test	87.9%	5.4%	0.7%	6.0%

Table 3. Results of LFP Analysis for Intermediate Group

Word-level	1000	2000	AWL	OL
Pre-test	92.5%	3.6%	1.2%	2.7%
Post-test	90.3%	5.2%	1.0%	3.5%

In summation, the results of this study showed that the English learners were able to develop their writing fluency and lexical richness through timed blogging, lending support to the claim that L2 blogs are an effective CALL activity. The average number of words the students wrote from pre- to post-test increased significantly. Moreover, the students were able to use a more varied vocabulary despite the increase in word counts. Given these improvements made by the learners, the use of blogs in L2 classes is strongly recommended. Timed blogging in particular seems to push learners to write more fluently while also affording them opportunities to incorporate recently learned vocabulary, thus highlighting the importance of output. As Swain (1995, 2000) stresses, output encourages learners to process language more deeply which results in the development of automaticity. In other words, if students are given ample opportunities to use the L2 in a meaningful context, for example, class blogs, they will be able to use the language more fluently.

Conclusion

Clearly, blogs can be used to help improve L2 writing, as recent studies including this one have shown. Therefore, teachers should make an effort to introduce blogging as an alternative way to improve learners’ writing skills. Some students, especially those with low motivation, may find the task to be more stimulating compared to paper-and-pencil writing and word processing. Moreover, the prevalence of students with smartphones and tablets also allows them to blog anytime and anywhere, thus extending learning outside of the small confines of the foreign language classroom.

Limitations of this study include its relatively small scale of 17 participants. Moreover, the researcher was

not able to control other factors outside of the class and blog which may have contributed to the students' vocabulary gains. It is also important to note that a control group was not incorporated; therefore, it is not clear if the improvements made by the learners were directly due to the blogs or if a more traditional writing activity would lead to similar results. Given this, it would be worthwhile to focus on this area to determine if the unique medium of blogs supports language learning or if it is the task itself, that is, timed writing, which promotes development. An additional avenue of research is to look more deeply into the effect that topic familiarity and complexity have on L2 writing fluency. These factors seem to have influenced the daily word count results and as a result, it would be interesting to discover what impact they would have in a longitudinal study.

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