

Introducing Freewriting to a Japanese High School English Class

Philip Head

University of Kochi

Reference Data:

Head, P. (2016). Introducing freewriting to a Japanese high school English class. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *Focus on the learner*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper details a yearlong study of timed freewriting in two 1st-year high school English classes. Although there have been numerous studies on the effect of topic selection on fluency during timed freewriting in Japan, few have looked at student attitudes towards freewriting. In addition, previous research has focused almost exclusively on university EFL classes and has only taken place over the course of a single semester. In this study, four student surveys were collected during the yearlong writing project. These indicated that students gained confidence in their writing ability (although this remained low) and increased their enjoyment of writing. Furthermore, it was found that teacher comments motivated students to write and that students generally desired spelling and grammar correction. Finally, more students preferred writing about teacher-assigned topics than student-selected topics, often due to difficulty deciding what topic they would write about.

本論は、4人の高校一年生を対象にしたフリー・ライティング授業の評価を詳述する。介入の期間は一年間であり、授業には時間の測定が含まれた。日本における時間測定を含むフリー・ライティングに関する研究は、トピック選択が流暢性 (fluency) に及ぼす影響を検討したものが大半である。また、先行研究は、その対象が大学のEFL授業で、一学期に渡って行われたものだけに限られている。本研究では一年間に渡って調査が行われた。その結果、ライティング能力の向上は見られなかった。しかし、ライティング能力に関する自信が向上し、生徒が書くことを楽しんでいくことが明らかとなった。さらに、教師のコメントが生徒にとって書くことの動機付けになり、生徒達もスペリングや文法の訂正を必要としていることが分かった。加えて、多くの生徒はライティングのトピックを自分達自身で考案することが困難なため、教師によるトピックの提示を求めていることも明らかとなった。

Writing is one of the four essential communication skills (along with reading, speaking, and listening). However, writing in EFL classes is often sentence-level writing focused on grammar, causing students to view writing as a test (with an emphasis on avoiding errors), rather than a means of communication (Homstad & Thorson, 2000). This focus on accuracy over communication can prevent students from taking (and learning from) risks when writing. In addition, Semke (1984) found that grammatical feedback did not increase student writing accuracy but that strictly content-based feedback had a positive effect on the number of words students wrote. Thus, the use of timed freewriting (without grammar correction) may offer a way for students to express themselves communicatively, rather than simply producing the minimum output required without making errors.

Several recent studies have focused on the effect of short, timed, freewriting on writing fluency in Japan (Dickinson, 2014; Ferreira, 2013; Leblanc & Fujieda, 2012; Rettig-Miki & Sholdt, 2014). These studies were replications of a study by Bonzo (2008) that looked at the effect of student-selected (SS) compared to teacher-assigned (TA) topic selection on writing fluency. However, these studies focused on university students and were limited to a single semester, restricting their ability to track changes in student attitudes and progress over time. Only Rettig-Miki and Sholdt (2014) explicitly asked students if they preferred SS or TA topics, although they did not check what percentage of students actually wrote on SS or TA topics when given the choice. Furthermore, Dickinson (2014) expressed concern that the short time period of these studies might hinder students from feeling a sense of progress in their writing. In addition, these studies did not examine the use of spelling and grammar correction with freewriting, a concern mentioned by both Dickinson (2014) and Ferreira (2013).

This paper contains a description of a yearlong timed freewriting project in two 1st-year Japanese high school classes. Students completed surveys to regularly provide feedback and the project was changed (such as by introducing grammar correction) based on this feedback. The results of the survey indicate that students do not often perform

Head: *Introducing Freewriting to a Japanese High School English Class*

English writing outside of school hours, that students' writing confidence increased following the introduction of freewriting, and that students enjoyed freewriting. Furthermore, the results indicate that content-related teacher feedback motivated students to write, that students desired correction, and that the majority of students preferred to write about teacher-selected topics. Based on these results, timed freewriting with teacher feedback and correction (but not grading) is recommended for high school English classes.

Research Questions

The research questions examined in this paper are as follows:

- RQ1. How much writing does a typical high school student do in comparison to reading, listening, and speaking?
- RQ2. How does student confidence in English writing ability and student enjoyment of freewriting change throughout the yearlong project?
- RQ3. What effect do teacher comments have on student motivation to write?
- RQ4. Do students desire grammar and spelling correction and does this change after correction is introduced?
- RQ5. What are student preferences for topic selection (TA vs. SS), and how do stated preferences reflect actual selections?

Method

Participants and Context

The participants were from two grade 10 classes, each of 35 students, in the Social Management Course of a commercial high school. This curriculum targeted students interested in careers working overseas or using English. Although the students had had many opportunities for writing and making presentations in Japanese, they had not done freewriting in English. Of the 70 students, 14 had passed the EIKEN (Test in Practical English Proficiency, <http://www.eiken.or.jp/eiken/en/>) Grade Pre-2 test, and the others had passed the EIKEN Grade 3 test. Students were asked for written permission to anonymously use their responses in a report on the study and permission for conducting this study was obtained from the school administration. Data from four of the 70 students were not included in the study due to a lack of student permission or because of missing data.

Class Procedure

The project had three phases, one per semester. In the first semester (S1), students began weekly 10-minute freewriting assignments wherein they alternated between writing about TA or SS topics (see Appendix). Students were encouraged to write as much as possible during the 10-minute period and told that writing assignments would not be graded. Students could use dictionaries and ask teachers about spelling, but no other teacher help was given beyond simple encouragement. Surveys were administered before the project began and after the sixth assignment was collected.

The second semester (S2) continued as before, but comments (typically two sentences) relating to the written content were added by the teacher before the assignments were handed back to the students. Furthermore, in S2 students had the option of either using the provided TA topic or an SS topic. Nine writing assignments were collected (see Appendix) and a survey was administered at the end of the semester.

The third semester (S3), like the first semester, had alternating TA and SS topics (see Appendix), but with teacher comments added. Also, both classes were subdivided into two groups, with half the students in each class receiving spelling and grammar correction in addition to comments. This was done because some students had requested correction in their S1-post survey feedback comments. The researcher corrected the assignments of only half the students so students could compare their experiences of correction to noncorrection, as well as to save teacher time. After two assignments the students receiving correction were switched. There were four assignments in this fashion, plus a final assignment wherein students had a choice of TA or SS topics (as in the second semester), and all students had their writing corrected. Table 1 details the project timeline.

Head: *Introducing Freewriting to a Japanese High School English Class*

Table 1. Summary of the Project Timeline

Date (semester)	Data collected	Student writing activities	Teacher feedback
May 2014 (1)	Survey S1-pre	Timed freewriting introduced Alternating TA and SA topics	None
July 2014 (1)	Survey S1-post	N/A	N/A
September 2014 (2)	None	Timed freewriting with choice of TA or SS topics introduced	Short comments
December 2014 (2)	Survey S2	N/A	N/A
January 2014 (3)	None	Timed freewriting with alternating TA or SS topics introduced	Short comments; two of four student assignments given explicit correction
March 2014 (3)	Survey S3	Final timed freewriting assignment with choice of TA or SS topics	Short comments and explicit correction for all students

Note. S1, S2, and S3 are semesters 1, 2, and 3; SS topics are student selected; TA topics are teacher assigned.

Data Sources and Analysis

Students completed four surveys (see timeline in Table 1) containing bilingual 4-point Likert-scale questions plus one section for general comments. Students were encouraged to write comments in English, but Japanese comments were also permitted (and later translated into English). An even-numbered scale was chosen so students would have to take a position. To check if differences in quantitative results between samples were statistically significant, a *t* test was used when comparing two sample means, and an ANOVA test was used when comparing more than two samples.

Results

Profile of Student English Use

Figure 1 shows that the great majority of students wrote and read in Japanese (with reading more common than writing). However, in terms of English use, reading and writing were both very uncommon for the students, although they were more likely to report speaking and listening to English.

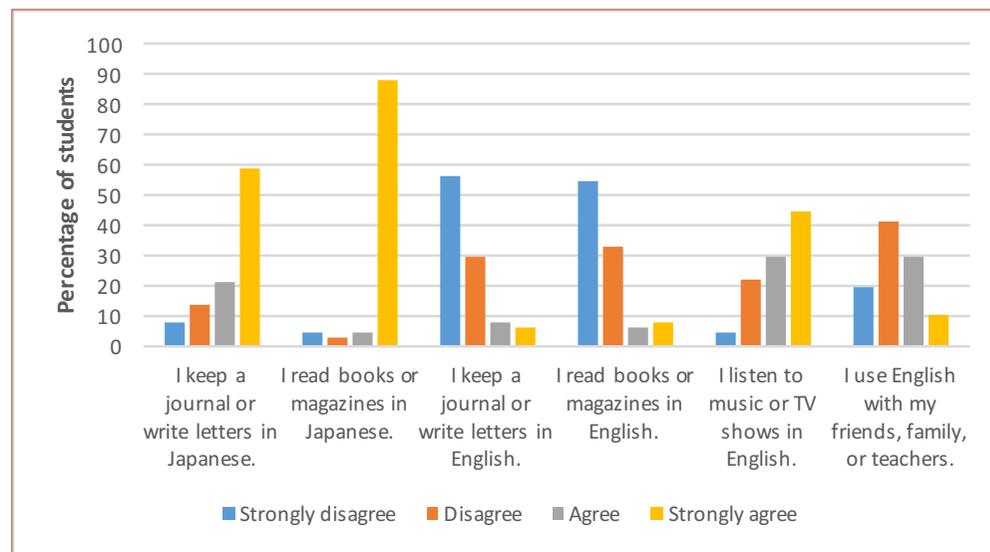


Figure 1. Student responses about L1 and English use before the study (N = 66).

English Writing Confidence

In terms of student English writing confidence, the survey results show a substantial decrease in the percentage of students who strongly disagreed with the statement “I feel confident writing in English” between the period before the introduction of freewriting and the end of the first semester (Figure 2). However, throughout the year, fewer than half of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident writing in English. The results of a one-way ANOVA test [$F(3) = 7.5, p < .001$] showed a significant difference between the S1-pre results ($M = 1.92, SD = 0.79$) when compared to the S1-post results ($M = 2.21, SD = 0.75$), S2 results ($M = 2.32, SD = 0.77$), and S3 results ($M = 2.30, SD = 0.76$),

Head: *Introducing Freewriting to a Japanese High School English Class*

with a significance of $p < .05$, $p < .01$, and $p < .01$ respectively indicated by the Tukey HSD test. There were no significant differences found between the S1-post, S2, and S3 results.

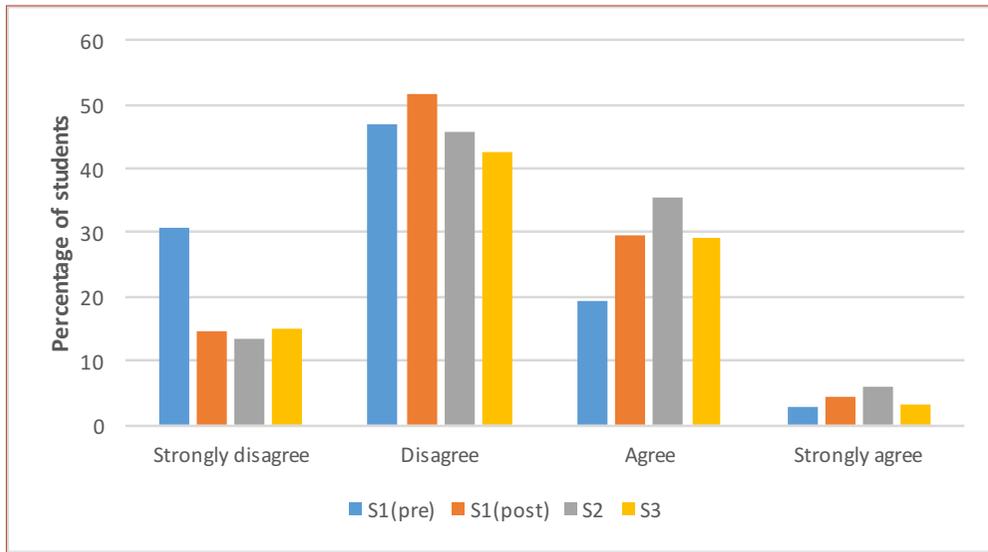


Figure 2. Student responses to the statement “I feel confident writing in English” ($N = 66$). S1, S2, and S3 are semesters 1, 2, and 3.

As regards the student survey comments, 30 responses were generally positive in terms of writing confidence. An example comment is

At first I could not write English so much, but now I'm happy to be able to write more. (S3)

The number of comments containing the words *difficult* or *hard* also decreased over the course of the year (S1-post survey had 18 occurrences, S2 had 10, and S3 had seven). A total of 25 students said that freewriting was difficult at some point during the year. However, 10 of these students later commented that they improved over the course of the year, as shown in the following series of comments from one student:

Freewriting is a bit difficult. (S1-post)

At first I couldn't write anything. But by freewriting I can gradually write many sentences. (S2)

I could feel my writing ability improved by freewriting. I want to write much more English. (S3)

However, five responses indicated a lack of confidence that did not improve by the end of the project. One student commented

Freewriting is difficult for me. I can't write English. But, I try writing! (S3)

Student Enjoyment of English Freewriting

The results indicate a majority of students enjoyed freewriting and there was an overall increase in stated enjoyment as the project went on (Figure 3). A one-way ANOVA test [$F(2) = 18.5$, $p < .001$] showed a significant difference (at $p < .01$) using the Tukey HSD Test between the S1-post result ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.80$), and both the S2 ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.77$) and S3 ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.64$) results. No significant difference was found between the S2 and S3 results, although the S3 mean score was higher. In all three surveys the majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed freewriting.

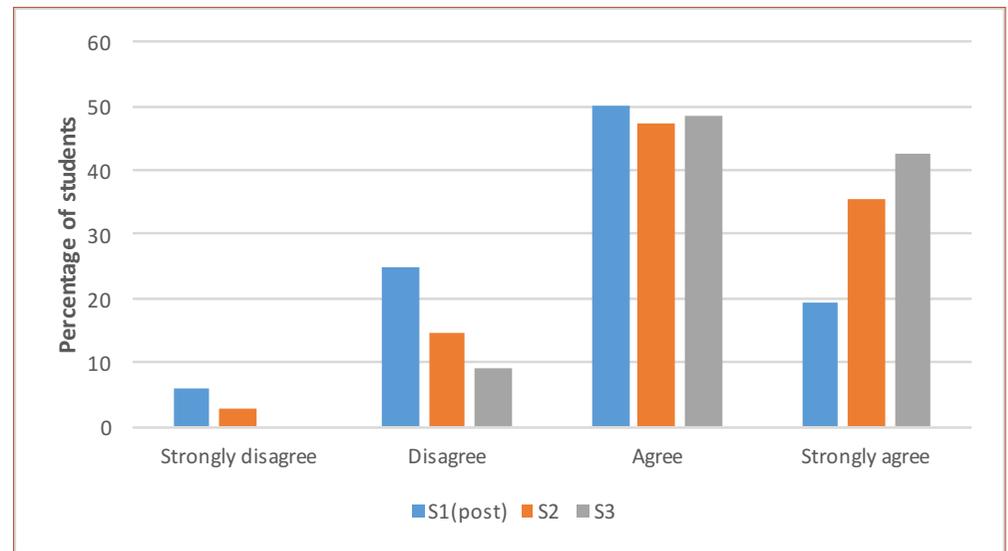


Figure 3. Student responses to the statement “I enjoyed freewriting” ($N = 66$). S1, S2, and S3 are semesters 1, 2, and 3.

Head: *Introducing Freewriting to a Japanese High School English Class*

Student comments were almost universally positive in terms of enjoyment, with 63 positive comments, as illustrated by the following:

Freewriting was very fun!! English writing is very interesting. (S3)

Only one comment was negative in terms of enjoyment:

I don't like English. (S1-post)

Teacher Feedback and Student Motivation

In terms of the effect of written comments on student motivation, the majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that teacher comments were motivating (Figure 4). In addition, a paired samples *t* test of responses shows a statistically significant ($t(65) = -2.12, p$ (two-tailed) = 0.038) increase between the S2 ($M = 3.05, SD = 0.75$) and S3 ($M = 3.26, SD = 0.64$) results, indicating that as the project continued more students found teacher comments motivating.

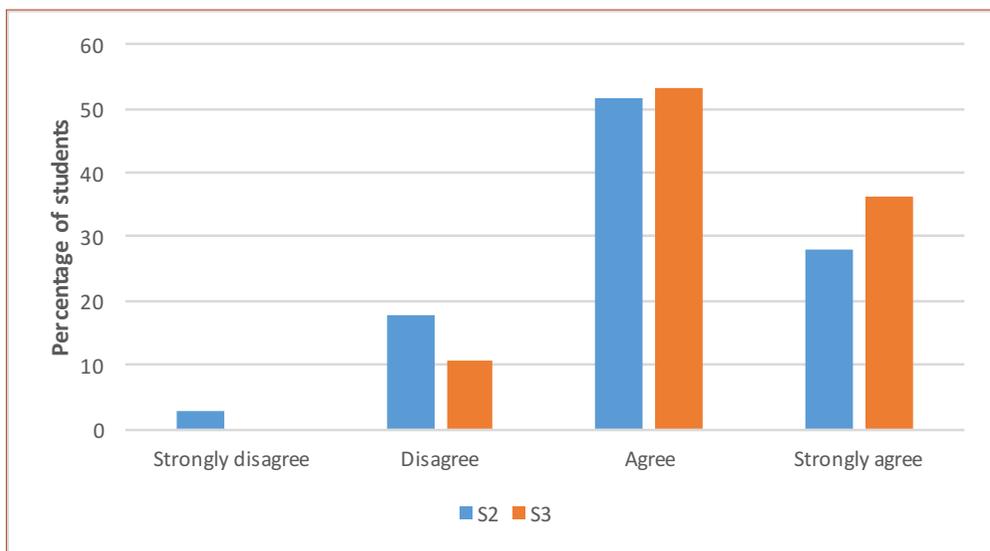


Figure 4. Student responses to the statement “Comments motivated me to write” ($N = 66$). S2 and S3 are semesters 2 and 3.

19 students expressed appreciation for teacher comments on their papers, for example:

I was glad when you gave me some comments.

Of these, five expressed that this motivated them to write more:

I was happy that you checked my writing, so I wanted to try more. (S2)

Grammar and Spelling Correction

In the first and second semesters (S1 and S2), the teacher did not correct student writing in terms of spelling and grammar. This was done both to save time and to encourage students to write as much as possible without being afraid of making mistakes. However, on the survey at the end of S1, two students commented that they wanted their writing corrected. To investigate this, students were asked on the S2 survey if they wanted correction. The majority of students stated that they wanted correction, so spelling and grammar correction was introduced in S3. The correction provided was explicit, with mistakes crossed out and the correct version written above in red pen. At the end of S3, after having experienced correction, students were once again asked if they wanted correction. As shown in Figure 5, the number of students who wanted correction actually increased after they had experienced it, with a paired samples *t* test showing a statistically significant difference ($t(65) = -2.57, p$ (two-tailed) = 0.012) between the S2 ($M = 3.20, SD = 0.79$) and S3 ($M = 3.42, SD = 0.72$) results.

Head: *Introducing Freewriting to a Japanese High School English Class*

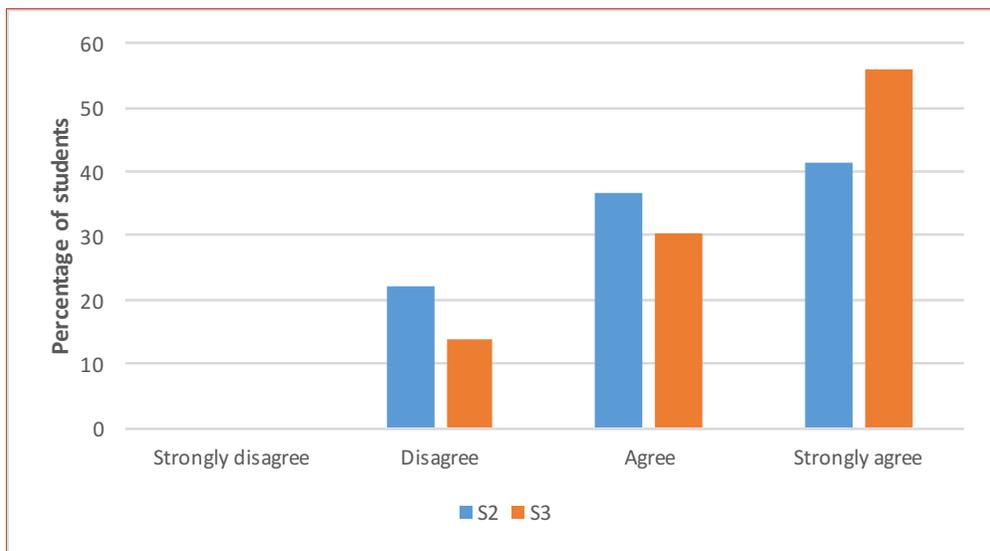


Figure 5. Student responses to the statement “I want my spelling and grammar corrected” (N = 66). S2 and S3 are semesters 2 and 3.

Ten comments about correction mentioned a desire to know what errors they made so that they could improve their future writing, for example:

I would like you to correct my grammar because I don't know whether my English is good or not. (S2)

However, two comments indicated that the fact that there were no penalties for mistakes was welcome:

It's good that you don't care about spelling mistakes. (S2)

Topic Preferences

As shown in Figure 6, more students preferred writing on TA topics (40-50%) than on SS topics (8-25%), but about one third of students claimed no preference. There was a drop in preference for SS topics at the end of S2, followed by a slight rebound in S3, which is opposite to the preferences for TA topics.

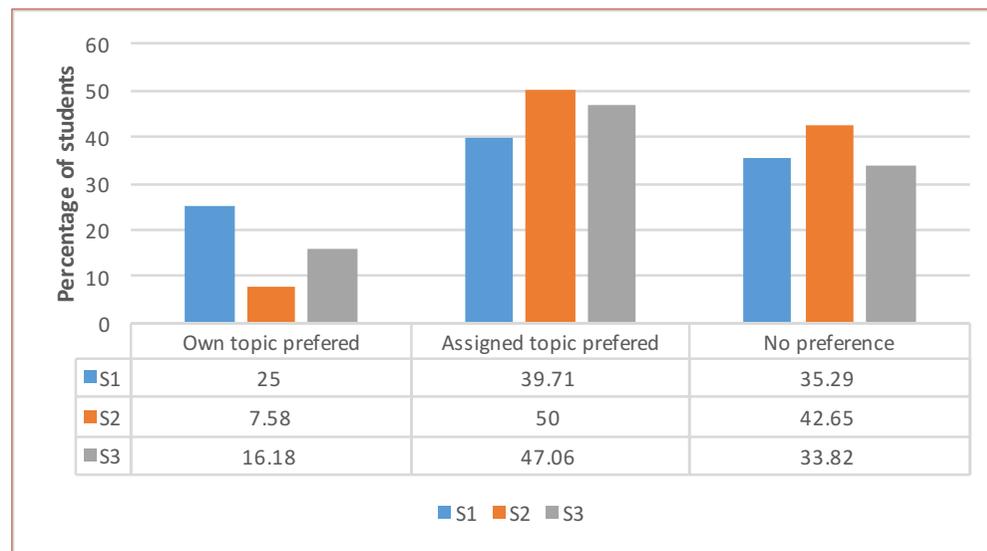


Figure 6. Student preferences for student or teacher selected topics (N = 66). S1, S2, and S3 are semesters 1, 2, and 3.

In addition, the stated preferences and actual writing behavior (when students were given the choice between TA and SA topics) were compared. The S2 results are an average of all the S2 assignments, whereas the S3 results are only for the final assignment. As shown in Figure 7, the numbers of students who wrote on SS topics and who expressed a preference for SS topics were almost identical.

Head: Introducing Freewriting to a Japanese High School English Class

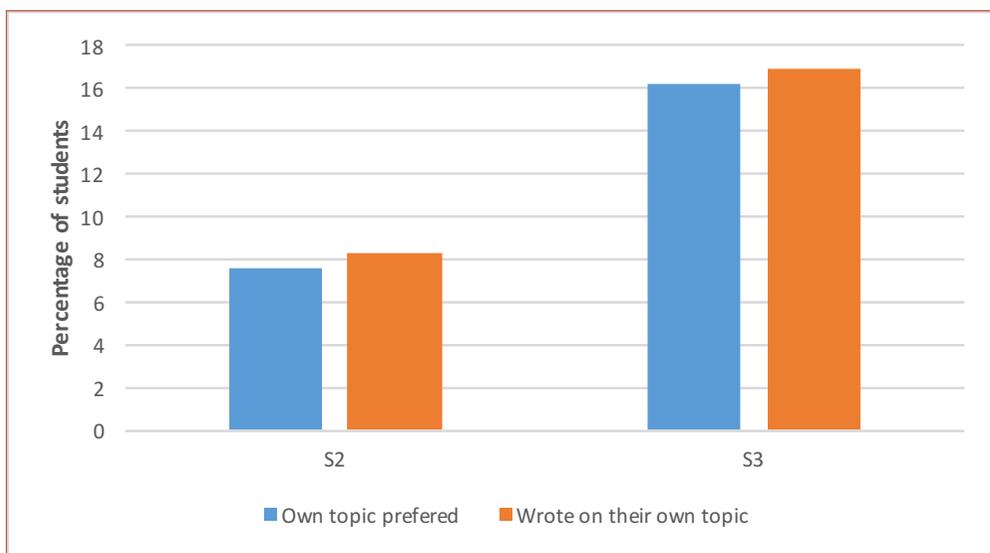


Figure 7. Percent of students who stated preference for versus actually elected to write about SS topics ($N = 66$).

Of the eight students who commented that they preferred SS topics, two gave no reason, four claimed that that it was more fun, and two said they could write more when they chose their own topics, as shown by the following comments:

It felt fun to write what I want. (S1-post)

I wanted to decide topics, because I could write more sentences about topics I decided than assigned topics. (S3)

However, of the 12 students that preferred TA topics, nine commented that they did so primarily because of difficulty in choosing their own topics, and three gave no reason for their preference:

It took a lot of time to choose my own topic. If the topic was assigned, I could write quickly. (S3)

In addition, three other student comments displayed ambivalence or conflicting feelings regarding topic selection. This reflects a conflict between being able to choose an interesting topic and the difficulty of writing on their chosen topic:

I don't know what to write for the theme that is given, but if I decide the theme it is more difficult to write. (S2)

Discussion

In this study, five questions regarding English writing were examined. First, concerning the use of English writing, Figure 1 shows that students rarely practiced this skill (or reading either) in their daily lives, although a number did listen to or speak English. This is likely because there is little need to write in English outside of school, whereas English-language audio-visual media is popular in Japan. Thus in-class writing (such as timed freewriting) is a particularly important source of writing practice.

The next research question concerned change in student writing confidence and enjoyment. For writing confidence, a statistically significant perceived increase was observed after the completion of the first semester (see Figure 2). This is consistent with the results of Leblanc and Fujieda (2012), who reported an increase in writing confidence following freewriting practice (but did not provide data regarding statistical significance), but unlike Dickinson (2014), who found no significant increase. However, in the current study, students were asked how they remembered their writing confidence from before the study began, rather than actually measuring their confidence at the beginning. Thus, students may have rated their previous confidence lower in order to express an increase in their confidence. No significant change occurred during the next two semesters (S2 and S3) and less than half the students felt confident in their English writing at the end of the study. Leblanc and Fujieda and Dickinson also observed low self-efficacy in university students. However, many student survey comments in the current study indicated an increase in confidence over the course of the study. Therefore, the current study lends support to the use of freewriting to increase students' writing confidence, although further research is warranted.

The majority of students expressed enjoyment in writing and this enjoyment significantly increased over the course of the year, particularly between the first and second semesters (see Figure 3). These results are consistent with those obtained by researchers at the university level (Dickinson, 2014; Leblanc & Fujieda, 2012; Rettig-Miki & Sholdt, 2014). This finding suggests that the use of timed freewriting activities in English class is a good use of time. However, whether enjoyment of freewriting positively influences student motivation toward English in general is an area for future research.

The third question concerned teacher feedback. Figure 4 indicates that teacher comments related to content were motivating for students and this increased significantly over time. Student comments highlighted the fact that knowing the papers were being

Head: Introducing Freewriting to a Japanese High School English Class

read and understood motivated them to write more and with a communicative aim. In fact, some students wrote replies to comments on their paper before they handed them back, forming a written conversation and providing an opportunity for meaningful communication in English that is not always available in the school's curriculum.

The fourth topic examined was grammar and spelling correction. Mistakes were not corrected during the first and second semesters so that students could write freely without fear of making mistakes. However, survey comments revealed that some students desired correction so that they could identify areas of difficulty and improve their future writing. When explicitly asked in the S2 survey, the majority of students wished for correction, an amount that significantly increased after correction was introduced in S3 (see Figure 5). However, student comments indicated it was positive that the writing assignments were not graded; further study concerning whether attitudes towards correction remain when written accuracy is graded is warranted.

The final question concerned student preferences regarding topic selection. Many studies have looked at the effect of topic selection on writing fluency, but few have directly asked students whether they prefer TA or SS topics. In this study, a minority of students preferred SS topics to TA topics (see Figure 6). Student survey comments indicated that the most common reason for preferring TA topics was difficulty in thinking of a topic, a result consistent with Rittig-Miki and Sholdt (2014). Finally, the number of students who claimed to prefer SS topics corresponded to the number who actually chose to write about SS topics when given the choice (see Figure 7). This correspondence between stated desires and actual choices supports the accuracy of the survey results.

Conclusion

By introducing timed freewriting activities into a high school English class, students were able to become increasingly confident writers and enjoyed the experience. Furthermore, teacher comments relating to the content of the students' writing were appreciated by students and led to greater student motivation to write, as well as additional opportunities for genuine English communication. Also, in a context where writing was not graded, most students welcomed spelling and grammar correction as a way of identifying problems and improving their writing. And lastly, more students preferred writing about topics chosen by the teacher, due primarily to difficulty in deciding their own topics, although many appreciated the freedom of being able to choose their own topic should they wish.

Based on these findings, high school English teachers should be encouraged to introduce timed freewriting activities into their classes. Also, to obtain the greatest benefit it is recommended that both content-based feedback and explicit correction be given to

students. However, grading should be based on participation rather than a lack of errors in order to encourage risk taking and genuine communication. Furthermore, teachers should assign topics to focus students, but also allow students to deviate from the assigned topic should they choose.

Bio Data

Philip Head is a part-time instructor at the University of Kochi. He has taught EFL in Japan for 7 years, to students of all ages and ability levels. His current research interests include student motivation, speech contests, and writing. <head.philip@gmail.com>

References

- Bonzo, J. D. (2008). To assign a topic or not: Observing fluency and complexity in intermediate foreign language writing. *Foreign Language Annals*, 41(4), 722-735.
- Dickinson, P. (2014). The effect of topic-selection control on EFL writing fluency. *Journal of Niigata University of International and Information Studies*, 17, 15-25.
- Ferreira, D. (2013). Researching the effects of students' self-selected topics on writing fluency. *Ferris Studies*, 48, 297-306.
- Homstad, T., & Thorson, H. (2000). Quantity versus quality? Using extensive and intensive writing in the FL classroom. In G. Brauer (Ed.), *Writing across languages* (pp. 141-152). Stamford, CT: Ablex.
- Leblanc, C. & Fujieda, M. (2012). Investigating effects of topic control on lexical variation in Japanese university students' in-class timed-writing. *Kwansei Gakuin University Humanities Review*, 17, 241-253. Retrieved from <<http://hdl.handle.net/10236/10549>>
- Rettig-Miki, E., & Sholdt, G. P. (2014). Impact on L2 writing fluency of topic selection method for a timed writing activity. *Journal of the School of Languages and Communication, Kobe University*, 11, 55-71. Retrieved from <<http://www.lib.kobe-u.ac.jp/repository/81008804.pdf>>
- Semke, H. D. (1984). Effects of the red pen. *Foreign Language Annals*, 17(3), 195-202.

Head: *Introducing Freewriting to a Japanese High School English Class*

Appendix

Summary of Writing Assignment Topics for Classes 1 and 2 Over the Course of Three Semesters

Assignment Number	Class 1 topic	Class 2 topic
1 (S1)	Student selected (SS)	Life after graduation
2 (S1)	Life after graduation	SS
3 (S1)	SS	My friends
4 (S1)	My friends	SS
5 (S1)	SS	Free time
6 (S1)	Free time	SS
7 (S2)	Summer vacation or SS	Summer vacation or SS
8 (S2)	Favorite season or SS	Favorite season or SS
9 (S2)	Culture festival or SS	Culture festival or SS
10 (S2)	Sports festival or SS	Sports festival or SS
11 (S2)	Family or SS	Family or SS
12 (S2)	Food or SS	Food or SS
13 (S2)	Music or SS	Music or SS
14 (S2)	Cellphones or SS	Cellphones or SS
15 (S2)	Pets or SS	Pets or SS
16 (S2)	Christmas or SS	(Not completed)
17 (S3)	New Years' holiday	SS
19 (S3)	SS	New Years' holiday
20 (S3)	Junior high school	SS
21 (S3)	SS	Junior high school
22 (S3)	First year of high school or SS	First year of high school or SS