Planning Activities and Freewriting

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Research shows that planning activities can enhance the complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) of language that learners produce during language tasks. However, it remains unclear whether the modality of the planning task could impact CAF aspects of learner production. This study was undertaken to investigate whether the mode of planning had any influence on the CAF features of freewriting in beginner level English for academic purposes (EAP) writing classes. Students (*N* = 51) from 4 classes were separated into two groups. Over 1 semester, the first group participated in interactive speaking activities before freewriting; the second completed individual written planning activities. Students were given a pre- and posttest in addition to 5 in-class freewriting activities. Results indicated that both groups of students developed their writing abilities over the semester and that the mode of planning did not influence the quality of language that students produced.

事前アクティビティをすることによって、学習者が言語タスク間に生み出す言語の複雑さ、正確さ、流暢さ（CAF）が高まることが立証されている。しかし、計画タスクのモダリティが、学習者のCAF面に影響を与えるか否かは明確にされていない。本研究は、一学期間に渡り、初級EAPライティングクラスにおいて、計画の方法がフリーライティングのCAFの特性に影響するかを調査する為に行われた。4クラスから選ばれた51名の学生が2つのグループに分けられ、1つのグループはフリーライティング前に相互的なスピーキングアクティビティーを行ったのに対し、2つ目のグループは個々が文書で事前アクティビティを完成させた。更に、学生は、クラスでの5つのフリーライティングアクティビティに加え、事前・事後テストを受けた。結果、一学期間で両グループの学生のライティングスキルは向上し、計画の方法は学生が生み出す言語の質に殆ど影響しないことが示唆された。

In recent years, planning activities and subsequent learner performance in language tasks have attracted attention from SLA researchers. Numerous studies (see Ellis, 2005; Foster & Skehan, 2009) have shown that the manipulation of planning activities can have significant effects on the complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) features of the language produced by learners performing tasks that incorporate planning.

One planning factor that could influence learner output is the modality of the planning task, due to the differences between spoken and written discourse. Although there appears to be little research on how modality may affect student performance, some researchers have investigated the differences in learner production of the same tasks in different modalities. Ellis and Yuan (2005) investigated the effects that planning had on the output that learners produced during language tasks. Results showed that when speaking, learners produced more fluent language, whereas learners produced higher levels of accuracy and complexity when writing. Therefore, given that task-planning activities have been shown to influence task performance, there is the possibility that the mode of planning could also affect student language production.

The language task investigated in this study was a freewriting activity that was carried out in a beginning-level English for academic purposes (EAP) writing class. Freewriting (also known as continuous or timed writing) is a commonly used activity in both L1 and L2 writing classes. The purpose is to help learners develop their writing skills without being overly concerned with the form or content of their output (Elbow, 1998). Polio (2012) pointed out that freewriting has several uses in the classroom. First, freewriting is an effective way for teachers to engage students in language production, in contrast to other activities such as teacher-led discussion, in which not all learners may be able or willing to participate. Second, freewriting activities can allow students to practice recently learned language items, a feature that could be especially relevant for foreign-language learning contexts in which most students have very few opportunities to produce language outside of the classroom. Finally, the language produced in freewriting can also be a source of input and output for subsequent language tasks.

Freewriting can also be adapted to meet the criteria for a fluency-development activity. Nation (2001) listed four criteria that an activity must meet in order to develop students' fluency. First, students must be able to complete the task using familiar language items and content. Second, the activity must be meaning focused. Third, there should be some encouragement for learners to perform the task at a higher than normal level, meaning that conditions should be created to push learners to produce language at a faster rate. In freewriting activities, one way that this condition can be met is to have a fixed time limit and encourage students to better their previous scores. Finally, the task must require students to process large amounts of language. To meet this condition, lower proficiency students may benefit from a planning activity before beginning to write, in order to generate enough content for the task. Therefore, although freewriting has been viewed as a planning activity in and of itself (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005), beginning-level learners may need an additional planning activity to generate content before writing.

Several studies have shown that freewriting and other fluency-first approaches, such as journal writing, can positively influence affective factors such as motivation and student attitudes toward writing in Japanese EFL classrooms (Casanave, 1995; Duppenthaler, 2002; Herder & Clements, 2012). However, despite the popularity of freewriting, there have been few longitudinal studies that have investigated the potential that it may have for developing student writing ability, although the study by Herder and Clements (2012) found that Japanese high school students were able to increase the length of their freewriting texts over a 9-month period. In addition, a recent study by Nitta and Baba (2014) looked at the development of CAF features of student writing over a 30-week academic year. Results indicated student improvement in various CAF features over the course of the year, although the students, who were from different learning contexts, showed different patterns of development and tended to focus on different aspects of language production at different time periods in the study.

Nitta and Baba's (2014) study also compared two different kinds of task repetition: specific task repetition and task-type repetition. Specific task repetition was operationalized as learners writing about the same topics. Learners wrote about the same topic for 2 weeks, which enabled the researchers to determine if the opportunity to write on the same topic influenced student output. In contrast, task-type repetition was operationalized as the difference between the first and last writing activity to determine if any long-term gains were made in student writing. Interestingly, the results of this study contradicted those of task repetition in second-language speaking, where gains have been seen for specific task repetition but not for task-type repetition. Although the researchers found some gains in student writing on the same topic, larger gains were found over the long term, which the researchers suggested could be due to fundamental differences in the composition of speech and writing.

The results of Nitta and Baba's study suggest that freewriting can be an effective means of developing student writing abilities, yet it is unclear to what degree the mode of planning task may affect student output, in both the short- and long-term. The aims of this study, therefore, were to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1. To what degree do changes in CAF measures in writing differ between students who engage in interactive speaking activities and those who engage in individual writing activities when students repeat a writing task?

RQ2. To what degree do changes in CAF measures in writing differ between students who engage in interactive speaking activities and those who engage in individual writing activities when students repeat the same type of writing task on a different topic?

The exploratory nature of this study should also be mentioned here, as no hypothesis regarding the superiority of one mode of planning activity over the other was postulated. Although it would have been desirable to include a control group in the study, given that it was carried out in a coordinated program, this was not possible due to the need to keep instruction consistent across classes. Finally, as intact classes were used for each condition, the generalizability of the findings is limited.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 70 first-year Japanese university students studying at a private university near Kobe. The students were in the first semester of a compulsory 2-year English language program in one of the university's departments and were studying in one of four classes. This program is coordinated in that it delivers a common EAP syllabus in the four skill areas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and all teachers on a course teach the same material with the same course objectives. Upon entering the program, students are grouped into two streams based on their TOEFL scores—the students in this study were in the lower score stream. This course comprised thirteen 90-minute lessons, seven of which utilized a freewriting activity. To be included in the study, students had to be present for these seven lessons. Due to absences, 16 students were excluded. In addition, three outlying students were not included in the analyses, resulting in a total of 51 complete student samples from the four different classes. Two of these classes were assigned interactive speaking activities as the planning stage for

freewriting (n = 26), and the other two were assigned an individual written activity (n = 25). The researchers each taught one class in the speaking condition and one class in the writing condition.

The Language for Writing Course

The program's lower stream writing course, Language for Writing, introduces students to basic emailing, paragraph writing, and cohesion, as well as academic structure and formatting. These goals are realized with the completion of three academic paragraphs by the end of the course. Another course objective is the development of written fluency, which is addressed by having students do freewriting. In the course, freewriting involves a planning activity in which students first generate ideas by discussing questions on a topic that requires no background knowledge. Example topics are *Places I'd like to visit*, *Things that are important to me*, *My summer plans*, and *My favorite season*. Students then have a set period of time to write as much as possible on the topic without regard to language accuracy. During the study, course instruction was uniform for all classes, as the course uses in-house materials.

Procedures

For this study, two classes were assigned to perform the original planning stage for freewriting (i.e., interactive speaking) as a condition; the other two classes did individual writing in its place. Specifically, students who were assigned the writing condition were given the same questions as the two speaking-condition classes, but instead of discussing the questions, they were instructed to individually reflect on them and write notes. Both groups were given the same length of time for planning (5 minutes) and freewriting (10 minutes). Students wrote their freewrites by hand on paper that was included in their course books and were encouraged to write as much as possible without worrying about grammar or vocabulary. Furthermore, students were dissuaded from using an eraser and not allowed to look back at the questions or any notes. There were seven freewrites over the entire course. Freewrite 1, in Lesson 3, introduced students to the concept of freewriting and was not considered for data collection. Each freewrite focused on a different topic, with the exception of Freewrite 2 (Lesson 4) and Freewrite 7 (Lesson 12), which shared the same topic (My favorite season). Thus, although a comparison of Freewrite 2 and Freewrite 6 (My summer plans) serves as an analysis for *task-type repetition*, a comparison of Freewrites 2 and 7 serves as an analysis for *specific task repetition*. This will be discussed in further detail. See Appendix A for a sample of planning questions and Appendix B for a sample freewrite.

Analyses

The researchers collected the students' freewrites, typed them into a word processor, and saved them as Microsoft Word files before proceeding with CAF analyses. This was either computational or manual in nature. The fluency measure was derived by counting the words and averaging them per freewrite. The total word count in each text was chosen as it has been used in previous studies of freewriting (Herder & Clements, 2012; Nitta & Baba, 2014), and as each freewriting activity was controlled for time, it was felt to reflect an indirect measure of the speed at which students could produce writing. For syntactic complexity, although there are a variety of measures, the mean length of t-unit was chosen ("one main clause with all subordinate clauses attached to it"; Hunt, 1965, pg. 20), as research has shown that it correlates with measures of proficiency (Ortega, 2003; Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, & Kim, 1998). Finally, the number of errors per t-unit was chosen as a measure of accuracy, as it has been shown to correlate with short-term changes in research conducted in intact writing classes (Wolfe-Qunitero et al., 1998), although the authors cautioned that this general measure is probably nonlinear and does not correlate with proficiency.

Due to the ungrammatical nature of some texts, measuring complexity and in particular accuracy, was challenging. As a result, we established guidelines in order to identify t-units and distinguish error types. We both coded the same four writing samples separately and then compared our analyses. However, as some cases were difficult to clearly categorize, while individually coding the data, we took note of such cases and discussed how they should be coded. Regarding complexity, we ascertained t-units by punctuation boundaries, using a line break to mark the end of a t-unit even when, as in the fourth line below, a subject or verb was lacking.

Sample Text 1

Also, I'd like to visit Italy.
I like to eating,
so I'd like to eat Italian foods.
For example, pizza, pasta.

To measure accuracy, we followed Tonkyn (2012) by identifying errors according to their relevance in four categories: noun phrase, verb phrase, syntactical, and lexical. Below are sample texts. Again, we developed guidelines for clarity and consistency—these are in italics.

Sample Text 2

My important thing is my pet dog.

[*not native-like but grammatically correct = no error*]

My pet is called Tanuki.

[no errors]

Its color *of* white.

[syntactical error: incorrect constituent]

She *run* fast.

[verb phrase error: inflection]

She *is* vitality.

[lexical error: incorrect word]

When I was ten she came *to home*.

[*missing constituent = syntactical error*]

I *led* her.

[lexical error: incorrect word]

I like her, because she is cute.

[*punctuation errors were not considered = no error*]

Always she is near to me.

[syntactical error: word order]

Sample Text 3

I might go to Hawaii *in* this summer.

[syntactical error: unnecessary constituent]

I'm looking forward to *go* to Hawaii.

[*gerund error = VP error*]

Summer *festival* is very fun.

[noun phrase error: number]

I like eating *kakigori*.

[*Japanese words not listed in the* Merriam-Webster *dictionary = lexical error*]

Sample Text 4

I like summer.

[no error]

This season has *firework*.

[noun phrase error: number]

It's *beautiful and special event* in summer.

[noun phrase error: article]

When I go to see *the fireworks*, I wear yukata.

[noun phrase error: article / *Japanese words that are defined = no error*]

Yukata is Japanese *clothes*.

[lexical error: wrong word form]

Results

The research questions focused on the degree to which the CAF measures in writing differed between students who engaged in interactive speaking activities and those who engaged in individual writing activities, in both a specific task and task-type repetition. To attempt to answer this question, the 95% confidence intervals for the CAF measures were examined. Due to space limitations, the researchers chose to examine the confidence intervals to emphasize the relatively large range of scores in the CAF measures for both groups (see Tables 1-3 below). Furthermore, due to the large number of variables and small sample size, several assumptions necessary for repeated measures ANOVA could not be met.

Table 1. Fluency (Word Count) of Freewriting in Lessons 4, 11, and 12

Freewrite	Condition	Mean (*SE*)	*SD*	95% CI
2	Speaking planning[a]	109.23 (7.67)	35.17	[93.23, 125.25]
	Writing planning[b]	118.43 (4.62)	25.30	[108.99, 127.88]
6	Speaking planning[a]	127.62 (9.15)	41.93	[108.53, 146.70]
	Writing planning[b]	150.23 (7.11)	38.96	[135.68, 164.78]
7	Speaking planning[a]	128.86 (7.76)	35.58	[112.66, 145.05]
	Writing planning[b]	132.60 (6.92)	37.89	[118.45, 146.75]

Note. [a]*n* = 26, [b]*n* = 25; Freewrite 6 = task-type repetition (Lesson 11); Freewrite 7 = specific task repetition (Lesson 12).

As shown in Table 1, the results indicate that students were able to develop their writing fluency, as they were able to write more over the course of the semester. On average, the writing planners wrote more than the speakers, although the nonoverlapping 95% confidence intervals indicate that there were no significant differences between the mean number of words for each lesson. The only instance of a significant increase for fluency was seen for the writing planners in the task-type repetition (Freewrite six).

Table 2. Syntactic Complexity (Average Length of T-Unit) of Freewriting in Lessons 4, 11, and 12

Freewrite	Condition	Mean (*SE*)	*SD*	95% CI
2	Speaking planning[a]	6.63 (.27)	1.22	[6.07, 7.18]
	Writing planning[b]	7.67 (.27)	1.49	[7.11, 8.22]
6	Speaking planning[a]	9.10 (.25)	1.15	[8.58, 9.62]
	Writing planning[b]	8.83 (.29)	1.59	[8.23, 9.42]
7	Speaking planning[a]	7.25 (.19)	0.89	[6.85, 7.65]
	Writing planning[b]	8.22 (.27)	1.47	[7.67, 8.77]

Note. [a]*n* = 26, [b]*n* = 25; Freewrite 6 = task-type repetition (Lesson 11); Freewrite 7 = specific task repetition (Lesson 12).

On average, students were also able to improve their syntactic complexity and compose longer t-units (see Table 2). Again, on average, the writing planners generally wrote longer clauses than the speakers (although not in Freewrite 6). Therefore, although there are nonoverlapping confidence intervals between the two groups for Freewrite 7, this difference is very small (0.2 words per t-unit) and so should be interpreted cautiously. There was also a significant increase in complexity for both the groups in the task-type repetition, but not the specific task repetition.

Table 3. Accuracy (Number of Errors Per T-Unit) of Freewriting in Lessons 4, 11, and 12

Freewrite	Condition	Mean (*SE*)	*SD*	95% CI
2	Speaking planning[a]	1.28 (0.17)	0.77	[0.95, 1.61]
	Writing planning[b]	1.27 (0.11)	0.61	[1.05, 1.49]
6	Speaking planning[a]	1.37 (0.20)	0.91	[0.98, 1.76]
	Writing planning[b]	1.05 (0.11)	0.62	[0.83, 1.27]
7	Speaking planning[a]	0.93 (0.09)	0.40	[0.76, 1.11]
	Writing planning[b]	1.10 (0.08)	0.42	[0.94, 1.25]

Note. [a]*n* = 26, [b]*n* = 25; Freewrite 6 = task-type repetition (Lesson 11); Freewrite 7 = specific task repetition (Lesson 12).

Finally, students were also able to make gains in their writing accuracy, as generally the number of errors per t-unit decreased over the semester, although the nonoverlapping confidence intervals indicate that there were no significant differences between the number of errors per t-unit at any stage in the study (see Table 3). On average, the number of errors decreased in the specific task repetition.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study suggest that there were very few differences for students in the speaking and writing planning conditions. This would seem to indicate that the students utilized both speaking and writing planning activities to prepare content for their freewrites, although it is possible that the planning activities did not influence student writing at all. However, research has shown that planning activities can positive-

ly affect student output (Ellis, 2005; Foster & Skehan, 2009), and we observed that the students were engaged during the planning activities in both conditions.

Although the majority of the changes were not significant, the students in this study were observed to make improvements in those aspects of CAF measured here; on average they wrote more words and longer t-units and made fewer grammatical errors. However, we must also emphasize that significant changes in syntactic complexity variables are rarely observed in short-term EFL writing studies (Ortega, 2003), and as there has been little research on how CAF variables may develop through freewriting, so there are very few studies to which these results can be compared. Therefore, despite the positive trends in the CAF measures that were found, these results must be interpreted cautiously. Furthermore, because there was no control group included in the study and the students were not randomly assigned to each condition, a variety of factors may have influenced the results.

When comparing task-type and specific task repetition, the results support the findings of Nitta and Baba's (2014) study. Namely, there appeared to be larger positive changes for task-type repetition than for specific task repetition. These findings add weight to Nitta and Baba's argument that because of differences in processing constraints, specific repetition may not benefit writers as much as it does speakers. Although Nitta and Baba pointed out that 1 week between topic repetition could also be too long an interval for the repetition to have any effect, it should be noted that in Bygate's (2001) study of task repetition in speaking tasks, specific task repetition effects were found for some CAF measures after a 10-week interval. These results lend support to the argument made by De Jong and Perfetti (2011) in their study of speaking fluency. De Jong and Perfetti (2011) also found gains in task-type repetition and argued that the gains were the result of similarity between the tasks and "may have mostly been of a morphological or syntactic, rather than lexical, nature" (p. 561). That is, by encouraging students to use familiar language forms with some time pressure, freewriting may allow students to improve not only fluency, but also syntactic complexity and accuracy of output.

Conclusion

Although there are several limitations to the findings in this study, perhaps the most important is that due to the large number of variables included, it was not possible to conduct more sophisticated statistical analyses without violating several important assumptions. Furthermore, the students engaged in a relatively small number of freewriting activities over an academic semester. Although the averages for most of the CAF measures improved for both task-type and specific task repetition, the majority of changes were nonsignificant.

However, the findings of this study do suggest that freewriting can be beneficial for CAF in student writing and furthermore, that students may benefit from either a spoken or written planning activity. Therefore, other factors such as the classroom environment and the individual students themselves may be the most important variables to consider. A qualitative follow-up study is desirable to investigate student preferences for the mode of planning, in addition to analyzing the output produced in planning activities. It is important to develop our understanding of these activities in writing classes as this will help researchers find ways of increasing the effectiveness of in-class writing activities. The findings of such research would be especially beneficial for many EFL learners who have few chances to produce and practice the language they are studying.

Bio Data

Timothy Doe is an associate lecturer of English at Kwansei Gakuin University. His interests include group dynamics, speaking fluency, and task-based language teaching.

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Appendix A
Freewriting Topics and Planning Questions

Freewrites 2 and 7 (Lessons 4 and 12)

Topic: My Favorite Season

Planning Questions:

1. Which is your favorite season – spring, summer, autumn, or winter?
2. What is special about this season?
3. What do you like to do in this season?
4. Have you always liked this season?
5. Which season do you like the least? Why?

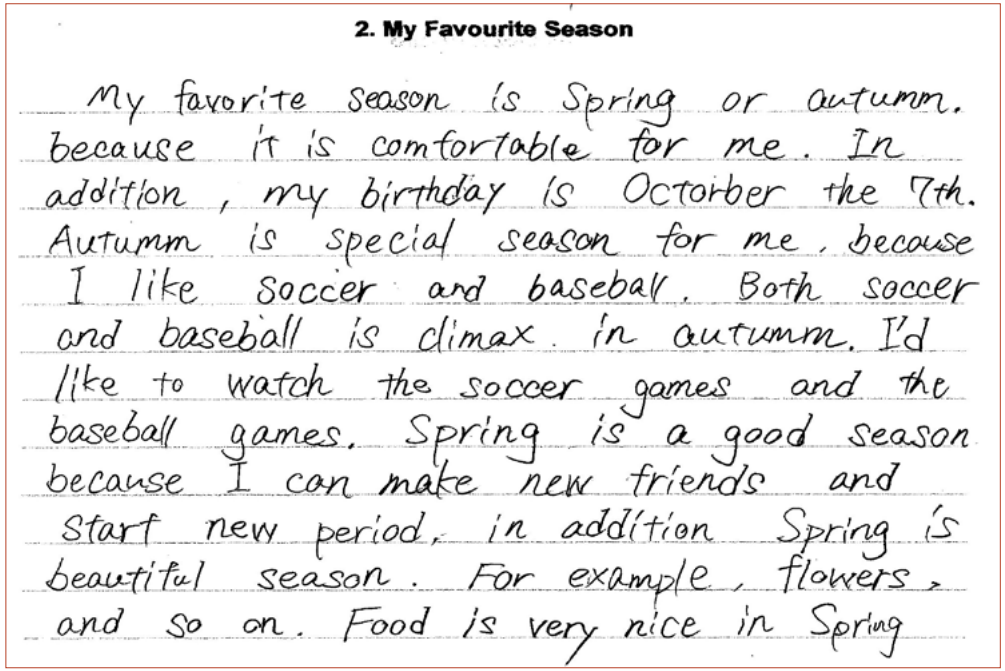
Freewrite 6 (Lesson 11)

Topic: My Summer Plans

Planning Questions:

1. How was your first semester as a university student?
2. Will you go back to your hometown during the summer vacation?
3. Will you travel somewhere or get a part-time job?
4. What do you usually do in the summer?
5. What would you like to do this summer vacation?

Appendix B
Sample Student Freewrite



2. My Favourite Season

My favorite season is Spring or autumn. because it is comfortable for me. In addition, my birthday is October the 7th. Autumn is special season for me, because I like soccer and baseball. Both soccer and baseball is climax in autumn. I'd like to watch the soccer games and the baseball games. Spring is a good season because I can make new friends and start new period, in addition Spring is beautiful season. For example, flowers, and so on. Food is very nice in Spring