

## Ten-Minute Writing Practice for Japanese High School Students

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### Reference Data:

Komiyama, K. (2017). Ten-minute writing practice for Japanese high school students. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *Transformation in language education*. Tokyo: JALT.

I examined whether weekly 10-minute writing practice with content-related feedback improved the writing skills of Japanese high school students. Participants were 37 twelfth graders. Investigated was if 10-minute writing (a) improved students' writing fluency, and (b) improved students' writing skills in general. Students were divided into 2 groups. One group wrote a series of short essays on topics assigned by the teacher, who gave feedback with virtually no grammar corrections. The control group practiced Japanese-English translation using target grammar points. After 15 sessions, all participants took a final exam that included a short essay question. The essays were rated by 4 native English speakers. Nonparametric tests showed statistical significance in that the students who practiced essay writing were superior to the translation practice group in the total number of words used and in overall impression on the rater. The results suggest an alternative to the traditional fixation on grammatical correction.

毎週10分間のフリーライティング練習が日本人高校生の書く力を伸ばすかどうかを検証する。仮説1は10分ライティングで学習者のフルエンシー（流暢さ）が伸びる。仮説2は10分ライティングで学習者の書く力は総合的に伸びる。である。参加者、37人の高校3年生は2つのグループに分けられ、1つは指導者が与えたトピックに従い10分間英文を書いた。フィードバックは内容に関するものが中心で、文法訂正はほぼ行われなかった。別のグループでは、教科書指定の重要文法項目による和文英訳や小テストを10分間行った。15回の練習の後、両グループは短いエッセイを書き、4人の英語母国語話者が採点した。その結果、10分ライティングを行ったグループが和文英訳グループより使用語数、全体的印象においてノンパラメトリック検定で統計的有意な伸びを示した。これは教育現場の伝統的な文法訂正フィードバックに対して、別の指導法も考慮できる事を示唆している。

The purpose of this study was to determine if a particular approach to writing instruction is effective in improving students' writing skills, which may impact their levels of confidence. As pointed out by Murakoshi (2012), avoidance of the use of new grammatical patterns may reflect a lack of confidence by the writer in his or her mastery. Use of a greater variety of patterns may then be interpreted as increased confidence by the writer in his or her linguistic knowledge.

In the most recent teaching guideline, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2011) has recommended that the four areas of language activities (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), be interlinked for comprehensive learning. Also, judging from my own observations, learners need to know that they can communicate effectively through their writing. Otherwise, they may not appreciate that English is a practical tool for communication.

Still, many Japanese high school English teachers believe that writing should be taught after reading, speaking, and listening training. This might be true in first language acquisition, but when it comes to high school students or adult learners who have already acquired these four skills in their mother tongue, are there any practical reasons for postponing the teaching of writing as a skill for communication?

Another reason that writing instruction is neglected in the high school classroom is that traditionally Japanese teachers spend a considerable amount of time correcting students' grammatical errors, which often ends up lowering students' confidence in their writing. As a high school teacher with 20 years of experience, I have come to believe that many students have less confidence in their writing abilities than in their reading, even though their proficiency tests show the opposite, with scores higher than average in writing but lower than average in reading.

In the Japanese high school setting, it seems little practice is done and little investment of time or effort has been made to improve novice learners' writing skills. According to the surveys reported in MEXT (2016), in 2014 and 2015, more than 50% of teachers said

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that they do not have students write about their thoughts or about information based on what they have read or listened to, even after MEXT changed its policy of teaching language to put more emphasis on communication. As a result, the writing ability of students in 12th grade, who are expected to perform at the A2 level or above of the CEFR, fails to reach the expected level. More than 80% of students are actually performing below expectations (MEXT, 2016).

Writing practice, when incorporated at all, used to mean Japanese-English translation to confirm grammatical knowledge, reproduction of memorized sentences, and production of written scripts for English speeches; accuracy was all that teachers required of their students. Writing practice was not for encouraging critical thinking, expressing students' thoughts or feelings, or conveying information. Moreover, sadly enough, in many classrooms, nothing has changed. Muller (2014) pointed out:

If high school is to be seen as preparation for post-secondary study, the current lack of writing in the curriculum ill prepares students for the writing requirements of university in Japan, where many graduation theses are expected to at least have an English abstract, or study abroad, where essays must be written in English. Thus, in many high schools in Japan there is an unmet need for writing to be incorporated into the syllabus. (p. 164)

It is time for Japanese English teachers to apply new approaches to writing practice for students.

There are some reports of related writing activities in high school. Casanave (1993) introduced journal writing to high school students as well as university students. According to the comments of students who were involved in the activity, journal writing successfully motivated most students, improved their attitude toward writing and their skills, and made them aware of the importance of expressing their thoughts. However, it was a homework activity. It may be difficult to apply in a context with less motivated students. Herder and King (2012) found that 10-minute writing practice was effective in increasing students' fluency and eventually also increased writing complexity for students with higher proficiency and accuracy for students with lower-proficiency.

Both research projects were conducted in private schools regarded as academically competitive, and we can assume that the students were reasonably academically motivated from the beginning. However, how might students in a middle-class public school react to this approach when it is led by a Japanese English teacher who does not have native-level writing skills or grammatical intuition?

What I wanted to investigate was the effectiveness of free writing as a class activity. Therefore, the aims of this research were to investigate two research questions:

- RQ1. Can a free writing class activity led by a Japanese English teacher giving limited feedback help students' writing abilities?
- RQ2. If the teacher does not give grammatical correction as part of her feedback, does it have a negative effect on the students?

It seems natural to assume that if students practice, they will show improvement on their writing. What I wanted to know was how much they would improve and whether the approach was efficient enough and worth spending class time on.

## Method

### *Ten-Minute Writing*

Ten-minute writing was originally advocated by Elbow (1973). It is a nonstop, nonediting writing practice that has students write freely on whatever they think at the time. It is difficult to adapt this method to a beginning or preintermediate class because of the learners' limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. However, because this approach allows students to convey their own thoughts using a minimal amount of class time, Elbow's method was modified in the following ways for use with Japanese high school students in this research.

The topic for each writing exercise was given so that students needed less time to think about what to write. The topics for 10-minute writing were related to textbook content that the students were studying. They were allowed to use dictionaries and textbooks and were encouraged to write as much as possible. If necessary, students were allowed to ask questions of their neighbors. The teacher also helped them when requested, but limited the degree of help so as not to make students too dependent.

Students were instructed that more writing was better, and after writing, they counted how many words they had used. Misspellings and grammatical mistakes were not considered. The teacher asked how many words they used and had them raise their hands according to the number they had written. This practice provided self-feedback and allowed them to consider their production in relation to that of others in the class. After that, the teacher collected the papers and later returned them with written communica-

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tive comments. For example, the teacher asked a follow-up question about the content or commented on how interesting the student's experience had been.

This modification of Elbow's original design was necessary because not only is there little time available that teachers can use freely, but also because there are other issues that affect classroom teaching in Japanese high schools. At the high school level, classes typically consist of 40 or more students and are not separated by proficiency. However, even under these circumstances, the Ministry of Education specifies that English should be taught communicatively. As a practical matter, teachers cannot communicate interactively with 40 students simultaneously in class, but they can give students written feedback on their writing and make it communicative.

### Context for the Study

In 2012, Japanese high schools followed the teaching guidelines in effect at the time, and some students took the English Writing class as an elective. The school was a public high school in Shiga Prefecture with an integrated course curriculum (*sougougakka*), which gives students more elective course choices, ranked as moderate overall, but generally considered average to below average academically, as reflected by its rank of D on a scale of S, A-G on Koukou Hensachi.net (2017), a site that shows rankings of senior high schools for students considering applying for admission from junior high schools. As mentioned above, normally a class is composed of 40 students, but fortunately, class size was smaller than usual simply because more than 40 students registered and two writing classes were opened, each taught by a different teacher using the same materials, but applying different methodologies. I was thus able to observe two different classes taught by two different teachers, one of whom used 10-minute writing.

### Participants

The initial participants were 45 twelfth-graders, but the actual number of students whose data was usable was smaller because eight participants were absent from the final exam, which was used to measure their improvement ( $N = 37$ ). All students who took the writing class were divided into two classes according to which homeroom class they belonged to, not by academic ability. Most students who took this elective writing class planned to go to university or junior college.

The two groups were checked for uniformity by comparing their previous year's English final exam scores. Although Group A's ( $n = 19$ ) average on the previous year's exam was higher than Group B ( $n = 18$ ), the nonparametric Mann-Whitney test showed that

the difference between the averages of the two groups was not significant ( $U = 128.5, Z = -1.29, p = .19$ ).

### Procedure

Two teachers taught the writing classes and each class had different training: One had 10-minute writing practice once a week and the other had a grammar-based quiz once a week that took around 10 minutes. This particular difference in teaching style arose from the teachers' different preferences. However, both groups used the same textbook, followed the same curriculum in all other respects, and took the same final exams.

Group A, the 10-minute writing group, practiced short essays with topics given by the teacher. Initial topics included pairwork in which students introduced themselves, after which most activities were done individually. At the end of the course, the students worked in groups of four to write stories (Appendix A).

Group B, the control group, took 10 minutes for weekly quizzes testing things like word order and translation of Japanese to English. Both groups took the same year-end exam including a short essay. They were required to write their opinion on "School should have classes on Saturdays, too" for 10 minutes.

For research purposes, the essay parts of the exams were read and rated by four native speakers, three of whom were working at high schools as ALTs and a fourth who had taught English at Japanese national universities. They did not know that the writings were from two different groups. They were given the students' essays, which had been copied and typed and put into random order, and were asked to rate them holistically on a scale from 1 to 10 (Appendix B).

The word count function in MS Word was used to count the number of words in each essay. In addition, the number of sentences used, the number of different words used, and the variety of grammatical constructions and patterns used were also counted.

### Results

In their holistic ratings, raters on average gave higher marks to Group A, the 10-minute writing group (Table 1). Because Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .874 and the coherency was reliable among the four raters, the average of the four raters' scores was used and the results showed that Group A was significantly different from Group B in the holistic rating by the English native-speaking raters ( $p = .017$ , effect size = .39; Table 2).

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**Table 1. Holistic Ratings by Four Native English Speakers**

Rater	Group	<i>n</i>	Average	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE mean</i>
Rater 1	A	19	5.58	1.87	0.43
	B	18	4.33	1.75	0.41
Rater 2	A	19	5.42	1.77	0.41
	B	18	4.83	1.54	0.36
Rater 3	A	19	4.32	1.60	0.37
	B	18	2.78	1.11	0.26
Rater 4	A	19	6.16	1.26	0.29
	B	18	5.22	1.17	0.27
Average	A	19	5.41	1.33	0.31
	B	18	4.29	1.12	0.26

**Table 2. Holistic Evaluation**

Factor	Value
Raw score average	
Group A ( <i>n</i> = 19)	5.41
Group B ( <i>n</i> = 18)	4.29
Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	93
Wilcoxon <i>W</i>	264
<i>Z</i>	-2.379
Sig (two-tailed)	0.017
Effect size	0.39 (medium)

The averages of the ratings show that raters uniformly assigned higher scores to the students from Group A. The overall averages of the holistic scores were compared and

the significance of the difference was calculated using the nonparametric Mann-Whitney test because samples were small and the number of each group was different.

Because the ratings were significantly different, we can conclude that 10-minute writing when used with public high school students can be an effective method that raises overall writing ability as judged holistically by native speakers.

Although holistic ratings have been argued to be an effective measure of fluency (Fraser, 2014), other quantitative measures were also used. The total number of words used, the number of different words used, the number of sentences used, and the variety of grammatical constructions and patterns used were counted and used as measures of fluency. The last measure is based on a checklist from Murakoshi (2013) that includes 87 key grammatical patterns taught in junior and senior high school (translated version in Appendix C).

Group A's scores were significantly higher than those of Group B on every factor except grammatical variety, on which it was higher, but only at the  $p = .065$  level (Table 3). These results indicate that Group A was also superior to Group B in fluency, on every measure used.

**Table 3. Factors Related to Fluency**

Factor	Group	Ave.	Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	Wilcoxon <i>W</i>	<i>Z</i>	Sig. (two-tailed)	Effect size
Words	A	48.26	68	239	-3.132	0.002	0.5 (large)
	B	32.56					
Sentences	A	5.84	94.5	265.5	-2.439	0.015	0.40 (medium)
	B	4.61					
Word/sentence	A	8.26	101	272	-2.128	0.033	0.35 (medium)
	B	6.88					
Different words	A	33.74	84.5	255.5	-2.633	0.008	0.43 (medium)
	B	24.72					
Key grammar points	A	3.89	111	282	-1.848	0.065	0.30 (medium)
	B	2.72					

*Note.* Group A: *n* = 19; Group B: *n* = 18.

## Discussion

Although the topics of the essays written by students in Group A for the most part did not require argumentation, they still had better scores on the final exam essay question, which was argumentative. This implies that if students get used to writing in English, their reasoning abilities in their first language are utilized in their foreign language. One disadvantage faced by Japanese learners of English is that they have little chance to use English in their daily lives. Writing activities can make up for the lack of opportunity for output.

This analysis did not pay particular attention to accuracy. That is because the point of the writing program was not whether students wrote with grammatical accuracy, but whether the sentences reasonably conveyed meaning. Because the holistic ratings of Group A were better than those of Group B, it seems quite likely that Group A somehow gained the necessary grammar skills to convey meaning. My ongoing research is based on the output hypothesis (Swain, 1995), which postulates that output requires more mental effort on the part of language learners than input and that consequently, output activities help language acquisition more than input activities. This research suggests that 10-minute writing practice, the main purpose of which is to get used to writing in English and to interest students in communicating through English, can also improve grammar knowledge.

The 10-minute writing practice presented English to students as a tool for communication. Unlike grammar-based writing practice, students were less afraid of making mistakes, as indicated by the greater variety of grammatical patterns they used. Even though the Japanese public high school setting does not provide the best circumstances for communication in English, this writing method might be applied to promote learners' communicative proficiency. The students' opinions of this activity have not been statistically analyzed, but this way of interaction between students or between student and teacher appears to have a good reputation among students in general. Some actual student comments translated into English were as follows:

- Has 10 minutes already passed? I want to continue it longer.
- I need more time to finish.
- Why don't we do the same activity next week?

Also, a few students wrote short messages or comments in English on the back of their exam papers.

Two limitations of this study were: (a) the manner in which the two groups were determined, by homeroom rather than by random selection, and (b) the fact that the two groups were taught by different teachers, albeit using the same materials and curriculum. The first point was addressed to some extent by showing that there was no significant difference in the average scores of the two groups on the previous year's English final exam. The second point, that there may be some differences in teaching approaches other than the use or nonuse of 10-minute writing as an activity that could have contributed to the difference in outcomes, is valid, but it does not negate the tentative conclusion that the use of 10-minute writing activities promotes the development of students' writing abilities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, nonparametric tests showed that the students who practiced essay writing scored significantly higher than the grammar quiz group in the total number of words used, sentence length, variety of words, and overall holistic impression. From the ratings of the native English speakers, it can tentatively be concluded that 10-minute writing promotes students' writing ability when rated holistically. Thus, the answer to the first research question of whether a free writing class activity led by a Japanese English teacher giving limited feedback can help students' writing abilities is affirmative.

Also, judging from the total number of words students used and the number of words per sentence, we can conclude that the students in Group A, who practiced 10-minute writing, improved their writing fluency. In addition, they wrote longer sentences with more unique words and used a greater variety of grammatical patterns to color their essays. Thus, the answer to the second research question of whether a teacher not giving grammatical correction as feedback invites a negative effect is that the lack of grammatical correction did not have a negative effect.

The fact that a fluency-based activity that provided feedback on content alone yielded significant positive results suggests that the traditional fixation of many Japanese high school teachers on grammatical structure corrections as feedback is misdirected.

That practice promotes fluency seems quite natural. However, many Japanese English teachers are afraid of not correcting students' mistakes. In this study, the teacher did not correct mistakes but gave oral feedback to some students right after collecting their papers and wrote short notes responding to the content of the essays when she returned their writing. Still, students appeared to want to write more; the teacher often saw their spontaneous English writing on the back of their exam papers or in their notebooks. Writing might be the most difficult skill if we insist on perfection, but even novice learners can enjoy the activities and the activities can motivate the learners.

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The purpose of 10-minute writing is to utilize this approach as an output activity and have students become more communicative when using English. Although the 10-minute writing activity was too short to be called extensive writing, it helped improve students' general English writing abilities as judged holistically by native English speakers and increased their fluency as demonstrated by a variety of quantitative measures.

### Bio Data

**Kazue Komiyama** is a high school teacher currently enrolled in a doctoral course at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies. She obtained an MA in educational counseling at Eastern Michigan University and an MEd in TESOL at Temple University Japan. Her interests include extensive writing, communicative teaching, and teacher training.

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### Appendix A

#### Ten-Minute Writing Topics

1. Self-introduction
2. Writing conversation (1)—pairwork
3. Writing conversation (2)—pairwork
4. What did you do yesterday?
5. What were you doing this time yesterday?
6. What is your plan for this coming weekend?
7. What do you want to be in the future?
8. What is "Hisho-sai"? (Hisho-sai is the name of the school festival)
9. Where will you take your friends from a foreign country?
10. Tell me about your summer vacation.
11. What would you want to be if you were reborn?
12. Which language will you choose to learn and why?
13. Which is more important: love or money? Why?
14. Write a story (1)—group work
15. Write a story (2)—group work

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**Appendix B**

**Instructions for Rating**

*Essay title: School should have classes on Saturdays, too.*

Please assign each of the attached student essays a single overall score on a 1-10 scale, where 1 = really bad, 5 = average, and 10 = really good. It is not necessary to make corrections to the essays.

**Appendix C**

**Grammatical Patterns (From Murakoshi, 2012)**

1 Sentence Pattern 1 (S V)	14 S V O ing	27 "may" (permission)	40 chance to ...	57 Past Progressive	74 Infinitive (adverb: cause)
2 Sentence Pattern 3 (S V O)	15 "it .... That"	28 "must" (necessity)	41 believe/find/suppose/take O to ...	58 Sentence Pattern 5 (call: noun)	75 It is ... for - to ~
3 Sentence Pattern 4 (S V O O) =Sentence Pattern 3 (S V O pre+O)	16 S V to... [that]	29 "should" (possibility)	42 be assumed/discovered/felt/ found/proved to ...	59 Tag Question	76 Conjunction "if"
4 S V+[that]	17 Relative Pronoun "whose"	30 Participial Construction Preceding Main Clause (Present Participle)	43 (... 's ...)'s	60 There is (are)	77 Conjunction "when"
5 S V+[that]	18 Pseudo-cleft Sentence Type I what S V	31 it ... to ~	44 "might" (permission)	61 "can" (ability)	78 Conjunction "because"
6 Non-subject WH questions	19 Indirect WH Questions wh- S V	32 Pseudo-cleft Sentence Type II	45 declare/presume/remember O to ... (O is S of infinitive)	62 "can" (request)	79 Gerund (object)
7 "something to ..."	20 WH Questions with Infinitive	33 what V	46 be presumed to ...	63 "can" (permission)	70 Gerund (Subject)
8 Past Participle Post-nominal Modification	21 "would rather""had better"	34 S V O [that]	47 S is tough to ...	64 be going to ...	81 Comparative Degree
9 Present Participle Post-nominal Modification	22 Participial Construction Following Main Clause (Present Participle)	35 S V O C (C=adjective)	48 be-verb (present tense, singular only)	65 will (volition, future)	82 Superlative Degree
10 "of..." belonging	23 "seem to ..." "be supposed to ..."	36 V/Adj to ...	49 General Verbs (present tense, singular, "do" only)	66 have to ...	83 Comparison of Equality
11 "may, can, might" (possibility)	24 want, like, expect +O+to ...	37 imagine/prefer O to ...	50 be-verb past tense forms	67 Could/Would you ... ?	84 Passive Mood
12 "must" (obligation)	25 S is easy to ...	38 be known/obliged/thought to ...	51 General Verbs past tense forms	68 Will you ... ?	85 Present Perfect
13 "should" (advice)	26 of (...)'s	39 S is difficult/good/hard to ...	52 S + V (=be) + C (=adjective)	69 Shall I ... ?	86 Relative Pronouns
			53 S + V + C (=adjective)	70 Infinitive (adverb: goal)	87 Adjectival Use of Prepositions
			54 Third-person Singular Present Tense	71 Infinitive (noun: object of verb)	
			55 Accusative Case	72 Infinitive (noun: complement)	
			56 Present Progressive	73 Infinitive (adjective)	