A Student-Generated List of Freewriting Topics

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Although freewriting is a popular fluency-focused writing activity, students often differ in their capacity, speed, and preference for self-selecting freewriting topics. This paper introduces a list of freewriting topics generated through empirical analysis of 631 self-selected freewriting samples produced by Japanese university students (*N* = 213). This list facilitates inclusive freewriting pedagogy by providing prompts to students who need such support without confining more autonomous students who prefer self-selecting their freewriting topics.

フリーライティングは、流暢さを重視した人気のライティングアクティビティである。しかし、フリーライティングのトピックを素早く決める力や好みが学生によって違いがしばしばある。本論文では、日本の大学生（*N* = 213）が自身で決めたトピックで書いた631件のフリーライティングサンプルを実証的に分析して集めたトピック一覧を紹介する。このリストは、自分でタイトルが決められない学生にとって有効で、やる気を引き出しながらフリーライティングが行える。それと同時に自分でトピックが決められる学生は、リストを使用せずに自由に書き進めることができる。

Freewriting is a popular fluency-focused writing activity in EFL classrooms in Japan. However, the manner of topic selection for freewriting tasks can pose problems. Although teachers often wish to give students the autonomy to write about topics of their choosing, studies have indicated that many students in Japan struggle to identify a topic quickly and begin writing. One solution to this problem is to provide a student-generated list that identifies a range of freewriting topics. To our knowledge, however, all available lists have been generated arbitrarily or in a top-down manner in which textbook writers or teachers have chosen the topics included on the lists. This paper introduces a list of student-generated topics derived from 631 freewriting samples for which Japanese university students (*N* = 213) selected their own topics. We will first discuss the benefits of freewriting and the various pre-existing topic lists. Next, we will discuss our methodology for collecting freewriting samples, coding and categorizing those samples, and developing the final list of popular freewriting topics among Japanese university students. We believe this list fills a pedagogical need inasmuch as it makes freewriting activities more inclusive; students who want to choose their topic independent of the list may do so, but students who prefer some extra guidance when selecting a topic will have a list of potential topics to which they can refer.

There are many popular activities commonly used by teachers of EFL writing in order to begin the writing process. Kroll (2001) listed brainstorming, listing, clustering, and freewriting as four such activities. Brainstorming is often a group exercise in which students share what they know about a topic. Listing and clustering are activities frequently completed individually in which students generate words or phrases related to a topic or keyword provided by the instructor. Unlike brainstorming, listing, or clustering, freewriting involves writing complete sentences.

Freewriting activities generally fall into two categories: guided and unguided. In guided freewriting, teachers provide a topic or focus, whereas in unguided freewriting activities they do not (Elbow & Belanoff, 2000; Elbow, 1998). The most important rule to freewriting is to write continuously. In a freewriting exercise, the writer writes

continuously for 10 minutes or longer about whatever comes to mind (Elbow & Belanoff, 2000). There is no editing, no going back—just writing (Elbow, 1998). This lack of editing applies to the teacher, too. In freewriting activities, the teacher does not comment, edit, or provide feedback on the student's writing. According to Elbow (1973), nonediting through freewriting will prevent the writer's words from being blocked and allow their thoughts to spill out onto the page. When a writer's words spill out onto the page, their writing becomes alive and powerful. According to Tanner (2016), for Japanese EFL students who may be anxious and risk-averse about their writing, freewriting can facilitate a different mindset that focuses on the content over form.

Several researchers have investigated the apparent benefits of freewriting over the past 40 years. Elbow (1981) argued that freewriting facilitates greater textual coherence, a contention that has been supported by other researchers (Galbraith & Torrance, 2004; Ong & Zhang, 2013). Penn and Lim (2016) found freewriting activities among Korean EFL students facilitated a significant increase in English proficiency in terms of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Moreover, Hwang (2010) credited freewriting activities with improving both student confidence and writing fluency. Several recent studies have focused upon writing fluency among Japanese university students and found that students wrote more fluently when they were able to self-select their own topics (Cohen, 2014; Dickinson, 2014; Leblanc & Fujieda, 2013; Ottoson & Crane, 2016; Sponseller & Wilkins, 2015). While Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1982) and Elbow's (1998) contention that freewriting is the most effective tool to improve one's writing ability may be an exaggeration, Li (2007) showed there is evidence that it is a worthwhile instructional tool and writing strategy.

Defining writing fluency is difficult and has long been an issue for researchers as explained by Fellner and Apple (2006). Bonzo (2008) defined fluency as simple unique token words divided by total token words: $F = U/T$. However several researchers, including Bonzo himself, noted the problematic nature of this definition of fluency as shorter writings sometimes received higher fluency ratings than longer writings. Both Ottoson and Crane (2016) and Sponseller and Wilkins (2015) used Carroll's (1967) formula that calculates fluency by dividing the total number of tokens by the square root of 2 multiplied by the total number of tokens: . Carroll's formula can identify the more fluent sample among the large and small samples. For example, using Carroll's formula, the shortest composition in Ottoson and Crane (2016) had a fluency score of 3.27, while the largest composition had a fluency score of 5.27.

Despite an increase in writing fluency when students selected their own topics, both Ottoson and Crane (2016) and Sponseller and Wilkins (2015) found that many students expressed a preference for teacher-selected topics (i.e., guided freewriting) over self-selected topics (i.e., unguided freewriting). For example, of the 51 students in Sponseller and Wilkins' study who were directly asked if they preferred guided or unguided freewriting, 22 responded that they preferred guided freewriting. One student said, "I think the topic that teacher gives us is good because it takes a lot of time to decide the topic." Another responded, "I prefer writing about teacher-selected topics because it is difficult to choose topics, and I can't come up with ideas immediately." Such reactions are not unexpected because the established notions that freewriting runs contrary to some students' learning preferences (Reid, 1995) or prior literacy training (Ferris & Hedgecock, 2004) are well established. Upon learning that many Japanese students prefer guided freewriting to its unguided counterpart, instructors might unconsciously avoid unguided freewriting.

Several attempts have been made to address this issue. Wang (2010) suggested a lack of topic-selection strategies as the culprit for the preference for teacher-selected topics and explored what topics university students in China wanted to write about. Likewise, Bonyadi (2014) sought to understand what freewriting topics were popular among university students in Iran. Both studies utilized a top-down approach when searching for topics by asking students to rate a list of teacher-selected topics. Additionally, Nation (2013) provided a list of 100 possible topics for short talks and 10-minute freewriting activities for EFL students. Specific research did not inform Nation's list; rather, he developed the list subjectively (Nation, personal communication, February 14, 2017). Moore and Barker's (2009) *Ready to Write* provided a list of topics derived from textbook prompts, which are frequently used by teachers and include the following topics: self-introductions, family, hometowns, school life, friends, part-time jobs, free time, childhood memories, trips and travel, dreams, and future plans. Participants in Kitzman's (2016) study were asked to rate 20 topics selected by the researcher. They were also allowed to write down additional topics of interest. Tanner (2016) provided a suggested list for freewriting topics for teachers to select, introduce to their students, and then have the students freewrite for 10 minutes.

A substantial body of freewriting research and resources for freewriting aimed at helping teachers and students with guided and unguided freewriting activities is available. The research summarized above asked students what they would hypothetically like to write about (Wang, 2010) or which teacher-derived topics would be most popular (Bonyadi, 2014). Nation, (2013), Moore & Barker, (2009), Kitzman, (2016), and Tanner (2016) provided top-down generated freewriting topics lists. However, at present, there have been no bottom-up studies exploring the topics

students actually choose to write about when given an unguided freewriting task. This study was aimed at addressing this issue.

Despite greater fluency during student-selected topics, as demonstrated in Ottoson and Crane (2016) and Sponseller & Wilkins (2015), students' preferences for teacher-selected topics struck the researchers as an interesting contradiction. The researchers developed curiosity about how teachers could assist students to choose topics quickly without infringing on their autonomy. We used the data from our previous studies (Ottoson & Crane, 2016; Sponseller & Wilkins, 2015) to formulate a list of student-generated freewriting topics. We determined that a list derived from a substantial body of original, unguided student freewriting would be of value in Japanese classrooms because this list offers a better idea of what Japanese university students want to write about, rather than teachers assuming what the students want to write about.

Method
Participants

The participants were 226 undergraduate students (83 male, 143 female) studying at two private universities in central Japan, hereinafter referred to as University A and University B. Participants were drawn from six intact, compulsory English courses at University A and eight intact, compulsory English classes at University B, thus constituting a convenience sample. All the participants were majoring in the humanities and social sciences. Students at University A were majoring in social sciences, literature, or policy science. Students at University B were either 1st-, 2nd-, or 3rd-year Japanese studies majors or 1st-year English majors. Participants' majors may have influenced the topics they chose to write about during freewriting activities.

In terms of English level, the literature majors at University A had TOEIC scores ranging from 340-500; the social sciences majors had TOEIC scores of 540-615. The students at University B did not provide TOEIC scores. However, by teacher estimates, most students could have been classified in the CEFR range of high A1/low A2 to A2/low B1. Prior to the freewriting activities, students at University B took an online vocabulary word size test (my.vocabsize.com). This test claims to measure the number of word families one has acquired in a particular language. Of the Japanese studies majors at University B, 63% had knowledge of 6,000-8,000 word families; the English majors ranged anywhere between 5700-9600 word families (Ottoson & Crane, 2016). For reference, Nation (2006) held that a vocabulary size of 6,000 words covers 98% of the words in children's movies. A vocabulary of 8,000 words is necessary for language users to handle unsimplified spoken language and written texts.

Procedures
Freewriting

Prior to producing the freewriting samples, participants were informed that they could withdraw from participating at any time and that participating had no influence on course grades. They were made aware that their writing samples would be collected and analyzed for research purposes. All participants included in the study signed consent forms. Six students declined to participate.

Students at both universities were introduced to the idea of freewriting as an exercise in which they were to write as much as possible, without revising or erasing, for 10 minutes. Students were encouraged to avoid using dictionaries or other resources while freewriting, but they were not forbidden to do so. At University A, the freewriting activity was introduced immediately without a practice session or any form of modeling. Students at University B, however, were provided 2 weeks of practice sessions prior to producing the freewriting used in this study. This difference in approach is due primarily to two different methodological approaches we employed when studying the impact of topic selection on writing fluency.

Students produced roughly six freewriting samples over the semester, three on teacher-selected topics and three on self-selected topics. The research presented here is focused solely upon the self-selected topics. In total, the 226 participants produced 631 self-selected freewriting samples: The 83 male students produced 217 samples and the 143 female students produced 415 samples. Many students were absent during one or more classes, so not every student produced three samples. In total, 189 (83.6%) students produced three samples, 29 (12.8%) produced two samples, and eight (3.5%) produced a single sample. The participants handwrote all freewriting samples and titles, and then we transcribed the samples in their entirety into MS Word format. Finally, the students gave a title to each of their samples.

Analysis

The analytic approach we used to develop a practical and data-driven list of popular freewriting topics consisted of several steps. First, we independently conducted an initial round of thematically coding the freewriting titles to identify salient themes/codes. Two of us identified around 22 themes/codes; the third felt eight broader themes/codes were sufficient.

In the second step, we discussed the initial themes/codes as a group. This discussion took place online via Google Hangouts. We spent 2 hours comparing respective coding

schemes and discussing which initial categories could be collapsed in order to create a manageable number of final themes. Throughout this process, we remained committed to the idea of producing a highly practical, teacher-friendly freewriting topic list. Certain themes/codes that had been coded separately were merged into broader themes for the second round of coding. Two of us had, for example, coded *family* and *friends* as distinct themes. After discussing the need to limit the number of total themes, we all agreed that a broader theme called *relationships* was appropriate. We settled upon 10 final codes to use moving forward: *life before university, university life, the future, entertainment, interests & hobbies, relationships, abstract ideas, travel, food & drink,* and *international topics.*

In the third step, we again individually coded the samples using the final 10 codes we had agreed upon. The fourth step involved comparing the second round of coding and discussing those samples whose coding we had not clearly agreed upon. In total, 34 of the 631 samples required group deliberation. For example, a few recurrent problematic sample titles were "my favorite season," "summer vacation," and "Okinawa." Individually, we struggled to code these titles, uncertain if they were most appropriately coded as *university life*, *interests & hobbies*, or *abstract ideas*. There was a consensus that "favorite season" fell most appropriately under the code *interests & hobbies*, a theme into which

many other "favorite" things had been coded. Discussing "summer vacation," we decided that because the samples were collected in a spring semester approximately one to two months prior to the summer holiday, this kind of title was most appropriately coded as *the future.* For place names like "Okinawa" and "Shiga," we looked at the original sample again to see if the content was about *travel, abstract ideas,* or their hometown (in which case, it was coded as *life before university*). See Table 1 for a summary of the 10 themes.

After all 631 samples were coded into the 10 agreed-upon themes, we then subcoded all the samples within each theme in order to arrive at approximately five prompts per theme. This process was easier for those themes with greater sample size.

The theme *abstract ideas* ($n = 47$) presented a challenge in terms of generating distinct prompts. The five prompts (concepts, skills, personal, society, things) generated were actually more like subthemes in themselves. For this reason, it was decided to expand the theme *abstract ideas* and present prompts (love, money, respect, worry, lies) within each of these five subthemes. The remaining samples ($n = 13$) did not fall into any of the subthemes. In the final version of our freewriting prompt list (see Appendix), this theme is presented last. We feel this makes the prompt list more intuitive to use and is in

Table 1. Final Themes and Prompts in Order of Popularity (N = 631)

Theme	Prompts by popularity					Other	n
	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5		
Interests & hobbies	my hobby (51)	sports (30)	favorite things & places (11)	shopping & fashion (8)	playing music (7)	(15)	122
University life	living situation (41)	last week(end) (34)	my part-time job (29)	club activities (9)	daily routines (6)	(0)	119
Entertainment	music (29)	movies (14)	celebrities (13)	television (7)	books (5)	(16)	84
Relationships	my family (28)	friends (14)	specific family member (13)	pets (7)	romantic partners (6)	(8)	76
International	international travel (14)	foreign languages (14)	study abroad (12)	a country I want to visit (3)	entertainment, culture, & politics (3)	(4)	50
Abstract ideas	concepts (12)	skills (7)	personal (6)	society (5)	things (4)	(13)	47
The future	vacation plans (17)	dreams for the future (7)	goals (4)	future job (5)	life after university (4)	(5)	42
Travel	traveling in Japan (18)	travel plans (2)	traveling with others (2)	the value of traveling (1)	best travel experience (1)	(10)	34
Food & drink	favorite food (12)	sweets (4)	Japanese food (3)	drinks (3)	diet & eating habits (2)	(7)	31
Life before university	my hometown (11)	high school life (6)	special memories (4)	school clubs (2)	school trips (1)	(2)	26

keeping with listing the most popular themes and prompts earlier in the list and the less common themes and prompts later in the list.

Conclusion

Previous research from Sponseller and Wilkins (2015) and Ottoson and Crane (2016) suggested that unguided freewriting in which students select their own topics facilitates greater writing fluency. However, the same studies found that many students prefer guided freewriting in which their teacher selects the topics for them. Further research can help discover more about topic preferences and the rationale behind those preferences. In the event that a teacher of L2 writing is simply using freewriting as a fluency-building activity, it would seem practical to give students absolute freedom to choose their topics. For those students who prefer some guidance, however, providing a list of topics such as the one we have established (see Appendix) may enable them to choose from a menu of student-derived topics that have proven popular among their peers at other Japanese universities. This flexible approach maintains freewriting as truly free for those students who like self-selecting their topics while providing several alternatives for those students who struggle to self-select. We believe this approach makes the task of freewriting for fluency development more efficacious—rather than deliberate on a topic, students are able to quickly begin their nonstop writing.

Bio Data

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Appendix
Most Popular Freewriting Prompts
10 Themes in Order of Popularity. 5+ Popular Topics per Theme.

Interests

My hobby * My favorite sport * My favorite place/thing * Where I like to shop * My fashion

University life

Last week/weekend * My part-time job * My club * My daily routine * My house/neighborhood

Entertainment

My music * My favorite movie * My favorite celebrity * My favorite TV program * My favorite book

Relationships

My family * My ____ (mother, father, sister…) * My friends * My pet * My boyfriend or girlfriend

International

My best trip abroad * Learning a foreign language * Studying abroad * A country I want to visit * Foreign culture

Future

My next vacation * My dream * My goals * My future job * My life after university

Travel

Traveling in Japan * My next trip * Traveling with my friends * My best trip * The value of travel

Food and drink

My favorite food * My favorite sweets * Japanese food * My favorite drink * My diet

Before university

My hometown * My high school * A special memory * My school club * My school trip

Other

Love * Money * Respect * Worry * Lies

Note: Based on Japanese university students' freewriting topics. 684 students: 249 male, 435 female.