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Rettig-Miki, Ellen
Sholdt, Gregory P.

(Citation)

神戸大学国際コミュニケーションセンター論集, 11:55-71

(Issue Date)

2014

(Resource Type)

departmental bulletin paper

(Version)

Version of Record

(JaLCD0I)

<https://doi.org/10.24546/81008804>

(URL)

<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14094/81008804>



Impact on L2 Writing Fluency of Topic Selection Method for a Timed Writing Activity

Ellen Rettig-Miki¹ Gregory P. Sholdt²

1. Introduction

A typical proclaimed goal for foreign or second language learners is becoming fluent in the target language. For these learners and many laypeople, the term *fluency* often refers to a high level of overall proficiency in a language; however, among language learning professionals, the term has a wide range of varying complex definitions (Brown, 2003, Koponen & Riggensbach, 2003, McCarthy, 2009). Lennon (1990) identifies the existence of a broader definition meaning the highest level of speaking ability but also points out that it also can refer to one isolated component of spoken language related to speed and natural flow. Nation (1997) defines fluency as “making the most effective use of what skills are already known” and highlights that it is “usually measured in terms of rate (words per minute) and lack of hesitation” (p. 30). While earlier conceptualizations of fluency focused on oral production, the term is also applied in discussions related to listening, reading, and writing as well (Schmidt, 2003). This paper centers on L2 writing fluency and describes a small-scale quantitative study that investigates aspects of a classroom activity that aims to promote the development of writing fluency among English language learners at a university in Japan.

When considering the distinctions in the definitions described by Lennon (1990), writing fluency can refer to an overall proficiency in L2 writing or one that relates to a specific component of writing: the ability to write quickly and smoothly. In a review of literature, Schoonen et al. (2003) highlight three components of knowledge and skills related to writing proficiency: linguistic knowledge, metacognitive knowledge, and fluent access of linguistic knowledge. They describe L2 writing fluency as “the ease with which words and grammatical structures can be accessed during writing.” (p. 8). Wolfe-Quintero et al (1998) define writing fluency as “a measure of the sheer number of words or structural units a writer is able to include in their writing within a particular period of time.” (p. 14). For Japanese university students preparing for timed writing tests such as the TOEFL writing tasks, concerns about writing fluency may be particularly salient; however, task completion time for nearly all forms of writing can be

¹ School of Languages and Communication, Kobe University, rettig-miki@garnet.kobe-u.ac.jp

² School of Languages and Communication, Kobe University, gsholdt@people.kobe-u.ac.jp

affected by limited development in writing fluency skills. Among the many goals for other language learners and teachers of other languages, engaging in activities that develop and improve writing fluency should be considered a valuable endeavor and part of a balanced language learning program.

Nation (1997) identifies three conditions for language learning activities necessary for the development of fluency; 1) there are limited demands on learners in terms of unfamiliarity, 2) the activity is primarily meaning-focused, and 3) learners are encouraged to perform at higher levels. He identifies one writing activity, continuous writing, that meets these conditions for fluency development in writing. Also referred to as *free writing* or *timed writing*, this activity typically focuses on having learners write as much as possible within a set time limit with no planning and limited regard for accuracy. For example, a teacher may ask students to write as much as they possibly can for 10 minutes on the topic of 'my best friend' and prohibit them from using dictionaries or stopping to think or plan during the time period. At the end of the activity, students may count and record the number of words they produced during the period. There are several aspects of the activity that can be manipulated by the teacher including the length of the task time, writing topic, use of dictionaries, and function of the activity in the larger lesson. By understanding the effects of varying aspects of an activity such as this, teachers can better use the activity as a tool to develop specific skills and balance a variety of tasks within their curriculum.

Bonzo (2008) conducted a study with American university students learning German and investigated the effects on writing fluency when students were allowed to select their own topics in a 10-minute timed writing activity as compared to writing on topics selected by the teacher. Once a week over a period of eight weeks, students either wrote for ten minutes on topics of their own choosing and or topics selected by the teacher. They were instructed to write as much as possible with no additional time set aside for planning. In order to compare writing fluency levels based on the written products, a general fluency index was employed based on a ratio of the number of unique words divided by the square root of twice the number of total words. This index was originally presented by Carroll (1967) as measure lexical complexity but argued by Bonzo to be a reasonable measure of fluency. Bonzo found that the writing fluency scores were statistically significantly higher when students were allowed to choose their own topics. Based on these findings, Bonzo suggested that intermediate language learners be given "a degree of freedom regarding the topics they write about" (p. 732).

The current study is a partial replication of Bonzo (2008) and aims to explore the effects on measures of writing fluency of manipulating one particular aspect of a timed writing activity, method of topic selection, gaining insight into students' perspectives of the activity, and determine if Bonzo's findings generalize to the situation with EFL learners in Japan. As such, the following research questions were investigated:

1. What is the effect of varying the topic-selection method on measures of writing fluency?

2. How do students perceive the different methods of topic selection?
3. How do students perceive the free writing activity as a language learning activity?

2. Methods

This study was conducted at a large, high-ranking public university in Japan. All students were part of a selective program designed for students who aspire to study abroad, either short or long term, in the future. Selection criteria for this program is based mainly on scores of the TOEFL (PBT) or TOEIC tests, depending on the student's chosen faculty. The range of scores on the TOEFL (N=27) was 507-775 and the mean score was 589. For students taking the TOEIC (N=25), the range fell between 510 and 800, and the mean score was 690.

The researcher gathered data in four classes: three reading classes, and one advanced writing class and was also the teacher of those classes. The reading courses were a required part of the special program, but the advanced writing course was an elective. Students who participated in the study were all sophomores majoring in Human Development, Literature, Economics, Business, Law, or Intercultural Studies. (One reading class consisted of strictly Human Development majors; the other classes were mixed.) As second year university students in this program, all had taken English oral and English reading courses in both the prior terms.

2.1 Writing sample and questionnaire collection

In each class, students were asked to spend 10 minutes writing continuously. Before initiating the first writing activity, the teacher talked about the benefits of regular writing practice in improving ability to express oneself in writing, in order to set up the pedagogical rationale of the activity. Students were clearly told that although they were required to do the activity as writing practice, they would not be graded negatively for grammar, usage, spelling, or mechanical errors. In fact, the researcher elected to not have the students write their names, only their student numbers, on each writing sample submitted. This allowed students a certain sense of anonymity and freedom from critique to further reassure them that they were not being graded in terms of accuracy or error.

Students, who all gave written consent to participate in the study, were informed that the study would be examining the amount written—and perhaps the grammatical complexity—of their writing, and they were encouraged to write as much and as quickly as possible. No preparation or planning time was given before the timer was set and students were expected to start writing. For each timed writing, a large, easily visible timer was placed in front of the class, and the researcher verbally stated “15 seconds remaining” when it hit 9 minutes, 45 seconds to allow the students to finish their sentences before the time expired. Students were asked to stop immediately when the 10 minutes were up, even if they were in the middle of a sentence, to ensure accurate measurement of amount of language produced in the given time. As in the original Bonzo (2008) study, students were allowed to use a dictionary if they wanted, although they were

reminded that doing so might reduce the amount they could write in the limited time.

Each class was divided into two roughly equally-sized groups for this activity. One half of the class wrote about a teacher-selected topics for four consecutive weeks, followed by four weeks of being free to select and write about their own topics. The other half of the class wrote about self-selected topics during the first four weeks and then later did the same teacher-selected topics as the other group, but in the second four week block. This split was designed as a counter-balance to compensate for possible higher fluency in whichever topic type was done later. Teacher-selected topics were decided based on likely commonality and relevance to a majority of students in the special program. See Table 1 for a list of topics and schedule.

Table 1. Writing Topics and Counter-Balance Schedule

| Week | Group A | Group B |
|------|--|--|
| 1 | Teacher-Selected Topic #1: My family | Free, Student-Selected Topic |
| 2 | Teacher-Selected Topic #2: Life at this university | Free, Student-Selected Topic |
| 3 | Teacher-Selected Topic #3: Travelling overseas | Free, Student-Selected Topic |
| 4 | Teacher-Selected Topic #4: A close friend of mine | Free, Student-Selected Topic |
| 5 | Free, Student-Selected Topic | Teacher-Selected Topic #1: My family |
| 6 | Free, Student-Selected Topic | Teacher-Selected Topic #2: Life at this university |
| 7 | Free, Student-Selected Topic | Teacher-Selected Topic #3: Travelling overseas |
| 8 | Free, Student-Selected Topic | Teacher-Selected Topic #4: A close friend of mine |

The classes varied slightly in the execution of the writing: three of the classes were conducted in CALL classrooms, so the students did their writing on computers, submitting them electronically when they finished. The remaining class was taught in a traditional classroom, and students did their writing with pen and paper. The week before the full study began, all students practiced a 10-minute writing sample about a topic of their own choosing in order to make sure that they were comfortable with the overall procedure before the actual study began.

At the end of the study, post-activity questionnaire was given in all classes, with six Likert items asking about perceptions of increased ease in writing, topic-selection preference, enjoyment, and desire to continue the activity.

2.2 Issues with sample collection

A number of issues arose as this study was being conducted across the four classes; adjustments needed to be made to deal with each, and both the issues and the adjustments may have had an impact on the final results. Although the researcher had intended to conduct the study

non-stop over 8 consecutive weeks, this did not happen for two of the classes. In the three reading classes, the course mid-term exam was scheduled while the study was on-going. In the first class of the morning, students did their regular writing sample before the exam, but were pressed for time in completing the exam. Consequently, for the two afternoon reading classes that day, the writing activity was omitted before the exam. This made for a 1-week break in the middle of the study for these classes.

Ultimately, only data from students who did all eight of the writing samples was used. Because the study began with a limited number of students, efforts were made to get all of the writing samples from every student. To deal with student absences, missed samples (i.e. on the specific teacher-selected topic or their own, student-selected one) were collected on an additional day at the end of the study. If a student had missed two samples, they were given another ten minutes to complete the second missed sample. (Students who had missed more than two samples were eliminated from the study.) However, these “made up” samples were out of the original designated order of being in the “teacher-selected topics first” or “student-selected topics first” counter-balance groups.

A related problem arose when a small number of students ignored their stated designation of “teacher-selected topics first” or “student-selected topics first” group and independently selected their topic assignment on a week-by-week basis. Various efforts were made by the researcher in each class to ensure students knew which topic to write on, but this direction was ignored by some. When the issue was discovered, the researcher checked the submissions afterward to make sure they were in the correct group.

A final small issue arose that could have potentially had an impact on the writing fluency of a given sample. The implicit assumption was that students were writing on a given topic only one time, so each writing sample was on a fresh topic, whether it was a student-selected topic or a teacher-selected topic. However, some students who were in the group who did self-selected topics during the first part of the course by chance selected as one of their topics one of the teacher-generated topics. Consequently, later in the term they ended up writing about the same topic when it was assigned to them as a teacher-selected topic.

2.3 Response and return

The researcher collected each writing sample and commented on the contents, with the written comments being generally brief and affirmative, in line with what was done in the Bonzo study. The teacher wanted the comments to convey clearly that the contents had been read and attended to, but that the writing style and grammar were not being judged. Grammatical errors were neither marked nor corrected. In order to preserve relative student anonymity, the writing samples were returned to the students in a folder with the writing samples stacked in order by student number; students anonymously re-collected their writing with the teacher’s comments.

2.4 Data analysis

In preparation for the data analysis, all hand-written entries were first word-processed. Misspelled words and ungrammatical structures were transcribed as faithfully as possible to the original. The researcher then used the Text Content Analysis Tool from the website, UsingEnglish.com (www.usingenglish.com) to calculate the total word count and the total unique word count of each sample.

This study adopted the fluency index used by Bonzo (2008) in order to faithfully replicate the original study. However, it should be noted that there are different measures of fluency, e.g., Harshon (2008) relied on the use of a total word count for a measure of writing fluency as advocated by Wolfe-Quintero et al. (1998). Additionally, the ratio of unique words to total words of a written sample provides a seemingly meaningful calculation about language production. However, this simple ratio fails to account for the difference between writers who have identical ratios of unique words to total words, but who differ by producing either a lot of language or by producing only a little. To adjust for this, a Fluency Index calculation, figured as the number of unique words divided by the square root of twice the total number of words, was used. This replicates the method used by Bonzo (2008), following Carroll (1967). A two-tailed dependent *t* test ($\alpha=0.05$) was calculated to compare the fluency index means for the two topic-selection conditions. Basic descriptive statistics were calculated and qualitative data were reviewed and summarized in order to address the other research questions.

3. Results

While the main research question centers on the particular index of writing fluency employed by Bonzo (2008), the following tables provide overviews of more readily interpretable indications of the students' production during the 10-minute free writing activities: total number of words written and unique words written.

Table 2. Total Words for Each Sample (N=52)

| | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|----------------------|---------|---------|-------|----------------|
| Student-selected 1st | 63 | 240 | 113.7 | 34.5 |
| Student-selected 2nd | 57 | 201 | 111.1 | 34.4 |
| Student-selected 3rd | 56 | 211 | 109.6 | 29.8 |
| Student-selected 4th | 48 | 262 | 107.9 | 34.2 |
| Teacher-selected 1st | 40 | 238 | 117.4 | 36.7 |
| Teacher-selected 2nd | 63 | 237 | 113.3 | 35.5 |
| Teacher-selected 3rd | 53 | 235 | 112.5 | 34.6 |
| Teacher-selected 4th | 53 | 236 | 110.0 | 33.4 |

Table 2 shows the range of the total number of words produced by the students in each of the writing sessions for both topic selection method conditions. The range from around 50 to above 200 indicates a fairly wide range of production among the students. The overall means are somewhat consistent in the low 100's with a trend of a slight decrease from the first writing of each method to the last.

Table 3. Unique Words for Each Sample (N=52)

| | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|----------------------|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Student-selected 1st | 42 | 127 | 67.6 | 16.6 |
| Student-selected 2nd | 40 | 110 | 68.4 | 17.0 |
| Student-selected 3rd | 40 | 115 | 68.2 | 14.9 |
| Student-selected 4th | 37 | 138 | 67.0 | 15.7 |
| Teacher-selected 1st | 34 | 113 | 71.2 | 17.1 |
| Teacher-selected 2nd | 43 | 127 | 69.1 | 16.4 |
| Teacher-selected 3rd | 39 | 107 | 68.0 | 14.6 |
| Teacher-selected 4th | 31 | 122 | 69.6 | 16.7 |

Table 3 shows the range of the unique number of words produced by the students in each of the writing sessions for both topic selection method conditions. The range from around 40 to above 100 is logically more restricted than that for the total words. The overall means are somewhat consistent in the mid 60's with no observable trends across progressive sessions.

3.1 Effect of Topic Selection Method on Writing Fluency (Research Question 1)

When factoring in unique words along with total words in the fluency index outlined in Bonzo (2008), information from both tables are combined into a less directly interpretable index. Table 4 shows that there is generally a consistent range across all the writing sessions.

Table 4. Fluency Index Means for Each Writing Sample (N=52)

| Writing Sample | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|----------------------|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Student-selected 1st | 3.52 | 5.80 | 4.47 | .50 |
| Student-selected 2nd | 3.63 | 5.72 | 4.58 | .53 |
| Student-selected 3rd | 3.48 | 5.71 | 4.60 | .48 |
| Student-selected 4th | 3.74 | 6.03 | 4.57 | .45 |
| Teacher-selected 1st | 3.76 | 5.68 | 4.65 | .48 |
| Teacher-selected 2nd | 3.47 | 5.83 | 4.60 | .50 |
| Teacher-selected 3rd | 3.44 | 5.87 | 4.55 | .42 |
| Teacher-selected 4th | 3.01 | 5.95 | 4.68 | .56 |

The overall means for the two conditions are close (see Table 5) with only a slightly higher level of fluency found in the teacher-selected topic selection method (mean difference = .064); however, the difference was found to be statistically significant ($t(51) = 2.048, p = .046$).

Table 5. Mean of Fluency Index Means by Topic Selection Method (N=52)

| Selection Method | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|------------------|------|----------------|
| Student-selected | 4.55 | .40 |
| Teacher-selected | 4.62 | .39 |

This result indicates that when students choose their own topics in the free writing activity, they tend to write less fluently as measured by the fluency index.

3.2 Student Perceptions of Different Topic Selection Methods (Research Question 2)

In order to gain deeper insight into the fluency index assessments, questionnaire data based on student perceptions of the two topic assignment methods were investigated. Two 5-point Likert scale items in the questionnaire directly address preferences for writing in each topic selection method. When asked if students preferred writing about the teacher-selected topics, the mean response was 3.62 (SD = .91), and when asked similarly about writing the free selected topics, the mean response was 2.67 (SD = .87). This result indicates a slight preference for writing the teacher selected topics. An open-ended follow-up question asked students if they felt that their writing was better when they chose the topic (see Table 6).

Table 6. Student perception of writing better when selecting their own topic (N=52)

| Response | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Better in Student-selected | 15 | 28.8 |
| Better in Teacher-selected | 32 | 61.5 |
| Pros and Cons in Both | 3 | 5.8 |
| No Difference | 2 | 3.8 |

While the differences in overall writing fluency between the two topic selection methods were slight, the expressed preference and sense of level of writing was stronger in favor of the teacher-selected topics. The results can better be understood when looking at the qualitative data collected. Two main themes came out from these responses; some students struggled to identify a theme to write. The need for extra time to come up with a good topic can explain the lower fluency index scores in the free topic selection condition. Additionally, students indicated that the topics that they choose to write about ended up being too difficult, requiring them to spend extra time looking up words in the dictionary and struggling to find appropriate ways to express their

ideas.

3.3 Student Opinions of the Timed Writing Activity (Research Question 3)

In order to gain deeper insight into the students' experience and opinions of timed writing as a learning activity, the end of activity questionnaire included several 5-point Likert-scale items (see Table 7).

Table 7. Student Opinions of the Timed Writing Activity (N=52)

| Opinion | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|------|----------------|
| Writing 10 minutes became easier after eight sessions | 3.52 | .96 |
| My writing ability improved after eight sessions | 3.15 | .87 |
| The activity was enjoyable | 3.40 | .87 |
| I want to do the activity in the future | 3.52 | .99 |

Overall, the reaction to the writing activity tended to be positive with means above the neutral choice of 3 moving into the positive end of the scale. While the students indicated that they were more easily able to do the activity with more experience, they seemed somewhat less sure that their writing ability had improved after eight sessions. The activity was only rated negatively by nine of the participants (17.3%) in terms of enjoyment and by seven participants (7.7%) in terms of interest in doing it in the future.

4. Discussion

At a fundamental level, in order to produce language (either in speaking or writing) to talk about a topic quickly and smoothly, the person communicating needs to have 1. something s/he wants to say about the topic and 2. the vocabulary and language structures to be able to express it. This research helps explore the question of whether allowing students to select their own topics to write about, or having a teacher give them a pre-selected topic to write about, will produce higher fluency in their writing. Intuitively, it would also be expected that repetition of the activity would increase both student's writing speed and comfort level in writing about various topics.

4.1 Implications of results to Research Question #1: Effect of Topic Selection Method on Writing Fluency

The original study by Bonzo (2008) that this one partially replicated showed that L2 students of German demonstrated a significantly higher level of writing fluency when they chose their own topics, as opposed to when the teacher selected the writing topic. In a similar study with Japanese students writing in L2 English classes, Grogan and Lucas (2012) reached the same

conclusion, with student-selected topics yielding significantly higher fluency index scores.

The findings of this study produced results in the opposite direction. Looking at the fluency index means for this small-scale study ($N=52$), the student-selected topics ($m=4.55$) and teacher-selected topics ($m=4.62$), show a small but statistically significant difference ($t(51)=2.048$, $p=.046$) favoring the teacher-selected topics.

A variety of factors could potentially contribute to this. First of all, the teacher-selected topics in this study (1. My family, 2. Life at this university, 3. Travelling overseas, and 4. A close friend of mine) were chosen carefully to be solid, general topics that likely every writer would know well about, have specific knowledge regarding, and have an inherent interest in. “My Family” and “A Close Friend of Mine” were topics students would likely be able to expand on, and “Life at this University” and “Travelling Overseas” would be noteworthy to university students in a program geared toward potential future study overseas. Secondly, considering the overall relatively high level of language knowledge/ability demonstrated by their TOEIC or TOEFL scores, none of these topics should have placed an excessive demand on the writers to use unknown or particularly technical/specialized vocabulary. It is unlikely that they would need to use a dictionary, or be stumped for language as they wrote.

In addition, when writing about the teacher-selected topics, students could immediately begin commenting about the topic, without spending time selecting a topic to write about. The timer was set and students were expected to begin writing almost immediately after the task was set up each day, meaning that students doing their own student-selected topics had to quickly come up with a topic to write about, before composing. (After the first week, of course, students in this group could have theoretically considered a topic to write about before class, though whether they had or not was not an angle this study explored.) Since the sum of total and unique words, as well scores on the fluency index, were dependent on the amount of language produced, fluency would have been lowered if students spent a longer time trying to decide on a topic to write about. This too may partially account for the higher numbers for the teacher-selected topics.

4.2 Implications of results to Research Question #2: Student Perceptions of Different Topic Selection Methods

In the questionnaire students filled out at the end of the study, responses given on student perceptions about topic selection methods mirrored the differences in actual fluency as observed in the previous section. In two separate Likert-style items, students revealed that they considered their writing better on the teacher-selected topics. Only 28% of the students ($N=52$) said that they felt their writing was better when doing the “free,” student-selected topics; in response to another item, 61.5% said that their writing was better on the teacher-selected topics. Below are some relevant student responses to the open-answer question “Do you feel your writing was better when you chose the topic? If not, why not?”

- *It's easier for me to be given a decided topic, because, in limited times, it's very waste of time to think what to write. If a topic was given, I can easily start writing.*
- *No, I don't, because I can't decide what should I write about. I always overthinking about topic.*
- *I don't feel like it. I'm poor at conveying my thought in words. It will take very much time for me to make the outline of the context I'd like to write. I'm not good at finding topics and connecting them with other points and my opinions.*

For students who preferred the teacher-selected topics, the benefit of not having to spend time thinking up a topic to write about was mentioned repeatedly, but students also did comment on the depth and quality of the teacher-selected topics in producing good writing:

- *I don't think so, because my topic is more abstract or superficial, it's difficult to choose the topic and I use the dictionary more time.*
- *I don't think so because I don't have so various topics to write. So I can't often decide the topic by myself. The chosen topics draw my thought out.*
- *I think selected topic is better. It is because when we write free topic we tend to write about what we can think easily. However, in selected topic we sometime write about topic which is difficult to write, so, we try hard and writing will be good.*

Although a solid majority of the comments reflected a preference for teacher-selected topics, there were some that explained why they preferred to select their own topics:

- *I feel my writing was better when I chose the topic. It may be because the topic I chose was what I always thought.*
- *Yes, I feel my writing was better when I chose the topic because when I chose a topic, it means that I have something to write about that. Therefore, it makes easier and better writing.*

Not all students felt there was a significant difference in who selected the topic:

- *I think there are not difference between selected topic or free topic. It's because I don't have good ideas for journal writing topics. I wrote the same level writing every time.*
- *I cannot judge. In case of free topic, the topic can be not good, but I can express whatever I like.*

One student made concrete suggestions on future topics:

- *I think it is good, but it would be better if there are more various topics, such as social, or economical topics, and the topics become gradually difficult.*

These comments, looked at overall, indicate that having a good, engaging topic and having something to say about it, regardless of whether it was student or teacher generated, was important to most students. For students who preferred the teacher to come up with the topics, the reasons were mainly that it took time and imagination to do so; in the time-pressured activity, this was often a negative factor.

4.3 Implications of results to Research Question #3: Student Opinions of the Timed Writing Activity

In the final questionnaire, responses on six Likert items regarding student opinions of the timed writing activity, and responses to the open-ended question “How would you feel about continuing the 10-minute writings?” showed an overall positive response to the activity. Means for all of the six Likert items were above a 3 (neutral). (See Table 6.)

Two of the superficially similar items, “It became easier to write for 10 minutes after doing the activity at least 8 times” and “My ability to write for 10 minutes improved by the 8th writing” garnered slightly different responses. Mean response to the item regarding improved ability was slightly lower at 3.15. If we consider fluency as measured by the fluency index an indication of improvement, in fact, progressive increases were not seen. Despite this, written comment in the open-ended question indicated a sense of improvement for many:

- *This is very useful for improving my English skill: rated “4”*
- *At first, it's difficult for me to finish writing in 10 minutes, but now, I can finish writing in 10 minutes. So I feel I could improve my writing abilities: rated “5”*

Even though some of those who had rated their sense of having improved as neutral (3) on the Likert item specifically mentioned a sense of improvement.

- *I think it's good to be used to writing in English. This will be connected to improving speaking skill: rated “3”*
- *Continuing the 10 minute writing give me ability to write 100 words English essay, so it is good for me: rated “3”*
- *Though it is difficult, I feel “I'm training my brain (mind)” every time. It will be useful later on: rated “3”*

One student noted:

- *It's good practice, I think. However the effect of this practice depends on the abilities and effort of students: rated "3"*

Two students who rated this item as only a "2" nevertheless said:

- *I believe it will help me to improve my English skills.*
- *I think the 10 minute writings are good practice for improving our writing skill, but I can't enjoy timed writing, sorry.*

The related Likert item, asking students to rate if they perceived the activity to become easier after eight times, the mean was slightly higher at 3.52.

- *At first, it's difficult for me to finish writing in 10 minutes, but now, I can finish writing in 10 minutes. So I feel I could improve my writing abilities: rated "5"*

In addition, some mentioned practical future application for the activity.

- *It's helpful to practice writing for TOEFL: rated "3"*

Increased enjoyment was also noted:

- *I like writing, so I enjoy this time every week. Sometimes I can't come up with correct word to express my feeling, so I need to more study English: rated "5"*
- *I feel a fun to express various thinkings and glad to receive the polite message by my teacher: rated "4"*
- *At first, I didn't like this writing activity. However, as I take the classes, I come to regard it as fun like "what is the topic today?" or "what I'm going to write about?": rated "5" for increased ease and "4" for enjoyment*

4.4 Generalizability

The students who participated in this study were all in a program at a well-regarded national university that required a fairly high level of English skill to enter, and all had expressed some interest in studying abroad in the future. Consequently, their overall writing fluency, attitudes toward selection of writing topics, and overall impressions of this activity may not be representative of the average Japanese university student not in such a selective, communication-skill focused program.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary

This small-scale study using short a short timed-writing activity in four classes, yielded the following results:

(Research Question #1) Teacher-selected topics produced a higher level of writing fluency (as measured by a Fluency Index) over student self-selected topics

(Research Question #2) Students preferred teacher-selected topics over their own student-selected topic by a substantial margin

(Research Question #3) Students perceived the activity as being valuable in improving their writing skill, often enjoying it and hoping to continue doing it

5.2 Pedagogical Implications/ Direct Application

Although previous studies had pointed towards self-selected writing topics as producing more fluent writing, the results of this study in the particular context of higher-level students with aspirations to study abroad indicated a clear preference for teacher-generated topics. A primary factor in this preference seemed to be difficulty for the students in coming up with a relevant topic “on-the-spot” while being timed, or the struggle to find a topic of sufficient depth for development that still held inherent interest to the writer.

For teachers focused on increasing students’ writing fluency through this activity, possible alternatives to giving students a single, randomly determined teacher-generated topic or simply allowing a free student-selected topic would be

1. Provide a list of teacher-generated topics and give it to the students at the beginning of the term, prior to the commencement of the regular classroom activity, allowing the students to roughly consider the topics before being asked to write about them in a timed situation during class. Topics could then be either a.) randomly selected each time by students in that class, or b.) given in a specific order, perhaps in order of increasing complexity
2. Have students generate a list of self-selected topics that they would be interested in writing about, and felt that they would like to expand on in 10-minute writing activities; have them make this list at the beginning of the term and bring it to each class, allowing them to select their topic for the activity from their own list immediately before each timed writing activity
3. Link the timed writing topics in concept to reading or listening material or discussion topics currently being focused on in class; this could provide a basis for increased complexity of the topics and ensure that the student had thought about the topic prior to writing about it

5.3 Future Directions for Research

The data gathered from this study could lead to research in several additional directions. Moving forward from this study, the preference for teacher-selected topics in the timed writing

activity could also be explored in more depth. For example, a more extensive examination of what specific teacher-selected topics produce the highest fluency indexes in student writing could be investigated. Another interesting area of inquiry would be in examining which student-selected topics were most favored, even if only to determine preferred teacher-selected topics for the future. The issue of complexity in writing produced, dealt with in the original Bonzo (2008) study, would also be a rich area for further exploration. In this vein, an interesting research direction to move in might be to seek to determine if there is a difference in linguistic complexity produced by students depending on the specific topic. In an entirely different direction, on a purely executional level, examining the amount of production of students writing by hand vs. writing on computer might provide insight into which medium allows for greater fluency.

5.4 Final Comments

Fluency in writing, while difficult both to define and to quantify, is a critical area for development in L2 learners. L2 writers may be confronted with on-demand writing tasks, either in standardized tests such as portions of the TOEFL or TOEIC writing tasks, in overseas academic courses, or later in real-life work situations in an increasingly globalized world. University teachers can help build facility in L2 writing, as well as perceived comfort with such tasks, by offering regular practice with timed writing tasks. Research and exploration into the mechanics of how to best maximize L2 writing fluency—through topic selection, writing medium, type of feedback, or other areas—will benefit classroom practice and help guide students toward more fluent writing.

Acknowledgements

This research study was conducted as a part of the 2014 Quantitative Research Training Project.

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Impact on L2 Writing Fluency of Topic Selection Method for a Timed Writing Activity

Ellen Rettig-Miki Gregory P. Sholdt

Fluency in writing, while difficult both to define and to quantify, is a critical area for development in L2 learners. L2 writers may be confronted with on-demand writing tasks, either in standardized tests such as portions of the TOEFL or TOEIC writing tasks, in overseas academic courses, or in real-life work situations in an increasingly globalized world. This paper centers on L2 writing fluency and describes a small-scale quantitative study that investigates aspects of a timed writing classroom activity with high-level English language learners at a Japanese university. The main findings of the study were that writing on teacher-selected topics produced slightly higher fluency scores over freely chosen student-selected topics, and that students indicated a clear preference for teacher-selected topics. Results of the study may help inform pedagogical decisions in the development of writing fluency.