

Faculty of Foreign Studies Students and Timed Free Writing: Effects on Word Production and Attitudes.

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1. Introduction

Writing continues to be a key skill for Japanese EFL students. Recently, some university entrance exams are moving away from Japanese to English translation questions to written opinion tasks (Asahi, 2023), and the Eiken exam has similarly increased its writing proportion (Eiken, 2023), so the ability of English students to generate ideas and write about them impromptu in a short period of time is essential. Despite this, compulsory English education in Japan lacks writing activities in which students write their own ideas (MEXT, 2016) and this continues into high school where students mostly do sentence level L1-L2 translation (Mulvey, 2016). It is therefore essential that university English writing classes compensate for this gap. One way to do this is timed free writing. Timed free writing is an activity in which students write freely for a certain period of time (often 10 minutes) either on a set topic (known as guided), or a topic of their choosing (unguided / self-sponsored). There may be preparation time such as brainstorming or discussion, and/or subsequent reflection time, or it may simply be the timed free writing only. Tanner (2016) summarised the ‘rules’ of timed free writing as: 1. “Write continuously and

as much as possible, focusing on content and ideas”, 2. “Pay no attention to grammar, spelling, neatness, or style”, 3. “No erasers or dictionaries are allowed”, 4. “Do not grade or correct FW.”, and finally 5. “When the time is up, students count the number of words and write it on the paper” (pg 10). Advantages of timed free writing are increased writing fluency and a freedom to write without an over-focus on form. On the other hand, this lack of focus on form may lead to errors remaining in students’ output (Tanner, 2016). Especially in university writing classes that often focus on students writing a few compositions (paragraphs or essays) very carefully and accurately, an activity that focuses on the opposite skills of fluency and expression should be valuable for students. This study will examine if timed free writing is a beneficial activity for students in the Faculty of Foreign Studies, in terms of effect on word production and student attitudes.

2. Literature review

Several studies have investigated the effect of timed free writings on students at the university level. A key study is Hwang (2010) at the University of Hawai’i, who examined 208 timed free

writing compositions (guided, for 15 minutes) by eight EFL (Thai L1) college-level students over eight weeks. The compositions were analyzed in terms of words per minute to measure writing fluency, and pretest and posttest writings were compared in terms of textual fluency and rated for quality. The results showed a statistically significant positive influence on students' writing fluency, with the mean words per minute (WPM) production increasing from 4.82 in the pretest to 8.28 WPM in the posttest. The quality score, as rated by Hwang and a colleague, also increased by an average of 10 points (the quality score included aspects such as organisation, content, language use and mechanics). Furthermore, the students agreed strongly with the words / phrases 'like', 'increases English writing fluency', 'meaningful', 'educational', and 'rewarding' in terms of their timed free writing experience in the study.

In the Japanese context, Shiobara (2014) investigated the changes in length of two writing classes' timed free writings (guided, five minutes preparation time, followed by five minutes writing) over 11 weeks. She found the mean number of lines produced by students increased from 8.2 to 12. In the final class, she also carried out a face-to-face discussion which elicited positive feedback.

Similarly, Farmer (2020) examined two first-year reading and writing classes in Japan, in which timed free writing exercises (unguided, 10 minutes, followed by 10 minutes paired reading and discussion) took place over 13 sessions, with 37 students included in the final analysis. The writing output increased from a mean of 12.51 words per minute in session 1 to 18.59 in session 11. A questionnaire to assess student attitudes was also

conducted. Key findings were: 60% of students reported that timed free writing became easier, 63% stated their thinking fluency improved, 91% liked choosing their own topic, and 94% were satisfied with the length of writing.

Likewise, Hamciuc (2024) conducted a study in two first-year Japanese national university classes consisting of 79 students. The timed free writing came at the end of a Sustainable Development Goals focused class and was 8 - 10 minutes 'storytelling' based on a first sentence prompt, for example, "My brother became a soldier to get us money" (pg 58). An overall increase was recorded in writing volume and writing speed for the first 6 - 7 sessions, although there was a 'dip' in session 4 and at the end, which were posited to be caused by fatigue at that particular time in the semester for session 4 (May sickness) and the lack of a timed free writing activity in the penultimate session to explain the reduction in the final session. A survey of student attitudes towards timed free writing was also carried out; the respondents were the subjects of the study and some others that had also done timed free writing in another class. 91% reported a 'somewhat positive' or 'very positive' sentiment regarding timed free writing.

There is therefore substantial support for timed free writing to increase student word production (writing fluency) and elicit positive student reactions.

3. Method

Two writing classes, one first-year class of 15 students and one second-year class of 16 students, took part in the study. Students were required to write for 10 minutes reacting to 15 prompts over a

14-week semester. These prompts were designed to elicit a variety of types of writing (expository / reflective / narrative / descriptive). Students were instructed to brainstorm / research for 2 - 5 minutes, write continuously by hand for 10 minutes (it was emphasised that the expression of ideas was the goal, not grammar or vocabulary), and then reflect on their writing (noticing any errors or places to be improved) for 2 - 5 minutes. The first prompt was carried out in the first class to model the procedure, and the following 13 were completed for homework. Each week the students' completion and word count were checked by the teacher. In the final class, the 15th prompt was completed (prompts can be found in Appendix A). Students would receive 10% of their final grade for completion of the timed free writings, but the quality of their writing would not be checked and would have no bearing on their grade. Having the timed free writing be part of their final grade was thought to encourage completion. Also in the final class, students filled in a bilingual questionnaire about their previous experience of timed free writing using closed and open questions, and their attitudes towards the timed free writing activities using a Likert scale and one open question. Questions probed issues like enjoyment, time consumption, sense of improvement, opinion on lack of teacher grading, topic choice and desire to continue timed free writing (provided in Appendix B). One first-year student was absent from the final class and so was not included in the analysis.

4. Results

First, there was a difference between the first year and second year students' experiences with timed

free writing. 63% of the second-year students stated they had done timed free writing before, frequently citing their first-year writing class. 50% of the first-year students stated they had done timed free writing before, but when their description of the activity was checked, it often referred to a single timed free writing task in an exam or infrequent tasks in a class involving an ALT. Only two first-year students claimed they had done timed free writing regularly before (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1

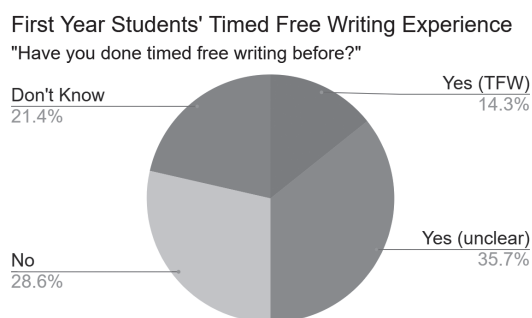
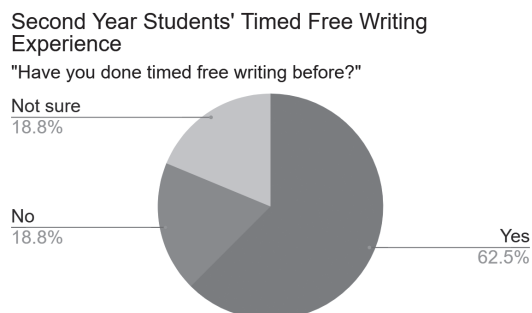


Figure 2



Second, despite the literature discussed previously showing the efficacy of timed free writing on writing production, in this study neither class showed a significant difference between the word counts of the first and last timed writings as proven with a paired T-test (see Figure 3 and Figure 4, T-test results in Appendix C). Despite this, 60% of the students stated that they "felt timed /

extensive writing improved my writing fluency” in the questionnaire.

Finally, the students had a mostly positive attitude towards the timed free writing activities. Particularly high scoring statements were 90% of the students answering 4 or 5 with regards to Question 5. ‘I enjoyed writing about the variety of topics provided’ and 67% answering 4 or 5 to Question 3. ‘I enjoyed writing without thinking about grammar / vocabulary too much.’ A notably low scoring statement was 67% disagreeing (answered 1 or 2) to Question 6. ‘It was a waste of time to write something that was not graded for quality.’

Perhaps the most important questions were Q9. ‘I would like to do timed free writing again’ and Q10. ‘I felt timed free writing improved my writing fluency.’ For Q9, 53% expressed a desire to do timed free writing again, and for Q10 60% stated

that timed writing had improved their writing fluency. (see Figure 5 and Figure 6)

Figure 5

First Year Students' Attitudes to Timed Free Writing

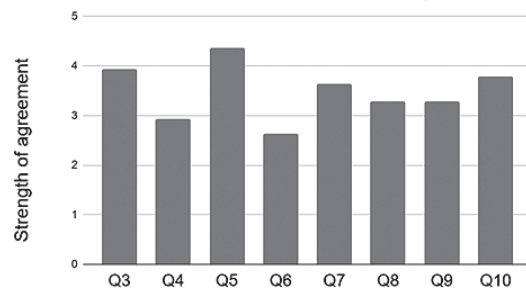


Figure 6

Second Year Students' Attitudes to Timed Free Writing

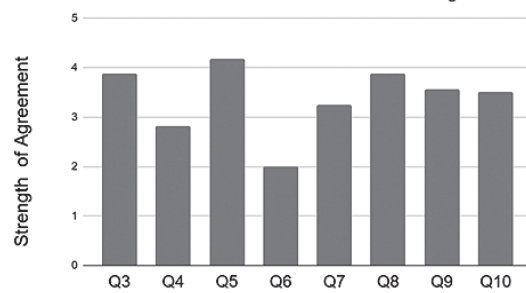


Figure 3

Average Timed Free Writing Word Counts of First Year Students

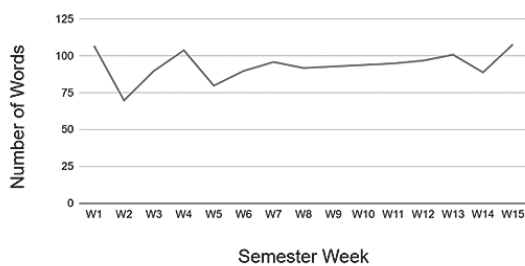
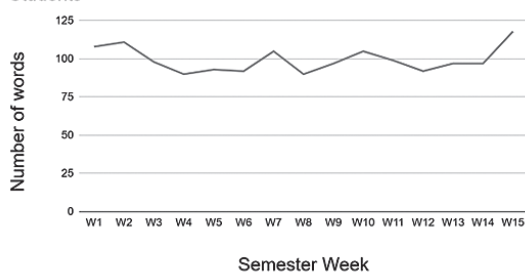


Figure 4

Average Timed Free Writing Word Counts of Second Year Students



Key

- Q3. I enjoyed writing without thinking about grammar / vocabulary too much.
- Q4. Writing something each week took too much time.
- Q5. I enjoyed writing about the variety of topics provided.
- Q6. It was a waste of time to write something that was not graded for quality.
- Q7. I would prefer to write about topics I chose myself.
- Q8. I enjoyed writing that was not graded for quality.
- Q9. I would like to do timed free writing again.
- Q10. I felt timed free writing improved my writing fluency.

5. Discussion

The lack of increased word count was surprising as other studies (outlined in the literature review) have shown such an outcome. There are several reasons why this may have occurred in this study. First, the 14 weeks may have been too short for the effect to be seen. If the timed free writing study was continued into the following semester an increase may have occurred. However, the studies discussed in the literature review were of a similar or even shorter length, so that does not seem feasible. Second, and more likely, in this study (unlike the studies in the literature review), the students completed the timed free writings 2 - 14 unsupervised at home. Therefore the students may not have completed the timed free writing correctly, and that adversely affected the results. To ensure the students complete the timed free writings following procedure strictly, all should be completed in class. This would guarantee more reliable results.

The attitudes towards the timed free writing activities were notably positive. This is in keeping with the other studies discussed in the literature review. As already mentioned in the results, 90% of the students reported they enjoyed writing about the variety of topics provided and 67% enjoyed writing without thinking about grammar / vocabulary too much. Because university students are very busy and understandably focused on getting obvious benefits as quickly as possible, it would be reasonable if they agreed with the statement 'Writing something each week took too much time' (Q4), but in fact only 27% agreed (marked 4 or 5). 67% also disagreed that it was a waste of time to write something that was not graded for quality.

This shows that students are capable of appreciating the long-term and covert effects of timed free writing on their English skills.

Students seem ambivalent about whether the topics should be chosen for them or not. 90% of the students answered they enjoyed writing about the variety of topics provided, but conversely 43% stated they would prefer to write about topics they chose themselves and 40% were uncommitted (marked 3 for Q7). So teachers can feel free to do guided or unguided timed free writing depending on personal preference or class goals.

In terms of the differences between the first- and second-year students' attitudes, the first-year students seemed to be more doubtful of the benefits of timed free writing as they agreed more strongly with Q6. 'It was a waste of time to write something that was not graded for quality' - the mean average answer for first year students was 2.6 and for second year students was 2. The first-year students were also more likely to disagree with Q8. 'I enjoyed writing that was not graded for quality' with the first-year students' mean average answer being 3.3 and the second- years' 3.9. This perhaps reflects the second-year students' higher likelihood of experience with timed free writing and its associated benefits, or it could be due to first-year students still being influenced by the teacher-focused methods of high school.

6. Conclusion

This study suggests that to achieve the full benefits of timed free writing, all the activities should be carried out in class. Taking 10-15 minutes of class time to do timed free writing is significant, and teachers should consider what their particular goals

are for the class and implement accordingly. It also suggests that students have no preference for unguided or guided timed free writing, so again, specific class goals and instructor discretion are key.

In the literature reviewed in this study, there are various procedures of timed free writing - presence or lack of preparation time, post-discussion, etc. However, none of the student surveys in the previous studies or this study investigated attitudes regarding these activities outside the timed free writing itself. It would be interesting for future research to discover how students felt about the presence or lack of pre- and post- timed free writing activities.

Finally, this study clearly replicates the other literature that shows that students have a positive response to doing timed free writing. So teachers in the Faculty of Foreign Studies can feel confident that this is an activity that students will appreciate in writing classes.

7. References

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8. Appendices

Appendix A - Timed Free Writing Prompts

How to do timed free writing.

2 – 5 minutes – Read the prompt and make sure you understand it. Think about ideas for what to write about. You can make notes / use a dictionary if you want.

10 minutes – Write your response. Focus more on writing lots of ideas than writing perfectly. Use a timer. Don't use a dictionary.

2 – 5 minutes – Count the words and write the word count. Look back at what you wrote and make notes about places where you notice errors or things you could have written better.

First-year Prompts

1. Write your self-introduction. (expository)
2. What are your plans, hopes and goals for the coming semester? (reflective)
3. Tell a story that starts with the sentence “My hands were shaking as I opened the envelope. I pulled out the letter and read...” (narrative)
4. Describe a female family member or friend. (descriptive)
5. Explain how to make pizza. (expository)
6. Explain why cell phones should / should not be banned in university classes. (persuasive)
7. What are your strong points? How have they helped you in the past and how can you use them in the future? (reflective)
8. Tell a story about what would happen if you had a superpower. (narrative)
9. Describe a special item from your childhood. (descriptive)
10. Explain why dogs are better than cats (or vice

versa) . (persuasive)

11. Explain about your hometown. (expository)
12. Write a story that has a ‘summer’ theme. (narrative)
13. Describe the most exciting place you have been to. (descriptive)
14. Schools and companies should / should not have a three-day weekend. (persuasive)
15. How has this semester been? What did you do well / not so well? What was enjoyable / challenging? (reflective)

Second-year Prompts

1. Write about your vacation. (expository)
2. What are your plans, hopes and goals for the coming semester? (reflective)
3. Write a story that has a ‘spring’ theme. (narrative)
4. Describe a male celebrity. (descriptive)
5. Explain how to make curry and rice. (expository)
6. Explain why couples should / should not live together for one year before they get married. (persuasive)
7. What are your weak points? How have they made problems for you in the past and how can you improve on them in the future? (reflective)
8. Tell a story about what would happen if you went into space. (narrative)
9. Describe the best present you ever received / gave. (descriptive)
10. Explain why USJ is better than Disneyland (or vice versa) . (persuasive)
11. Explain about a favorite hobby. (expository)
12. Tell a story that starts with the sentence “I came down and sat at the table to eat breakfast. My mother looked at me and said... (narrative)

13. Describe your ideal house. (descriptive)
14. The age to drink alcohol should / should not be lowered to 16. (persuasive)
15. How has this semester been? What did you do well / not so well? What was enjoyable / challenging? (reflective)

Appendix B - Student Questionnaire on Timed Free Writing

1. Have you ever done timed free writing before?
今まで、時間制限フリーライティングの経験はありますか？

Yes はい No いいえ
Not sure 分からない

If yes, go to Question 2. Others, go to question 3.
はい、その場合は質問2へ進んでください。それ以外は質問3へ進んでください。

2. If yes, explain where, what, how often, for how long, in as much detail as you can.
はいと答えた場合、どこで、何をしたか、どのくらいの頻度で、どのくらいの期間、できるだけ詳細に説明してください。

3. I enjoyed writing without thinking about grammar / vocabulary too much.

文法や語彙にあまりこだわらずに書くことが楽しかったです。

Yes - 5 4 3 2 1 - No

4. Writing something each week took too much time.
毎週何かを書くのは時間がかかりすぎた。

Yes - 5 4 3 2 1 - No

5. I enjoyed writing about the variety of topics provided.

提供された多様なトピックについて書くことを楽しめました

Yes - 5 4 3 2 1 - No

6. It was a waste of time to write something that was not graded for quality.

品質評価の対象外のものに時間を費やして書くのは無駄でした。

Yes - 5 4 3 2 1 - No

7. I would prefer to write about topics I chose myself.

私は自分で選んだテーマについて書くことを好みます。

Yes - 5 4 3 2 1 - No

8. I enjoyed writing that was not graded for quality.
品質評価されない文章を書くことが楽しかったです。

Yes - 5 4 3 2 1 - No

9. I would like to do timed free writing again.
再び時間制限フリーライティングを行いたいと考えています。

Yes - 5 4 3 2 1 - No

10. I felt timed free writing improved my writing fluency.

時間制限フリーライティングが、私の文章の流暢さを向上させたと感じました。

Yes - 5 4 3 2 1 - No

11. Any other comments about the timed free writing write here.

時間制限フリーライティングに関するその他のコメントはここに記入してください。

Appendix C - Paired t test Results

First-year Students

Paired t test results			
P value and statistical significance:			
The two-tailed P value equals 0,4657			
By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be not statistically significant.			
Confidence interval:			
The mean of Group One minus Group Two equals -3,21			
95% confidence interval of this difference: From -12,45 to 6,02			
Intermediate values used in calculations:			
t = 0,7516			
df = 13			
standard error of difference = 4,276			
Review your data:			
Group	Group One	Group Two	
Mean	104,71	107,93	
SD	24,33	22,96	
SEM	6,50	6,14	
N	14	14	

Second-year Students

Paired t test results			
P value and statistical significance:			
The two-tailed P value equals 0,0919			
By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be not quite statistically significant.			
Confidence interval:			
The mean of Group One minus Group Two equals -14,87			
95% confidence interval of this difference: From -32,48 to 2,73			
Intermediate values used in calculations:			
t = 1,8007			
df = 15			
standard error of difference = 8,261			
Review your data:			
Group	Group One	Group Two	
Mean	108,38	123,25	
SD	30,67	34,23	
SEM	7,67	8,56	
N	16	16	