

TOPIC CHOICE: EFFECTS ON WRITTEN FLUENCY IN SECOND LANGUAGE FREEWRITING

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1. Introduction

1.1 Marginalization of Fluency

University level language courses in Japan generally require English majors to produce writing in English in a wide variety of genres, from academic papers to business letters. In terms of empowerment and employability, it is important for learners to be able to write in the generic styles necessary for study and business. Learners also focus on formal proficiency tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL and IELTS.

This can lead to the marginalization of fluency practice in the syllabus. Citing Inagaki and Kim (1998), Bonzo (2008) suggests that this ‘leads writers and instructors alike to forget equally important elements of foreign language writing’ (p.723). As Homstad and Thorson (2000) observe, learners come to view writing assignments not as meaningful communication, but as ‘tests of vocabulary and accuracy and write as little as possible to avoid making any errors’ (p.144). In this way, students fail to draw on all the language resources available, but ‘play safe’ or try to follow a formula. Indeed, due to their previous focus of study, many students ‘may be preoccupied with accuracy’ (Reichelt, 2009, p.197) by the time they reach university. Students can even become anxious and fearful about the act of writing (Cheng, 2004), resulting in writing that is reduced in complexity, quantity and fluency.

To address this issue, some researchers such as Briere (1966), have chosen to stress quantity of writing rather than quality recommending that

students 'put content first and not worry about form' (Raimes, 1983, p.7). The idea is that once students are able to fluently put their thoughts on the page, grammatical accuracy, organization, generic conventions and so forth will follow.

1.2 Free-Writing

Freewriting is one method that might be used to improve fluency and reduce anxiety. Due to time restraints and the priorities mentioned above, free writing is rarely included in the Japanese university writing syllabus. There may be some freewriting in informal homework journals, but little or none in the classroom.

Yet freewriting allows learners to write without worrying about grammar or spelling. Learners can 'put content and fluency first and not worry about form' (Raimes, 1983, p.7). Freewriting has 'a drive towards honesty' (Elbow, 1989, 45). Elbow (1981) suggests that learners can write freely and uncritically and get down as many words as possible. With this 'sense of safety' (Elbow, 1989, p.47) affective factors may be reduced and fluency improved. This content-focused (rather than form-focused) writing may reduce anxiety and help students to develop fluency.

1.3 Topic Choice

Bonzo (2008), citing Homstad and Thorson (2000), suggests that 'meaningful writing is key' in developing L2 writing fluency. More content-focused writing produces lexically richer text. To this end, students should write about what is significant to them (Paris/Turner, 1994). So selection of topic is key to determining whether the writing is significant and meaningful to the writer. Indeed, Raimes (1983) writes that, 'choosing topics should be the teacher's most responsible activity' (p.266). Consequently, it also follows that if learners are to write about themselves they may need some control over the topic. Raimes (1991) notes that in 'a form-dominated approach to writing topics are assigned by the teacher. In a writer-dominated approach the students themselves

frequently choose the topics' (p.413). If freewriting is to be a writer-dominated activity, allowing learners to choose the topic for their writing may be beneficial.

Bonzo (2008) reported the effects of topic choice on fluency and complexity in the writing of intermediate-level English L1 learners of German. The study focused on timed free-writing tasks performed over a number of weeks. Students wrote for ten minutes on either student-controlled or teacher-controlled topics, and a fluency index was calculated for each piece of writing. The study concluded that topic choice has a significant effect on fluency, with writing on student-controlled topics showing greater levels of fluency than writing on teacher-controlled topics.

1.4 Purpose of this Study

This paper reports the results of a limited-scope reproduction of Bonzo's 2008 study. Whereas Bonzo's study looks at both fluency and complexity of language, this paper only focuses on any observable improvement in fluency. The paper also reports some participant reactions to the freewriting.

1.5 Research Question

Does giving learners the freedom to choose what they will write about in a freewriting activity have any significant effect on written fluency?

What response do learners have to freewriting on teacher-controlled topics and student-controlled topics?

This replication study tested the hypothesis that free choice of topic would increase writing-fluency index scores for intermediate-level learners of English at a Japanese university.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were a class of 17 (9 male, 8 female) third year English majors at a Japanese university. All scored highly in initial placement tests at the start of the course and accordingly placed in the top-level class for their year. The class was an IELTS academic writing class for English majors, so for the most part focused on generic test writing skills, developing coherence, cohesion, accuracy and vocabulary choice. Fifteen of the participants spoke Japanese as a first language and two were Chinese speakers. All students signed consent forms agreeing to participate in the study.

2.2 Pre-study questionnaire

All participants completed a pre-study questionnaire at the start of the course to ascertain how they felt about their own English abilities. Results of the pre-study questionnaires indicated that participants were generally confident in their writing ability, with most students indicating that they were comfortable and confident in writing topic sentences and paragraphs, and expressing their opinions.

2.3 Procedure

It is important to note that the procedure for this study differs from the Bonzo study in some aspects.

For this study, participants performed a sequence of six free-writing exercises. Each free-writing task lasted 10 minutes and was conducted at the start of class, each week, over six weeks of the spring semester. Students were divided into two groups (A and B). For the first three weeks, Group A students were able to choose their own topic to write about. Group B students wrote on topics provided by their teacher (See table below). This was reversed for the subsequent three weeks, with

Group A students now writing on topics provided for them and Group B students now choosing their own topics.

TABLE 1
Design of the study

Week	Group A Topic	Group B Topic
1	Student-controlled topic	Free Time
2	Student-controlled topic	Life after Graduation
3	Student-controlled topic	Friends
4	Free Time	Student-controlled topic
5	Life after Graduation	Student-controlled topic
6	Friends	Student-controlled topic

Participants wrote in pencil and were encouraged before each writing session to relax and write as much as possible. They were also told that their writing would not be judged for either content or accuracy, and they should write as much as possible without concern for errors. As the writing remained anonymous, there was no feedback on the writing at all. This was in order to ensure the sort of uninhibited ‘low stakes’ (Elbow, 1997, p.5) writing in an atmosphere of non-judgmental freedom that comes with ‘writing not meant for others to see’ (Elbow, 1999, p.139).

After students had completed the writing samples they were typed verbatim into a word-processing program. The number of words and number of unique words were then calculated using online word-count software (<https://www.easycalculation.com>). These totals were used to create a fluency index for each student, for both student-selected and teacher selected topics. This study used the formula:

$$FI = \frac{U}{\sqrt{2T}}$$

FI is Fluency Index (score) for a particular writing sample.

U is the number of unique words in the writing sample

T is the total number of words in the writing sample

Therefore, the Fluency Index for each writing sample is the number of unique words divided by the square root of double the total number of words, following Bonzo's own chosen method for determining fluency. Bonzo (2000) writes, 'fluency is defined as a ratio of total different words occurring in an entry to the total words in the entry. However, since such a ratio is expressed as a percentage, it is incapable of discriminating between longer and shorter entries when the ratios of different to total words are identical' (p.728). The above formula represents a more sensitive fluency ratio, which Bonzo draws from the work of Carroll (1967).

Mean averages of fluency indexes were calculated and tabulated for each student for both teacher-controlled and learner-controlled topics. These mean scores were then used to conduct a paired t-test using the VassarStats online tool (<http://vassarstats.net>).

2.4 Qualitative Research Questionnaires

Participants also completed a post-writing questionnaire after each freewriting and results were compiled. Students filled the questionnaire directly after each writing activity so that participants' responses would be fresh. The questionnaire was provided in both English and Japanese and answered on a Likert scale. Students also had the opportunity to note their reactions to the activity.

Participants also completed a post-study questionnaire in order to get a reaction to the process as a whole.

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative Results

Bonzo, citing Brière (1966), defines quantity as ‘the total number of words or sentences written about a subject within a given period of time’ (p.728). These results represent ‘quantity’ as the total number of words written in six 10-minute free-writing sessions.

TABLE 2
Free-Writing Quantity (Total Words Written)

Writing Sample	Group	Student-Controlled	Group	Teacher-Controlled
1	A	942 words	B	1338 words
2	A	1033 words	B	1423 words
3	A	1087 words	B	1395 words
4	B	1439 words	A	1181 words
5	B	1017 words	A	1192 words
6	B	1321 words	A	1148 words
Total words		6839		7677

Teacher controlled topics produced a higher overall word-count. It should be noted that, apart from in Week 5, Group B produced a higher word-count, regardless of topic. It should also be noted that Group A contained 8 students, whereas Group B contained 9 students.

TABLE 3
Fluency Index Averages

Group A

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Teacher-controlled Topic	5.512	5.263	5.810	5.223	5.549	4.569	5.604	4.841
Student-Controlled Topic	5.889	4.709	5.772	5.295	6.067	4.238	4.951	5.283

Group B

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Teacher-controlled Topic	5.293	5.459	5.395	5.633	5.936	5.733	5.401	4.537	4.572
Student-Controlled Topic	5.315	5.491	5.392	5.955	5.489	5.835	5.168	4.426	4.648

t-Test Results

A paired *t*-test for correlated samples was conducted on all 17 students' self-selected and teacher-selected writing samples. The test showed no significant difference between fluency indexes for topics chosen by teachers ($M=5.3135$) or by students ($M=5.2896$), with $T(17) = +0.29$. This shows that students actually performed very marginally better, on average, with teacher-selected topics than with topics that they chose themselves. In answer to the research question, there was no indication that free choice of topic had a positive effect on students' writing fluency. Overall, mean fluency index scores were slightly higher for teacher-selected topics.

3.2 Qualitative Results

3.2.a Post-Writing Responses

Participants responded to the following sentences on a questionnaire, provided in both English and Japanese after each writing activity, on a Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree):

1. It was easy to keep writing for the full 10 minutes
2. I didn't know the right English vocabulary to express my ideas on this topic.
3. This topic is something I often think about outside of the class.
4. It was difficult to think of things related to this topic to write about.
5. It was easy to put my ideas on this topic into English sentences.

TABLE 4a
Student-Controlled Topic Responses

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	5	14	5	20	16
2	7	13	17	19	4
3	2	15	13	24	6
4	16	24	11	7	2
5	3	11	12	27	7

TABLE 4b
Teacher-Controlled Topic Responses

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	6	11	29	12
2	10	24	15	11	0
3	5	16	12	16	11
4	9	31	9	9	2
5	0	9	14	28	9

Unfortunately, only 10 of the 17 students adequately completed all six of the post-writing questionnaires, so some respondents were disqualified from the above results. I include the results here as they still represent a useful (if incomplete) sample of responses to the activity. The data represents collated responses to all six writing activities, so scores for each response are from a possible total of 60 (10 participants x six writing samples). Results were as follows:

1. For the statement 'It was easy to keep writing for the full 10 minutes', the most common answer was 'Agree'. Agreement was more marked for the teacher-controlled topics than for the student-controlled topics. In fact, more participants answered that they disagreed with this statement when writing on a topic of their own choosing.
2. Surprisingly, respondents answered that they were more likely to struggle to find vocabulary for their own topics than for teacher-controlled topics.
3. As you might expect, students more often agreed that the topic was something they often thought about outside of the class when they chose

their own topics, with 24 respondents agreeing with the statement. For the teacher-controlled topics the response was more mixed, with 12 neutral and an equal 16 agreeing and 16 disagreeing.

4. For both student-controlled and teacher-controlled topics most disagreed or strongly disagreed that it was difficult to think of things related to this topic to write about, with 16 in strong disagreement when writing on student-controlled topics, compared to 9 in strong disagreement when writing on teacher-controlled topics.

5. Finally, participants answered in overwhelming agreement for both student controlled- and teacher-controlled topics that it was easy for them to put their ideas on this topic into English sentences.

Participants also provided a number of short written responses to the writing. I present these responses to student-controlled topics and teacher-controlled topics here separately:

Sample of post-writing comments on Free / Student-Controlled Topics:

I really enjoyed it.

Free topic is the most difficult to write about.

It wasn't enough time.

Might be difficult to choose a topic.

When you are not given some topics you need to make out one as soon as possible, which needs you to think a bunch of things in different fields.

It was difficult for me to deal with free topic.

As time goes by the amount of writing increased.

High frequency of free topic is hard to think of the content of writing.

I usually get stuck as I don't know the appropriate expression.

I didn't come up with any good topic.

Sample of post-writing comments on Teacher-Controlled Topics:

I need vocabulary because I used same words from start to end.

One of the familiar topics to write which is comfortable for me.

It's much easier for me to write something up with some topic.

Hard to decide some topic.

It was a bit easier for me to write with topic than with no topic...

It's hard to write without topic many times.

It is difficult for me to write about my friends.

3.2.b Post-Study Responses

During the final post-study questionnaire the following sentences, provided in both English and Japanese, were answered on a Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 2=Agree, 1=Strongly Agree):

- a. It became easier to write for 10 minutes after doing the activity 6 times.
- b. I prefer writing about a teacher-selected topic.
- c. I prefer choosing my own topic.
- d. My ability to write for 10 minutes improved by the 6th writing.
- e. I enjoyed writing for 10 minutes.
- f. I would like to continue doing timed writing activities in this or other classes.

Table 5
Post-Study Responses

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
a	0	2	1	11	3
b	0	3	5	7	2
c	0	8	6	1	2
d	1	3	7	6	0
e	0	2	3	8	4
f	1	3	5	6	2

The post-study questionnaires revealed that a majority of students felt that it became easier to write for ten minutes once they had practice at freewriting. A majority also enjoyed writing for ten minutes. Only 2 students did not enjoy it, and 4 students would rather not continue the activity.

Most surprisingly, 9 students from 17 agreed or strongly agreed that they preferred a teacher-controlled topic, and 3 disagreed. 5 participants felt neutral.

Of 17 students, 8 did not prefer to choose their own topic to write about, whereas only 3 agreed or strongly agreed that they preferred a student-controlled topic. 6 respondents remained neutral.

Qualitative results show that although participants generally enjoyed the activity and found it useful, most either preferred to write about the teacher-controlled topics, rather than student-controlled topics, or remained neutral, showing no preference for either.

4. Discussion

At first glance these results are surprising in the light of Bonzo's similar study. One might understandably expect students to write more fluently on topics they had chosen themselves. Yet, in the context of this small-scale study, the evidence does not seem to support this view. In fact, teacher-controlled topics also produced a higher quantity of writing overall.

One possible reason that participants' fluency index scores showed little difference between teacher-controlled and student-controlled topics may be that some students had difficulty coming up with suitable topics to write about. Several participants noted on the final post-study questionnaires that 'it was pretty difficult to find out certain suitable topics' and 'hard to decide what topic to write about'. The stress of having to decide upon a topic seemed to counteract the benefits of free choice. In my own experience, Japanese university students can display difficulties when faced with choosing their own topic. These particular students, who had previously had training in planned generic writing in their other classes, often using a process-writing approach, did not seem comfortable coming up with topics off the cuff. This may also explain the lower word-count for student-controlled topics, as some writing time was used trying to think of something to write about. For this reason, it is possible that a choice from a variety of topics, rather than completely free choice of topic, could provide a more appropriate level of learner autonomy.

Additionally, participants, being of a good intermediate level and perhaps wanting to challenge themselves, often chose topics such as social issues or news items (for instance, a news item about a murder, global warming, Islamic culture) that were far more challenging than the teacher-controlled topics, which some students noted were 'familiar' or 'comfortable' topics. The teacher-chosen topics were possibly quite commonplace for these students and they possibly would have encountered the topics before in their regular speaking and writing classes. They were also topics that students could address on a personal

level, allowing them to write about what is 'significant and meaningful' to them, despite not choosing the topic.

I would suggest that the main factor is not free choice of topic, but familiarity with the topic itself. Familiarity with a topic affords a greater range of vocabulary that can be retrieved more easily. With little time to think about the topic it may be difficult to draw on a range of vocabulary. As Kellogg (1994) shows, lexical retrieval is a challenging process, even in L1 writing and can be a major obstacle to fluent L2 writing. Lexical retrieval may well become more automatic with familiar topics, although there is no direct evidence of this in this study, and there seems no guarantee that giving students the freedom to choose their own topic will necessarily result in a topic that is more meaningful or familiar to the writer.

Neither did the freewriting activity necessarily reduce anxiety over quality and quantity of writing. Participants were clearly informed that neither the quality nor quantity of their writing would be judged in any way. Despite this, affective factors certainly influenced performance on the writing task. An almost formal testing atmosphere seemed to settle on the classroom, rather than the companionable atmosphere of 'pens and pencils moving across the paper-people moving in their chairs, sometimes a grunt or sigh or giggle' which Elbow describes (Elbow, 1989, p.51). Some participants also experienced time-pressure during the activity, noting, 'I have a lot of things to write in 10 minutes' and 'Time was short'. One student, however, did note, 'Especially, I enjoy with relaxed feelings'.

Nevertheless, overall reaction to the free-writing task was positive, which suggests it could play a useful role in improving L2 writing. Participants noted that 'I feel my writing skills improved', 'I really enjoy this task', 'It's quite a good strategy to improve writing' and a variety of other positive comments. Certainly, in terms of ethical teaching and student autonomy, occasionally giving students the chance to select topics in such activities can only be a positive move. As Friere (1998)

points out, it is vital that teachers ‘respect the autonomy, the dignity, and the identity of the student’ (p.61), so regardless of any statistical evidence on fluency and unique word counts, there is value in allowing learners to take control of their own learning process.

5. Conclusion

There is certainly some evidence here that, for intermediate learners in a Japanese university setting, student-controlled topics do not always increase writing fluency.

Yet the reaction of participants showed that some students enjoyed the chance to choose their own topics and perhaps without such strict time-constraints, which would allow students more time to settle on a topic, freewriting on student-controlled topics would be an effective writing activity.

I would hesitate to strongly recommend either teacher-control or student-control over topics, as it seems to depend too much on the learning style and preference of each individual student, and on the mood of the student at the moment of writing. I would recommend that when incorporating a freewriting element into a writing course, a mix of teacher-controlled and student-controlled topics might be most effective. Also, I would recommend that the atmosphere be made as relaxed and informal as possible, as anxiety may have a negative impact on fluency.

Finally, this research was carried out as part of the Professional Development through Collaborative Research: Writing Fluency Project, organized by Gregory Scholdt of Kobe University. Other similar (as yet unpublished) studies conducted in parallel to this study, did show significant improvement in fluency when participants controlled the topic. Therefore, it would be wise to examine a larger sample of such studies before drawing any firm conclusions.

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