

## Free-writing : *Beyond a pre-writing task*

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### Introduction

Free-writing has been regarded as a way of brainstorming and as a warm-up activity in the first language program (Jacobs, 1986; Dickson, 2001; Brown, 2001). Dickson (2001) explains that free-writing as “an opportunity for students to write freely for a brief period in each class, ... (p.1).” This offers students a rewarding experience of writing. Jacobs (1986) also recommends quick-writing by outlining the three important aspects, concentrating on content, not worrying about form, and writing without stopping. In fact, although sometimes free-writing and quick-writing are considered to be slightly different activities, both of the two are treated as the same in this project because the aims and procedure are quite similar fundamentally.

While a great number of English writing activities used in Japan are rigidly structured as Rivers criticizes (p.9), free-writing has several advantages. One of the greatest benefits is that it represents a rare inter-hemispherical activity (Rivers, p.10). Another benefit is that free-writing bridges the gap between spoken and written communication (p. 11). Yet another benefit is that it helps students invent. Since students are writing what comes to their minds immediately, it is likely that they are surprised that they have written what they had not noticed themselves. A final benefit is that it aids invention by separating the process of creating from the process of editing (Jacobs,

1986, p. 282).

Even though free-writing has been regarded as a useful pre-writing task, the research which actually investigated how effective it was is scarce. Also, there is a chance that free-writing can go beyond only a pre-writing task. In other words, free-writing can possibly become one of the main activities in the classroom to improve learners' writing skills as well as communication skills.

### Research question

The current research is aimed to investigate how effective free-writing activities are. First, the amount that the participants become able to write through the activities is observed. Second, the quality of the writing that the participants become able to write through the activities is investigated.

### Methods

#### *Participants*

The participants who took part in the free-writing project were 83 second-year students in a public high school, who belonged to an international or literature course, aged 16-17. Eight of the 83 participants missed either the second time or the tenth time, so they were excluded. Generally speaking, the English proficiency level of most students is slightly below the National average for Japanese high school students. Their levels range from STEP (Testing English Proficiency) test-pre-second grade to second grade.

### Procedure

Reviewing the guideline, (Jacobs, 1986; Dickson, 2001; Brown, 2001; Rivers, 2007), the basic procedure taken in this study is as follows

1. The students were shown a topic to write about.
2. The students started writing.
3. The students were told neither to judge their ideas, nor to worry about spelling and grammar, and to stop writing. Even when they were running out of things to say, they were told to continue writing whatever came to their minds.
4. After 12 minutes, the students were told to stop writing and to write down what advice they wanted to receive from instructors, e.g., "Appropriate expressions do not come to me when writing, what should I do?" Then, they were told to give the sheet to the instructor.

The students experienced the free-writing activity in half of their weekly English conversation classes, i.e., in two of their four monthly classes, they had the free-writing activities. Thus, they experienced the activities ten times in total from April to December, factoring in breaks for exam-periods, summer vacation, and fall break. Different topics were given to the learners every time except for the second time and the last time.

In order to compare as accurately as possible, the same topic *write your favorite TV or movie* was given to the learners twice, in the second time and the last time. The data of the first time were excluded because students were still learning about the procedure and accurate data were not expected to be collected. The instructor answered the questions that the participants brought up. Error correction was not made at all because the initial focus of free-writing

is on the participants' fluency development.

### Analysis

First, the number of the words the participants wrote in each essay was kept on record and compared in order to measure how much they have become able to write.

Second, the essay from the second time and the last time were compared more carefully. A total of nine participants were selected randomly from the 75 participants. Two participants were selected randomly from those who had written more than 100 words each time. Two participants were selected randomly from those who had written fewer words in the tenth time than the second time. Five participants were selected randomly from those who had written more words in the tenth time than the second time.

While ESL composition file (Jacobs., et al, 1981) is widely used in the analysis of essays, the essays written by the participants for this study were analyzed along the following guidelines by referring to Abe (2004): types, token, t-unit, an average words contained in a t-unit, error-free-t-unit (EFT), the percentage of EFT in t-unit, the average of words in an EFT. Token is the actual number of the words used in an essay and types are different words in an essay. For instance, the following sentence has 14 tokens and 11 types. *I am sure that the cats that are walking around the park are mine.* While criteria of EFT differ from rater to rater (Scott & Tucker, 1977; Freeman & Storm, 1977), considering the level of the learners' English proficiency, as long as the sentence has a subject and a correct verb and they are grammatically ordered, it is accepted as an EFT. In other words, an EFT is a t-unit which makes sense and is ordered correctly. For example, the

following sentence has an error in the usage of the verb. *This is the movie I was love.* The following sentence is accepted as EFT though it has an error in the usage of the preposition. *I watched the movie in home.* As a final example, the following is not an EFT because the words *the best* are placed in a completely wrong place. *The TV program the best I like very much is Harry Potter.*

## Results

The number of words they wrote in each essay was kept on record. The data of the second time and the tenth time are compared and are shown below.

Table 1 Participants' data

Participants who wrote fewer words in the tenth time	19
Participants who wrote more words in the tenth time	55
Participant who wrote the same number of words	1
Total	75

Table 2 Comparison of second time and tenth time

	second time	tenth time
MEAN of the words the participants wrote	66.3	81.4
SD	25.2	26.8
MAX	140	156
MIN	0	27
RANGE	141	130

What table 1 shows is 55 of the 75 participants increased the number of the words, while 19 of the 75 participants did not increase the number of words in the tenth essay. One participant remained the same. It is obvious that much more participants

learned to write more by the tenth time.

Table 2 shows to what degree the participants' performance has changed. The mean of the tenth time increased by 15.1 words, which means the number of words in the tenth essay was on average 15 greater than in the second essay. Plus, both the MAX and the MIN increased.

Token, types, type-token ration, t-unit, EFT (Error Free T-unit), average of words in t-unit, and the rate of EFT in t-unit, are compared in Table 3 and Table 4.

First, the participants have become able to write longer passages with a greater variety of words. Table 3 and Table 4 show types for eight of nine participants and the type-token-ratio for six of nine participants increased. *Being able to produce more types* means being able to use a greater variety of words and expressions. In fact, during the first couple of times, the participants raised the questions of *how to use a greater variety of words* or *how to avoid using the same words or expressions repeatedly*. Eventually, they stopped asking these questions as they proceeded.

Second, these data imply that the eight participants have become able to write accurate sentences. The average words in a t-unit of eight of the participants became higher, and that the rate of EFT in a t-unit is higher in five participants of nine. *Being able to write more words in a t-unit* means the participants have succeeded in writing longer sentences. *Higher rate of EFT in t-units* suggests the participants now can write more grammatically-correct sentences than before. However, the negative side also should be revealed: The EFT/t-unit of participants 6, 7, and 8 has become lower. The EFT/t-unit of number 6 and 7 in the tenth time were slightly lower than in the second time. These results might suggest

they could not improve their skill to write accurately.

Third, it is interpreted that the quality of the essays has become more sophisticated for the following two reasons. First, in the tenth essay, participant 9 wrote only about half the number of words as the second time but still wrote the same number of EFT and had more words in t-unit, which means the

participant has become able to write more grammatically accurate sentences. Second, some of the participants (number 1, number 3, number 5) wrote on the same subject matter twice. Observing their data can support the idea that they improved their writing skills because most of the aspects of the three participants writing developed.

Table 3 Detailed data of the second time

	tokens	types	type-token-ratio	t-unit	EFT	ave words of EFT in a t-unit	rate of EFT in t-units
1	117	69	0.59	15	8	7.50	0.53
2	110	69	0.63	15	10	5.60	0.67
3	55	35	0.64	8	7	6.57	0.88
4	77	51	0.66	11	4	6.00	0.36
5	84	42	0.50	11	6	7.67	0.55
6	73	45	0.62	10	6	5.83	0.60
7	94	53	0.56	15	12	6.25	0.80
8	58	34	0.59	8	7	7.14	0.88
9	140	67	0.45	20	8	5.63	0.40

Table 4 Detailed data of the tenth time

	tokens	types	type-token-ratio	t-unit	EFT	ave words of EFT in a t-unit	rate of EFT in t-units
1	147	90	0.61	19	12	6.35	0.63
2	156	84	0.54	23	16	6.19	0.70
3	91	54	0.59	16	12	6.58	0.75
4	86	54	0.63	11	9	7.25	0.82
5	123	67	0.54	16	15	7.73	0.94
6	79	57	0.72	11	4	6.62	0.36
7	97	55	0.57	13	10	6.45	0.77
8	49	35	0.71	6	5	7.60	0.83
9	75	45	0.60	10	8	6.38	0.80

## Conclusion

Direct answers to the research question are described. Comparing the second time and the tenth time, the participants have succeeded in producing more words. Also, in almost all aspects, the participants writing skills seem to have been improved. In short, the free-writing activities can contribute to improving learners' writing skills in speed, in accuracy, and in active vocabulary.

At the same time, a few limitations of this study should be pointed out. First, in this survey, the learners experienced the free-writing activity ten times in total during the seven months. It is unclear whether this is enough or not. Second, since they have been exposed to English in other classes and outside the classroom, it is likely that the learners have been influenced by other activities, and that those might have affected their achievement. Considering the limitations and the results, two steps should be taken. First, the learners should experience the free-writing more frequently so that they will be given more opportunities to practice, and so that more reliable data can be obtained. Second, in order to obtain more accurate data, the data should be compared with that of a control group.

Despite these limitations, free-writing has been proven to be a practical activity which can enhance learners' writing performance. Free-writing can be applied not only as a warm-up activity but as a main activity, aiming to improve writing skills. It is my hope that learners will derive a benefit by making the most of free-writing activities.

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