

Further Reflections on the Effects of Free Writing in an EFL Writing Class

Edo Forsythe

Steven MacWhinnie

Hirosaki Gakuin University



Research Background

- Free writing is writing continuously for a set time without pausing, thinking, or correcting (Rivers, 2007) and is either *guided* (teacher-defined topic) or *unguided* (student-chosen topic) (Darling, 2018)
- Free writing has been recommended and used in L2 writing since the 1980s (Jacobs, 1986);
- Very little research on free writing in Japanese university contexts
- Used free writing in class but no noticeable improvement in students' writing fluency (Azizi (2015) found increase in overall word count)
- To explore efficacy of free writing, we compared students' WPM (Azizi (2015), Baba & Nitta (2014), Muller (2014a;b))

Azizi (2015), Baba & Nitta (2014) found slight increase in WPM over time.

Muller (2014a;b) saw no significant increase in WPM over a semester, or over a year's time.

More research is needed in this field to truly establish the efficacy of free writing.

Populations

- **73** Freshmen & Sophomore Private Univ Students
 - Free writing done in Composition I & II classes
 - 2018 Freshmen & 2019 Sophomores are same cohort
 - All English majors

- **68** Freshmen Public Univ Students
 - Free writing done in English Writing (中級) classes
 - Variety of majors

Informed consent obtained from all

Writing Assignments & Topics (Private University – No textbook)

- Set 1: Hobbies, favorite game / sport, favorite movie
- Set 2: School days, clubs, part-time jobs, favorite holiday
- Set 3: Foreign country to visit, studying at university, favorite food
- Set 4: Where you want to live, favorite book, school trips
- Set 5: Weekend activities, favorite TV show, pets, animals
- Set 6: Summer vacation, North Korea problem, celebrities
- Set 7: Birthdays, aging society, concerts
- Set 8: Halloween, global warming, Japanese comedians
- Set 9: New Year, declining birthrate, musician 'idols'
- Set 10: Spring break, age of adulthood, internet of things (IoT)

All writing periods = 10 mins; Each topic used 2X

▾

Writing Assignments & Topics

(Public University – *Writing for Fluency and Accuracy*, Boon 2017)

Unit 1: Narrative Paragraphs: Interesting things about me (2X 5 mins & 10 mins) -
About their partner (5 mins)

Unit 3: Descriptive Paragraphs: My friend (2X 5 mins & 10 mins) - About their
partner's friend (5 mins)

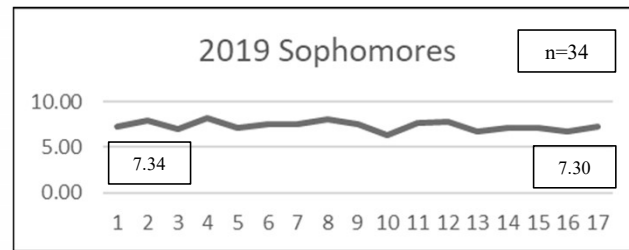
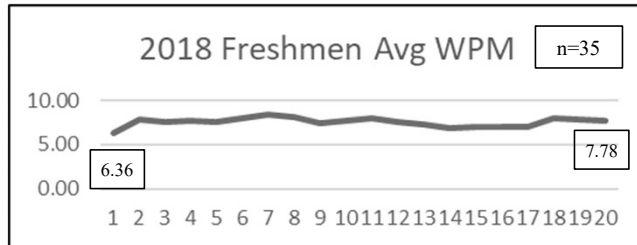
Unit 5: Compare and Contrast Paragraphs: - Two popular pets (2X 5 mins & 10 mins)
- Comparing self and partner (5 mins)

Unit 7: Cause and Effect Paragraphs: My study habits (2X 5 mins & 10 mins) -
Classmate's study habits (5 mins)

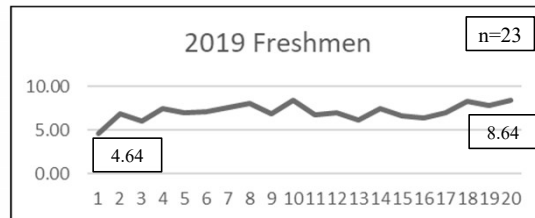
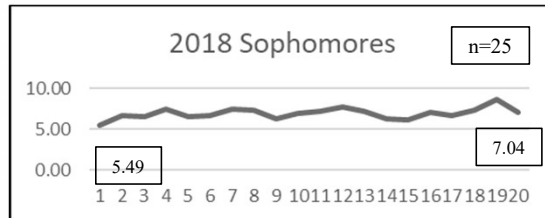
Unit 9: Summary Paragraphs: A typical day summary (5 mins)

Unit 11: Opinion Paragraphs: Working in a group (2X 5 mins & 10 mins) -
Classmate's opinions (5 mins)

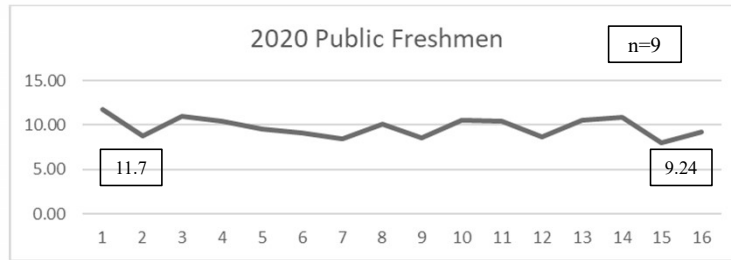
Words per Minute (WPM) Comparison Private Univ Data



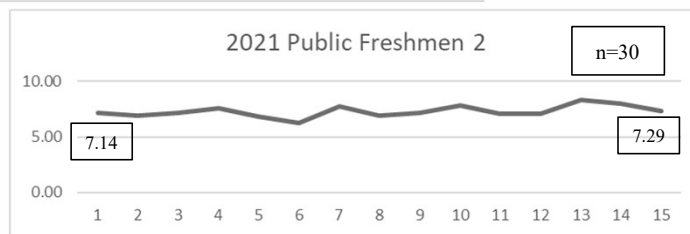
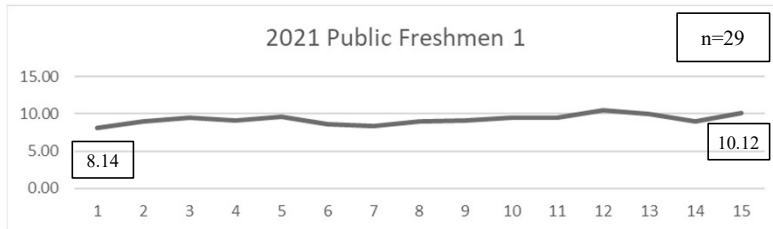
Words per Minute (WPM) Comparison Private Univ Data



Words per Minute (WPM) Comparison
2020 Public Univ Data



Words per Minute (WPM) Comparison 2021 Public Univ Data



Discussion

- Analyzing the data, no statistically significant increases in WPM were found after a semester or year of regular free writing practice (paired T-test done on 2018-19 samples)
- Results match Muller's (2014a;b) findings
 - Azizi (2015) & Nitta & Baba (2014) found slight increase in WPM over time

Conclusion

- Free writing does not seem to have positive effect on Japanese university students' English writing fluency across a semester or full year.
- No negative effects observed, so there's no harm in doing it, but is it worth the time and effort?
 - Shekarabi (2017) found free writing improves textual cohesion
 - Nordin, Zabidin & Kamaludin (2019) report free writing lowering EFL writing anxiety
 - Darling (2018); Head (2016); Hwang (2010) & Muller (2014a; 2014b) found students felt that free writing was beneficial to their English writing skills



Thank you for your attention

Any Questions???

Edo Forsythe
forsythe@hirogaku-u.ac.jp;
Steven G. MacWhinnie
macwhinnie@hirogaku-u.ac.jp

References

- Azizi, E. (2015). Word count matters: Increasing EFL learner's writing fluency through freewriting. *Kokusaigaku Kenkyu*, 4(1), 83-89. <http://hdl.handle.net/10236/13145>
- Baba, K. & Nitta, R. (2014). Phase transitions in development of writing fluency from a complex dynamic systems perspective. *Language Learning*, 64(1), 1-35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12033>
- Darling, M. (2018). Using freewriting in journals to improve written fluency. *Encounters*, 6, 19-27. <https://core.ac.uk/display/233128817>
- Head, P. (2016). Introducing freewriting to a Japanese high school English class. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *Focus on the learner*. JALT. <https://jalt-publications.org/node/4/articles/5369-introducing-freewriting-japanese-high-school-english-class>
- Hwang, J. (2010). Influence of freewriting on writing fluency and confidence of EFL college-level students. *Second Language Studies*, 28(2), 99-134.
- Jacobs, G. (1986). Quickwriting: A technique for invention in writing. *ELT Journal*, 40(4), 282-290. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249252394>
- Muller, T. (2014a). Implementing and evaluating free writing in a Japanese EFL classroom. In Muller T., Adamson J., Brown P.S., & Herder S. (Eds.), *Exploring EFL Fluency in Asia* (pp.163-177), Palgrave Macmillan. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304987593_Implementing_and_Evaluating_Free_Writing_in_a_Japanese_EFL_Classroom/
- Muller, T. (2014b). Free writing in medical ESP: Exploring issues of research methods for intact classroom research. *Journal of Liberal Arts and Science University of Toyama*, 42, 29-37. <https://core.ac.uk/reader/84136915>
- Nordin, N., Zabidin, N., & Kamaludin, P. (2019). Students' perception on the use of free writing in overcoming writing anxiety. *Academic Journal of Business and Social Sciences*, 3, 1-11. <https://ir.uitm.edu.my/id/eprint/29884/>
- Rivers, D. (2007). Free-writing as an expressive communication tool for Japanese English Learners. *The Language Teacher*, 31(11), 9-12.
- Shekarabi, Z. (2017). The impacts of outlining and free writing strategies on the quality of Japanese L2 academic writing. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Higher Education*, 2(1), 63-76. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1227258>