

Writing Fluency and Student Attitudes Towards Writing Promoted Through Weekly Online Journal Writing

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The purpose of this study was to examine the efficacy of an online journal writing program in tandem with a communicative English-speaking course at a national institute of technology (NIT) in Nagano, Japan. 184 second year (11th grade) students participated in the study. The students were required to write a free-topic, semi-private online journal once a week for 15 weeks. They were asked to continuously write for 20 minutes about a topic of their choosing. Their writing was read and commented on by the teacher, but it was not corrected or graded. Word counts were used to measure student writing fluency and a questionnaire was used to measure student attitudes towards writing and the perceived usefulness of the exercise. The findings showed that while there was a definite increase in writing fluency for the treatment group, it did not quite meet the standard for statistical significance. Regarding student attitudes towards writing, there was an increase in the number of students who enjoyed writing in English but there was a decrease in students who saw the journal writing as a useful way to increase their English-speaking ability.

Key word : fluency, online, writing, English

Introduction

Communicative English language classes that are taught mostly by native English-speaking teachers (NETs) in Japan largely focus on promoting speaking skills. It is believed that this is important to balance out the focus on grammar and reading that is found in curricula taught by Japanese English language teachers (JTEs). The JTEs focus is the result of pressure to help students pass strict university entrance exams in Japan. This means that one skill that is usually lacking in coverage in both types of classes is English writing. In fact, a lack of both first language (L1) and second language (L2) writing instruction is a problem in Japan (Mulvey, 2016). While it is true that the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has mandated greater focus on academic English and critical thinking skills for classes in Japan, there is still a lack of opportunity for students to focus on writing fluency (Mulvey, 2016).

For students who have a less academic focus, like those studying in technical schools or those

who study for professional purposes, more importance should be placed on the ability to write in English more fluently with less focus on academic writing formats like essays and dissertations. For these students, the ability to get their point across in English quickly and effectively is of greater importance. The reason for these students to study English is to enable them to communicate internationally with project teams or business partners in English. To this end, methods that match these needs must be examined to improve the effectiveness of English classes in Japan or abroad.

One method that can help students at any level of English proficiency is journal writing (Swain, 1985). Journal writing allows students to practice English writing while having autonomy over subject matter and format. This enables students to focus on the message as well as the vocabulary and grammar that help them convey that message in the quickest means possible. In other words, students must increase their skill in communicating quickly and effectively through writing. For many students, this is one of the most pertinent skills for their future professional careers. Students need to be able to

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communicate via computer, writing quickly in English with their keyboards. Translation technologies are not reliable and not always convenient for technical vocabulary (Aiken & Balan, 2011. Fitria, 2021.). In the study presented in this paper, the practice of weekly online journal writing in combination with a communicative English-speaking course was examined to see if students could improve the amount of writing they could produce in a set amount of time. If students could increase the amount of English they could write, it could be taken as proof that online journal writing promotes fluency in English as a second language and would therefore allow for greater success in the future. In addition, the study looked at student attitudes towards writing weekly journals. This was done to see if positive attitudes were produced regarding the enjoyment of writing and the perceived usefulness of the practice.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The skill of writing has for the most part been described as the hardest of the four skills to learn in a second language (Rendandya & Richards, 2002). The productive skill of English writing requires a learner to formulate ideas and organize them in a more formal way than is usually found in second language speaking. Writing is more permanent when compared to speaking and a whole host of added difficulties arise when students tackle this skill. Among these difficulties, organization of ideas and format are good examples of added intellectual burdens that can frustrate language learners. Zamel (1983) showed that students with the greatest problems in expressing themselves in writing were overly fixated on having perfect form or correctness. This extra pressure on students can limit the amount of time they spend focusing on the message. Finding the appropriate words to make their ideas understood is difficult enough. Therefore, an activity like journal writing, with its focus on content and fluency over form, should help students build confidence and better prepare them for writing that focuses more on content rather than form. This will, in turn, help them to become better all-round users of English as a second language. Brumfit (1984) concluded that these

types of activities are beneficial since they mimic real life situations that students will ultimately face. Previous researchers have concluded that performance and proficiency in a second language can be described using the parameters of complexity, accuracy, and fluency or CAF (Skehan 1998, Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005). Journal writing serves to improve a student's fluency by allowing them to come in repeated contact with known and learned vocabulary in a "safe" environment. This type of journal writing is similar to "freewriting" that is praised by researchers such as Elbow and Belanoff (2000) for the way it helps students become more fluent writers and enjoy writing more. Therefore, while journal writing may not highlight components like accuracy or complexity, this extra focus on fluency can be beneficial when paired with the regular class activities that do focus on those aspects.

There have been several studies that have looked at the benefits of journal writing at the secondary level. In general, the results have shown a net positive result on student improvement. The first of these improvements involves writing fluency, in particular the facet of rate or how much a student can write in a certain amount of time. Hwang (2010) found a mean increase in fluency of 3.87 words per minute over an eight-week period. Hwang used "guided freewriting" which gives the students a topic and a time to write, without the burden of being graded or having their writing count towards their grades. While this study had students writing with paper and pen, another study using computers by Fellner and Apple (2004) saw writing fluency increase by 4.52 words per minute. Liao and Wong (2010) found in their study of the effects of dialogue journals that there was a "positive influence" on the writing fluency of their students with a mean difference of 46.82 total words between the first and last journal entries of the course. Finally, Patterson (2014) provided similar results in an informal study over four years of using writing journals in his classroom. This study will look mainly at the component of fluency defined as "rate".

Regarding student attitudes towards writing, the studies above by Hwang (2010) and

Patterson (2014) both showed an increase in student positivity towards writing in English. In both of those studies students responded that they “liked” the activity. Similarly, Liao and Wong (2010) showed that student anxiety towards writing dropped and intrinsic motivation rose “significantly”. In the study by Fellner and Apple (2004), student attitudes were not looked at, but it was stated that increased motivation was definitely one outcome of the online journal exercise.

Therefore, it was believed that adding an online journal writing component to a communicative English class would provide added benefits to students. It was assumed that these positive benefits would include an increase in writing fluency and an increase in positive attitudes towards writing in English for communicative purposes. This research was launched to ensure that these positive benefits would be attained by the science and engineering students at a NIT in Japan.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

First, although studies have shown that journal writing can help students with various facets of their English language learning (Mlynarczyk, 1998, Fellner and Apple, 2004, Hwang, 2010, Liao and Wong, 2010, Patterson, 2014), a study of online journal writing in combination with a communicative speaking course was needed to see if fluency could indeed be promoted under those specific circumstances. Second, student attitudes towards writing are an important part of motivation and were therefore included in the research parameters. Therefore, this study examines the effects of online journal writing in tandem with regular English communication lessons on writing fluency for students. It also examines students’ attitudes towards writing both before and after the research project. This second aspect was studied due to the perceived assumption that having a good attitude towards writing is beneficial to future success. A third focus of the study was the extent to which students felt that the exercise of journal writing helped their English-speaking ability.

The following research questions were examined:

1. Did the treatment group write a significantly greater number of words in English in a 20-minute timed writing exercise than the control group after a 15-week period where the treatment group wrote online journals once a week, and the control group did not?

2. Did students’ attitudes towards writing in English change after partaking in the treatment group?

3. Did students in the treatment group feel that online journal writing helped their speaking ability in English?

3. METHOD

3 - 1 Participants

The participants in the study were 184 second grade students at a National Institute of Technology in Nagano Prefecture. The students were studying communicative English for fifteen 90-minute classes during the first semester of the 2021-22 school year. The students ranged in English skill level from CEFR A1 to A2. The treatment group contained 90 students and the control group contained 94. They were randomly separated by student number and both groups had similar English abilities. They were using a Cambridge Publishing textbook for classroom work that is for CEFR level A1. The textbook is focused on increasing the students’ speaking abilities in English. The written exercises from the textbook were omitted during class time in order to focus on listening and speaking.

3 - 2 Instruments

Pre and Posttests

To measure the students’ change in fluency, a pre and posttest was used that measured how many words students could write on a topic in a 20-minute timeframe. Both tests required the students to answer a question about their favorite things. The pretest asked them to explain their favorite activity to do in their free time, while the posttest asked them to explain their favorite food to eat. The pre and post

tests were given to all 184 students, which made up both the control group and the treatment group.

Questionnaires

To measure student attitudes towards journal writing, the treatment group were given a short questionnaire both before and after the course. The questions that were asked were:

- 1) Do you enjoy writing journals in English?
- 2) Do you think that writing a journal every week in English will be useful to you? and
- 3) Do you think writing in a journal will help your English speaking ability?

These questions were asked to help determine whether students could gain both enjoyment and appreciation for journal writing over the length of the course. Students were also asked how long it took them to write an English paragraph of about 80-100 words. This question was not used in the study but was included to motivate students to write as much as they could during the pre and posttests.

Journal Entries

The journal entries that were written by the treatment group were done using Microsoft Teams software. The students wrote their journals using the class notebook tab in their class Team. Students were asked to time their writing. They were asked to write for a minimum of 15 minutes and a maximum of 20 minutes. The students were allowed to write about any topic of their choosing. This was done to help promote fluency since students would naturally be interested in whatever topic they chose.

3 - 3 Procedures

The participants in the study were 184 second grade students at a National Institute of Technology in Nagano Prefecture. The students were studying communicative English for fifteen 90-minute classes during the first semester of the 2021-22 school year. The students ranged in English skill level from CEFR A1 to A2. The treatment group contained 90 students and the control group contained 94. They were randomly separated by student number and both groups had similar English abilities. They were using a Cambridge Publishing

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3 - 4 Data Analysis

The pre and posttests were examined for both the control group and the treatment group. The number of words were counted and recorded in an excel file for both tests. The data was then checked for statistical significance with a t-Test. The pre and posttest results within each group were checked with a one-tailed, paired t-Test. A one-tailed test was used because the research question was asking whether the treatment group wrote more, rather than if there was any difference at all between the two groups. The pre and posttest results for the entire study was done with a one-tailed unpaired t-Test. The threshold of $p < .05$ was used to determine statistical significance of the results for fluency. The null hypothesis was that there would be no significant increase in the mean number of words a student could write in 20 minutes after writing a journal every week for 15 weeks and the alternative hypothesis was that the treatment would result in a significant increase in the mean number of words a student could write in 20 minutes.

For the questions on student attitudes towards journal writing, a percentage of the responses was calculated and compared both pre and post course. A Pearson's chi-square test was used to check and see if the students' changes in attitude were statistically significant. The null hypothesis was that there would be no statistical change in the students' attitudes about writing in English while the alternative hypothesis was that there would be a change in attitudes that was statistically significant.

4. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Research Question 1 – Did the treatment group write a significantly greater number of words in English in a 20-minute timed writing exercise than the control group after a 15-week period where the treatment group wrote online journals once a week, and the control group did not?

Table 1 – Statistical differences between the control group and the treatment groups

	N	M	SD	p_1 for pre and post tests	p_2 for both treatment and control groups
Control group	94	+4.9	34.2	$p=0.083$	$p=0.06$
Treatment group	90	+12.3	28.4	$p=0.01$	

N = the number of students

M = the mean difference in words written in 20 minutes between the pre and posttests

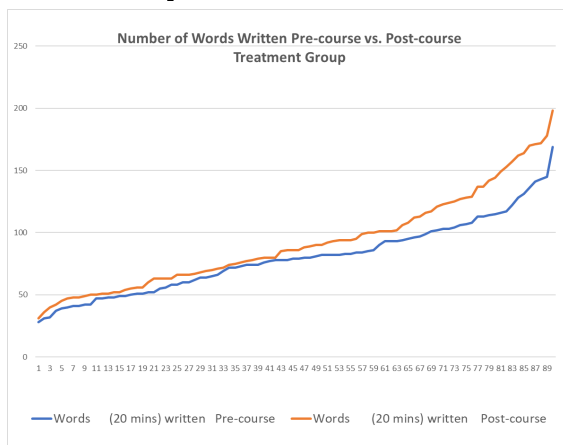
SD = the standard deviation

p_1 = The p value for the differences between pre and posttests for each group

p_2 = The p value for the differences between the means of the control group and the treatment group

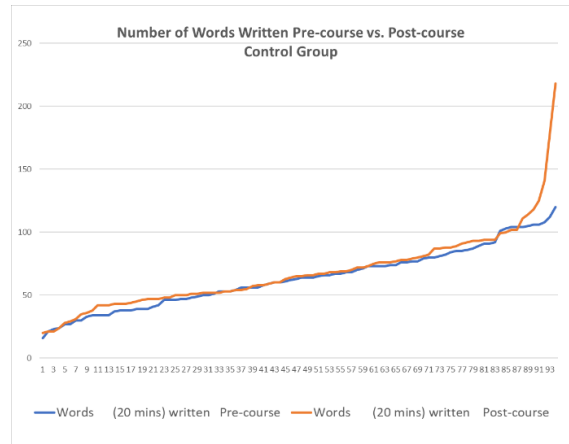
The results show that there is a significant difference between the pre and post test scores for the treatment group ($p=0.01$), while there is not a significant difference between the pre and post test scores for the control group ($p=0.08$). However, when the means for both groups were analyzed for significance, the difference between the control and the treatment group cannot be considered statistically significant with a p-value score of $p > 0.05$ ($p=0.06$).

Chart 1: Number of Words Written Pre-course vs. Post-course – Treatment Group



Note: x axis = student / y axis =number of words written in 20 minutes pre and post-course

Chart 2: Number of Words Written Pre-course vs. Post-course – Control Group



Note: x axis = student / y axis =number of words written in 20 minutes pre and post-course

Research Question 2 – Did students’ attitudes towards writing change after partaking in the treatment group?

To determine whether student attitudes changed towards writing journals in English, the treatment group were asked two questions before and after the course. Question 1 was simply whether the students enjoyed writing journals in English. Question 2 was whether the students thought that writing a journal every week in English would be useful to them. It was believed that these two questions would be a good indicator of student attitudes towards writing in English. The results of how the students answered can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2 – Student responses to two questions about their attitudes towards writing in English

	Q1) Do/Did you enjoy writing journals in English?		Q2) Do you think that writing a journal every week in English will be/was useful to you?	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Pre-course	39%	61%	94%	6%
Post-course	55%	45%	88%	12%
Change	+16%		-6%	
Chi-square value	$X^2=10.76$		$X^2=6.38$	

Note. N=90

There was a 16% increase in students who enjoy writing journals in English in the treatment group. However, there was a 6% decrease in students who believed that writing journals in English every week was useful to them. This could be explained by students having the idea that doing fun activities may not necessarily be useful to them when studying for standardized tests or university entrance exams. Further study could be conducted to understand the reasons for this result. Both questions had a chi-square value greater than the critical value of 3.841, leading to acceptance of the alternate hypothesis.

Research Question 3 – Did students in the treatment group feel that online journal writing helped their speaking ability in English?

Table 3 – Student responses to whether they thought journal writing helped with their English speaking ability

Q3) Do you think writing in a journal will help/helped your English-speaking ability?		
Answer	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Pre-course	83%	17%
Post-course	68%	32%
Change	-15%	-15%
Chi-square value	$X^2 = 15.95$	

Note. N=90

There was a 15% decrease in students who thought writing a journal in English helped their English speaking. The chi-square value was greater than the critical value of 3.841, allowing the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis that the change in attitudes was not due to chance.

Overall, writing journals helped students with their enjoyment of writing. It did not, however, seem useful to them and their speaking abilities. For fluency, the threshold was not met to show a

significant result that writing journals increased fluency. However, the treatment group did show a larger increase in fluency than the control group. Therefore, the practice of writing journals in combination with a regular communication curriculum would seem to help students get the added benefit of learning to enjoy writing. Also, it would seem to have a very small effect in helping fluency in writing, but not enough to recommend it as a necessary activity in addition to the regular communicative curriculum.

Ultimately, it comes down to the teachers views and preferences. Online journal writing might also be done as a mandatory activity at first and then changed to an optional activity for students who would like to continue it. The results of the previously cited studies above, in combination with the results of this study, suggest that a regularly scheduled journal exercise when used in combination with a communicative English course does not have any ill effects on students and in fact may help with student fluency and enjoyment when writing in English as a second language. The nature of the educational institution may have had some effect on the results of the study. The National Institute of Technology in Nagano is mainly focused on science and engineering skills. Students are less motivated to improve fluency in English due to its perceived relevance to their futures. However, for students who are studying in polytechnics or institutes of technology, the ability to use English as a tool for their future careers is becoming increasingly important. Zhu (2004) stressed the connection of writing skills to future job prospects in industry. The future technicians and engineers of our world are increasingly working together across national and linguistic boundaries, and the success of these endeavors depends on an ability to communicate effectively. Due to the technical nature of their education, most students do not have enough time to study English in an overly academic manner. Focusing on format and rhetorical structures is not a good use of their time. However, promoting fluency and positive attitudes towards communicating in English is of the utmost importance. Future communication between professionals will be first

done in writing and followed up in speaking. Therefore, teachers of English as a second language in technical schools today should try and recreate this pattern in their classes so that students will be better prepared for success on the global stage.

5. LIMITATIONS and SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Possible limitations can be discussed with this research. First, the students were asked to time themselves when writing in their journals and there was no way for the researcher to confirm that students were able to do that successfully with every journal entry. This might not be a big drawback since the research was comparing a group that wrote journals and a group that did not. However, this could result in lower numbers for the increase in fluency of the treatment group if some students were not actually writing for the full time limit. Second, the topics that were chosen for the pre and posttests might have influenced students' ability to write fluently. For example, if a student was not interested in discussing their favorite food, which was the topic for the posttest, this could have affected the total number of words. The same could be said for the topic of the pretest. Finally, the pre and posttests were written with paper and pen, while the journal writing was done online. This may have had a negative effect on the students' ability to write fluently during the pre and posttests.

Further research will be needed to see if journal writing in combination with a communicative speaking course has positive effects on fluency and student attitude. In addition, a deeper examination into student motivation and attitude could be done to more fully understand how a weekly freewriting activity helps students decrease anxiety that surrounds using English as a second language.

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