

Extensive Writing: Another Fluency Approach for EFL Learners

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In Japan, many high school writing classes do not offer enough opportunities for students to write. Nakanishi (2006) states that students have very limited experience in writing, and that sentence-level translation and vocabulary training is still the norm. Hayashi (2003) concluded that one-sentence translations seem to be an inefficient method for improving writing ability. Furthermore, Nation (2009) asserts that a successful English program includes a focus on fluency practice. Our high school Extensive Writing (EWr) program places an equal amount of attention on fluency as it does on accuracy or complexity. This paper shares qualitative and quantitative results from April 2010 to March 2011, covering three different writing classes (N= 75) at an all-girls Catholic high school in Osaka. Our results show immediate gains in writing speed and writing volume as well as an encouraging increase in self-confidence and improved motivation to study English. For many students in our writing classes, English is now perceived as a tool for communicating ideas and opinions.

There is a clever analogy that humans anywhere on Earth naturally know how to walk and run, but up to 50% of the world population cannot swim. Swimming is a skill that must be learned initially, and then practiced in order to achieve a certain level of competence. Learning to write is similar in that many people cannot communicate effectively in written communication. This is true for L1 or L2 writers, ESL learners or EFL learners, and learners at any age level.

Our high school writing program is predicated on two well-established tenets of writing instruction in general: 1) Writing is a skill that must be learned, and, 2) In order to improve writing, lots of practice is required. We are in the rather enviable position of having enough autonomy in our institution to be able to implement a syllabus according to a combination of established theory of writing instruction as seen in the literature and our own accumulated experience working in and understanding the needs of EFL students for many years. Understanding that some of our approach may go against the norm, and that there are sometimes conflicting needs from various stakeholders within our school, we have set out to clearly measure what is happening in our classrooms as a result of our innovative approach to L2 writing instruction in our EFL context. We will present some of these results and discuss the implications for not only our students but for students throughout Japan.

The High School Context

Our high school writing program addresses the imbalance between how much time is spent on accuracy, fluency and complexity in current writing classrooms in Japan, where teachers focus almost entirely on accuracy. This focus can be understood due to the pressure on students, teachers and schools to prepare for university entrance examinations; however, unfortunately, students stop learning any English of particular value beyond the test itself. The decoding and translation skills that students acquire are only useful if students wish to become translators or high school English teachers themselves someday. The real shame is that the constant focus on accuracy leaves little time to focus on fluency or complexity. This imbalance has two very detrimental outcomes. Firstly, many students lose confidence and motivation to make an effort studying English because of the overwhelming nature of the syllabus in high school English classes. Furthermore, students miss out on the natural opportunity to gain confidence and increase motivation that comes with developing fluency in any skill, whether it be swimming, typing, playing the piano or writing.

Our High School

Our high school is a private, Catholic girls' high school located in Western Japan at the below average

level on the Hensachi, a ranking in Japan compiled by *juku* ("cram schools" or night schools) based on test information collected from throughout the country. This is important to establish because sometimes in the past when we have shown student work to other teachers at presentations, we often hear that anything is possible with really high-level students; but this is the furthest thing from the truth. We occasionally have very determined or especially inspired students who go to the top public universities, but that is simply not the norm at our school.

All students take either *sougou* (general) courses or *supaa* (academic) courses. There are three native teachers in the high school and two of us share five different writing classes ($N=95$). We teach writing for two 50-minute classes per week.

Like many other schools, students generally like English when they begin their English studies in the first year of junior high school. Unfortunately, while the curriculum for junior high school is manageable for students, the high school curriculum is overwhelming and leaves many students depressed and unmotivated about learning English. One teacher aptly stated, "Students must study English, but they don't have to learn English" (Saito, personal communication).

One of our goals in writing class is to wrestle back the image that English is a tool for communication, not something to be analyzed and decoded.

MEXT 2011 Guidelines

In Section 9 of MEXT (Japan's Ministry of Education) 2011 Foreign Languages policy paper, it is clearly stated that, "Language activities should be conducted in such a way as grammar is effectively utilized for communication, based on the idea that grammar underpins communication" (MEXT 2011, p. 6). This is a clear mandate that supports our efforts to present a meaning-based writing program for our students. We routinely hear comments from students that writing opinions and expressing ideas makes sense to them, as both a way to practice English and as a way to actually use English.

Methodology

Our approach to teaching writing begins with fluency because Japanese EFL students

desperately need an injection of self-confidence, and our experience over the past five years consistently shows that as fluency increases, so does confidence. Self-confidence ignites motivation, and so begins the virtuous cycle that teachers strive to introduce to their students.

In order to address the need for enough fluency writing practice, classes begin with a 10-minute writing exercise as either free writing or as writing about a given topic, depending on the teacher. This focus on fluency right from day one allows students to begin to build confidence as they witness their own clear improvements in writing speed and writing volume. Figure 1 shows progress made in writing fluency during the first 11 sessions of a third-year general class in 2010. The trend is clearly increasing even as there are occasional dips.

Once students reach some level of confidence in their ability to write somewhat fluently (thinking and writing at the same time) they naturally begin to look for a new challenge. This is where the level or type of class seems to matter a lot. From our experience, it seems like lower level, general classes want to return to accuracy as their next challenge (Figure 2). Now that they have some confidence in getting things down on the page quickly, they want to improve the quality of what they have written. Conversely, many students in academic-oriented classes look to complexity as the natural next step (Figure 3). Since they already have a pretty good grip on their use of grammar, once they feel comfortable with fluency, they want to be challenged by complexity. For us as instructors, this insight offers us a clear and meaningful path for us to follow in our teaching.

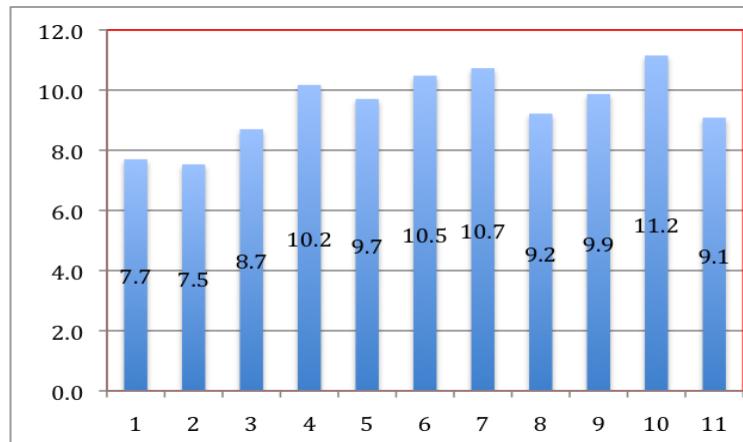


Figure 1. Words per minute in the first 11 sessions of Y Class 10-minute writing (2010)

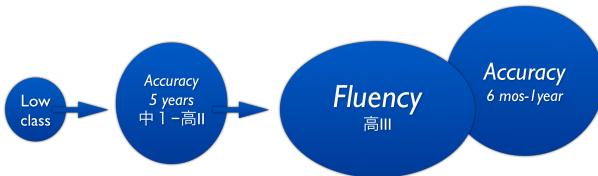


Figure 2. Lower classes go from a focus on fluency back to a focus on accuracy

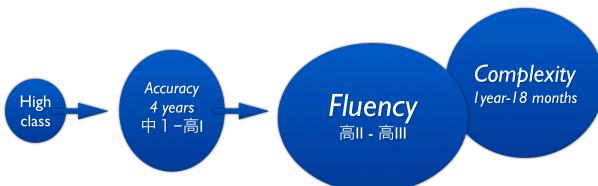


Figure 3. Higher classes go from a focus on fluency to a focus on complexity

Results

Throughout the past five years, we have collected a number of surveys, including quantitative Likert scale questionnaire responses as well as qualitative open-ended reflections about experiences in the writing classes. The messages we receive are consistently positive toward the approach that we have taken thus far; students can see their own improvement, and this positive self-efficacy benefits everyone in the class. There is nothing more compelling than real words from real students, who say:

This program was tremendously fresh for me...most of the topics Rebecca gives to us are interesting for me (but there are many difficult topics to think the subject matters). However, the more difficult topics are, the more I'm motivated by it. (Student A)

My feeling was changed scared into calm. In other words, in April, when my teacher said to us "Please write 100-150 words in your notebooks" I would thought "Waoh. 100-150? Too many for me to write!" But in March 2011, when my teacher tell us to write 200-250 words, I think "It's O.K. That thing doesn't bother me." (Student K)

When I heard about second year writing class's [sic] plan, I felt sad and thought that I would hate English more and more. But somehow, I like writing English. And I feel my English level goes up. I'm happy. (Student M)

Conclusion

We have personally seen clear evidence that there is great room for improvement in providing more

positive and more useful writing experiences for Japanese EFL students in high school writing classes. Students have "a right to write" and if given the chance, if expected to offer opinions and if challenged to express themselves clearly and logically in their writing, they more often than not surprise us. In the past year whole classes have written 400-500 word essays on topics such as: "Was the US right to invade Pakistan to pursue Osama Bin Laden?" "What do you think of the democratic uprisings known as the Arab Spring?" "Should elementary school students be allowed to have cell phones?" Not surprising to us anymore, students have opinions on just about any subject if they believe that a reader (the teacher or a classmate) is sincerely interested in hearing their opinion. We hope that with the introduction of the 2011 MEXT guidelines that more English classes will offer students genuine opportunities to learn to write by learning that writing is a way of communicating thoughts and ideas, and the more you practice the more your skills will improve. We also hope that other teachers will be inspired by our success in our program to pursue a similar methodology, taking into account own local constraints. Our experience has demonstrated that it isn't the level of the students or the track of their academic program that makes the difference, but the engagement of teachers with their students, and students with one another, as they pursue writing for communication rather than for evaluation.

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