

The Potential Benefits of Timed Writing in College EFL Classes

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Keywords: timed writing, EFL, writing fluency

Abstract

Fluency is essential in describing a language learner's proficiency. At the same time, fluency is very difficult to develop only through formal, in-class education due to curricular and time restraints. This paper focuses on the potential of short, weekly timed writing sessions to develop the writing fluency of EFL students, including volume and quality of writing. Analysis of short texts produced by two groups of students shows that timed writing exercises can lead to an increase in both the volume and the quality of writing over nine weeks. An additional survey of three student groups that engaged in various forms of timed writing shows several other perceived benefits of practicing writing for fluency in the English language classroom.

Introduction

Timed writing is a technique often used in writing exercises, especially in educational settings, to improve writing skills and encourage productivity. The basic idea is to set a specific time limit and write as much as possible within that time frame without worrying too much about editing or perfection. The concept of timed writing, or at least using timed exercises for writing practice, does not have a specific single origin or associated mention. This technique has evolved over time and has been widely adopted in various educational and writing contexts. The use of timed writing exercises can be traced back to the pedagogical methods employed by writing instructors and educators. Timed prompts and in-class writing assignments have long been used to assess students' writing abilities.

Timed writing in the context of language learning typically involves setting a specific time limit for learners to produce a written piece in the target language, aiming to improve writing fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and overall language proficiency. Educators are well aware of the benefits of developing writing skills as part of the process of learning a foreign language, but how aware are the students?

When asked which English language skills they would like to develop more, most university students and also most people in Japan would choose speaking skills. However, Japanese media recently reported that the average ninth grader taking part in a national English-speaking assessment test earlier this year answered only 12.4% of the questions correctly and that most students failed to get any questions right.

Alongside speaking, writing is also a productive skill and, as such, represents an opportunity to use and consolidate the foreign language knowledge that the students have accumulated. While recently, more attention has been drawn to incorporating writing into the English teaching curriculum starting as early as elementary school in Japan, English writing activities at the high school level generally refer to sentence or short paragraph writing of the description, report, or opinion type. Free, creative writing is mostly inconsistent and highly undervalued. To develop the students' writing ability, a variety of writing exercises, incorporating both writing for accuracy and content and writing for speed and quantity (extensive writing), are necessary. In university EFL classes, which in Japan can range between 20 and hundreds of students, class

size can be another challenge when considering whether or not to incorporate writing activities into the lesson. However, giving all the students as many chances to express themselves as possible and thus helping them develop their English communication skills is paramount when considering the globalized job market the students need to be ready for.

This paper focuses on timed writing activities that were introduced into reading-focused classes as an efficient method of allowing the students to not only show their understanding of the topics discussed but also to try to find the relevance of the topics to their own lives by creating stories that begin with prompts related to the textbook topics. For the educator/ researcher in this study, efficiency was the main driver for incorporating eight to ten-minute writing activities at the end of most classes. However, gains were expected and, upon analysis, observed in writing fluency (both speed and accuracy) as well. Student questionnaires were also designed to gauge other potential benefits of the timed writing activities as perceived by the student participants.

Literature Review

Within the Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, in 1990, Kresovich argued that timed writing in college EFL classes offered students the chance to express themselves in a manner that was new to many of them and helped to promote confidence and thinking in English, as well as to ease anxiety over writing tests. In 2012, Baba and Nitta investigated the longitudinal effects of repeating a timed writing activity on fluency, grammatical, and lexical complexity. They found that, unexpectedly, grammatical complexity improved significantly compared to the other aspects.

In 2014, Dickinson focused on the effect of topic-selection control on the writing fluency of college EFL students. Findings show that texts written on self-selected topics displayed a significantly higher level of fluency than those written on assigned topics. This study also examines the effect of the writing activity on learners' self-efficacy and attitude to second language (L2) writing through pre- and post-activity questionnaires. Although it looks like the participants enjoyed the exercises, they did not perceive them as helpful in enhancing their productive skills in English (speaking and writing).

In Vietnam, Nguyen found in 2015 that timed writing activities can have different results across different cohorts of students. In this study, third-year students' writing showed significant gains in quantity and quality after 30 sessions of 7-minute writing activities. In contrast, first-year students improved slightly but not significantly compared to the control group.

In 2016, in Japan again, Dizon analyzed the effects of timed blogging on L2 writing fluency and lexical richness (ability to use a varied and extensive vocabulary). The study found that 24 blog writing sessions positively affected both writing fluency and vocabulary use.

In 2018, in a two-part essay describing the benefits and the process of timed writing, Rodgers argued that writing for content is an energy and memory-consuming exercise, which, in many cases, can lead to students not revising their work. By devoting time to developing the students' writing fluency through timed writing exercises, educators can help the students overcome fatigue and produce better-quality writing. He also describes the timed writing process as having "three key components: (1) repeated writings, (2) immediate and corrective feedback, and (3) individualized goals with progress monitoring."

Although not extensive, the review of the research articles above shows that timed writing has a potentially positive impact on the writing fluency of English language learners. The effects encompass linguistic aspects such as increased speed of writing, improved grammatical and lexical accuracy and richness, and

non-linguistic aspects like reduced anxiety and increased confidence.

Current Study

The current study aims to explore the potential benefits of a limited number of timed writing sessions (seven to eight total) on the writing fluency of first-year EFL students in reading-focused four-skill integrated courses. It also seeks to gauge other benefits of the exercise through student perception questionnaires. In two first-year classes at a Japanese national university, students engaged in 8- to 10-minute story writing based on prompts provided by the teacher. The students first studied the vocabulary in each chapter at home, then read five-paragraph long passages on topics related to Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), engaged in discussions about the issues raised in each paragraph, completed comprehension checking exercises, additional vocabulary exercises, and listening exercises as well. In the last 10 minutes of the lesson, they were given a sentence prompt and the following instructions:

“Write a short story that begins with the following sentence:

Copy the sentence above into the box and continue the story.

Keep writing for 10 minutes. Write more than 100 words for 10 points.”

They were reminded that as long as the meaning was clear, grammar and spelling errors would not be considered when their writing was evaluated. The primary purpose was to write as much as possible until the 10-minute timer ran out and the test closed automatically on their screen. The learning management system they used also allowed them and the instructor to see how many words they had produced at any given time.

The study was conducted in the spring semester (April-July 2023) in two first-year classes with a total of 79 students. The students wrote a total of 556 stories, of which 545 stories were analyzed. The data for several students who missed three or more timed writing sessions was excluded from the analysis.

	Number of students	Total stories produced	Stories analyzed	Number of stories per student
Class 1	40	309	299	7.9
Class 2	39	247	246	6.5

Table 1: Demographic data

At the end of the 15-week semester, a survey was conducted to determine how the students felt about timed writing and to what extent they recognized the exercise as beneficial. For comparison purposes, this survey was implemented in a writing-focused English class taught by a different instructor who had also used timed writing exercises as part of the lesson.

The two main research questions of this study are:

1. Does writing fluency (volume, speed, sophistication, and readability) improve over a relatively

short period through timed writing exercises?

2. Do timed writing exercises have other perceived benefits for English language skill development?

Results and Discussion

Writing fluency

Writing fluency was analyzed from several different perspectives. Table 2 and Figure 1 below show the session averages for the total volume (number of words per story) and the writing speed (number of words produced per minute), taking into consideration the fact that not all sessions had the same length.

	Class 1	Class 2
S1 volume	56.8	62.1
S1#WPM	5.7	6.2
S2 volume	64.3	69.4
S2#WPM	7.7	7.7
S3 volume	77.0	84.5
S3#WPM	8.1	8.4
S4 volume	65.9	67.4
S4#WPM	7.7	6.7
S5 volume	90.4	86.9
S5#WPM	9.0	8.7
S6 volume	92.8	97.2
S6#WPM	9.7	9.7
S7 volume	99.4	
S7#WPM	9.9	
S9 volume	92.1	79.2
S9#WPM	9.2	7.9

Table 2: Volume (total word count) and speed (words per minute) averages over nine weeks

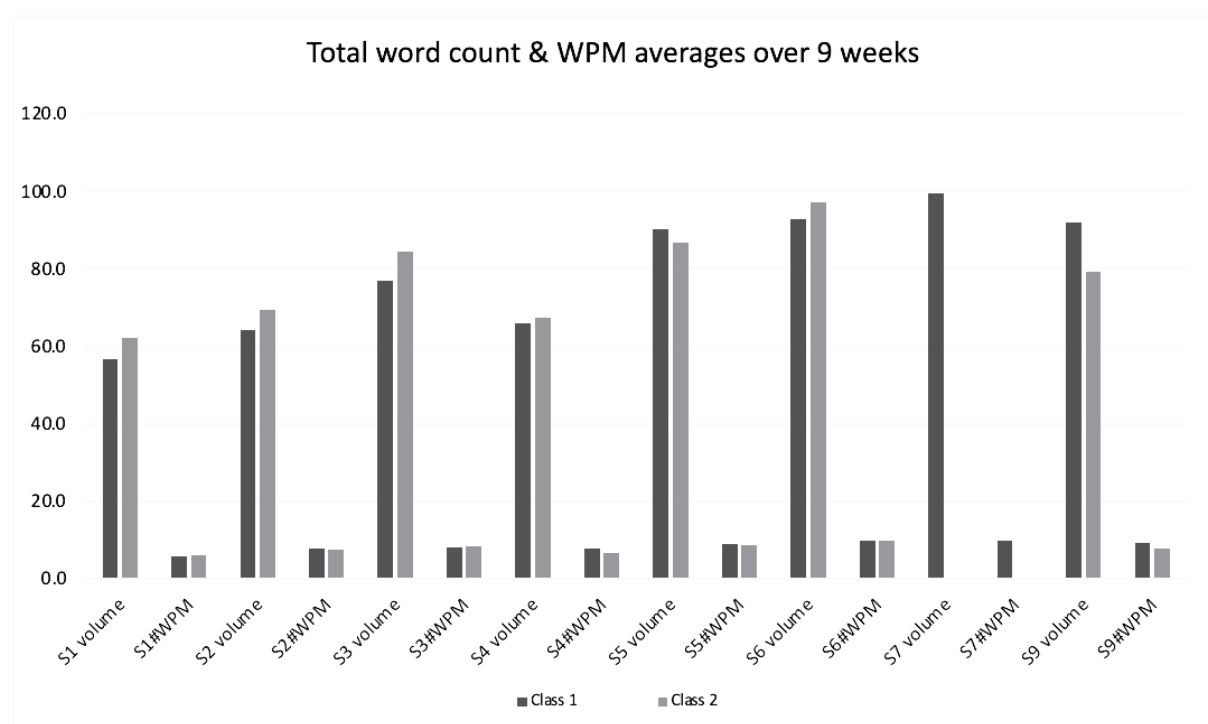


Figure 1: Volume (total word count) and speed (words per minute) averages over nine weeks

With the exception of Session 4, a steady increase can be noticed in both overall writing volume and writing speed until Session 6 for Class 2 and Session 7 for Class 1. Neither class engaged in timed writing for Session 8, and their volume and speed scores fell during Session 9. This tendency is observed less in Class 1, which only experienced a week-long hiatus from writing compared to the two-week break experienced by Class 2. Class 2 scored generally higher than Class 1 before this break, during which Class 1 had an extra timed writing session and then clearly overtook Class 2.

When considering writing speed only, Class 1 sees an impressive jump of 173% from session 1 (5.7 wpm average) to session 7 (9.9 wpm average). Class 2 begins at a slightly higher speed in session 1 (6.2 wpm average) but also improves significantly at 156% until session 6 (9.7 wpm average).

The results seem to suggest that sustained weekly practice contributes to improvements in speed and volume of writing, even if the writing only occurs once a week for a few minutes. Also, any interruption of the practice affects the performance in the subsequent week, and the longer the interruption, the lower the volume and speed become when training is resumed.

Several factors could explain the “dip” in Session 4, where writing fluency seems to have dropped suddenly and significantly. The factors influencing learning performance include individual, environmental, temporal, and other factors that cannot be accounted for in this study. A student’s health or mood, the room temperature, outside weather, the chair or desk where one sits, the time of the day, and so on could all have contributed to raising or lowering performance. However, it is hard to ignore the fact that this drop occurs in both classes. In other words, the graph suggests that there may be common factors that have influenced the students’ performance. Session 4 occurred in the third week of May, commonly known in Japan as the time of ‘gogatsu byo’ (May sickness), a seasonal affective disorder. Other factors could include the difficulty of the topic or the degree to which the students were familiar with or interested in it. The subject for Session 4 was clean energy, and the prompt was: “*This clean energy did not exist in 2022.*” No tool was employed to examine the difficulty of each topic as perceived by the students, so this would be something to consider in further study attempts.

In this study, fluency is defined as a combination of volume, speed, sophistication, and accuracy of the writing. Therefore, the accuracy and complexity of each story were also analyzed. To this end, an online free grammar checker called <scribens.com> was used. The checking tool also provides statistics for each text, including average words per sentence, often used as a measure of sophistication, and the Flesch index, a measure of accuracy. Each story was copied into the text box on this website, and the corresponding statistics were obtained. A record was made of the number of words per sentence (sophistication data) and the readability of each story based on the Flesch index (accuracy data). L2 acquisition literature suggests that learners produce more extended and more varied syntactic structures as they develop. Syntactic complexity is typically measured by the degree of clausal subordination and sentence length (Kyle, 2016). The Flesch Reading Ease is a readability test designed to assess the readability of English text. It is based on the idea that more straightforward text is generally more readable. The Flesch Reading Ease test produces a score between 0 and 100. The higher the score, the easier the text is to read. A score of 90-100 suggests a very easy-to-read text (a school grade of 5th or 6th). On the other hand, a score of 0-30 indicates a text that is very difficult to read (e.g., college level). <scribens.com> suggests that a score between 60 to 70 is ideal.

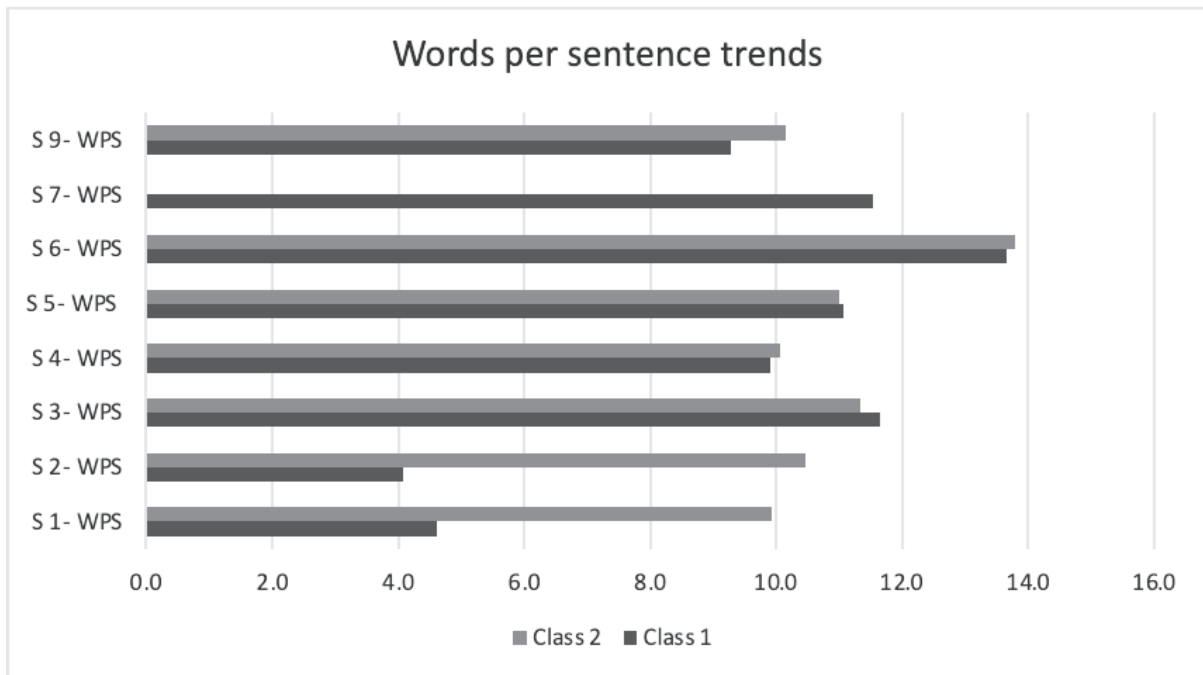


Fig. 2: Sophistication as measured by the number of words per sentence

As Fig. 2 above shows, in Class 2, there appears to be an increasing trend in sophistication until session 6, and then, after a 2-session hiatus, the values drop back to levels seen at the beginning of the exercise. Class 1 has, at the start, very low levels of sophistication, but then they reach similar levels to Class 2, sometimes even slightly surpassing it. Although Class 1 participated in one additional timed writing session (Session 7), the week-long hiatus marked by the missing Session 8 also has an impact on its sophistication level. However, even with the drop recorded, the level of sophistication in Class 1 remains much higher than in sessions 1 and 2 at the beginning of the semester.



Fig 3: Accuracy measured as Flesch readability scores

In terms of the readability of the stories produced in each session, Class 1 produced texts with higher readability in almost every session compared to Class 2, but overall, readability levels are very similar. Except

for session 4, all the stories produced have an average Flesch readability score of between 74 and 88. Session 4 score averages are lower (64 and 67) but still within the ideal readability range.

Below are several samples of stories from each group that scored both very high and very low on the Flesch readability scale.

Class 1:

“I try to imagine the world my kids will live in. I think I have a son who playing football. I teach him so hard, and h can play very well. I am regretting now I should practice hard when I was young. So I do not want him to think same way. But if he says I want to quit the footballer, I respect his thought. I want him to do football, but I want to him live freely.” (session 2, Flesch score of 100)

“In 2050, half of our monthly salary goes to buying drinking water. So, we can not afford to buy extra things for our pleasure. Especially, families which have children have problems such as children’s school expenses. This situation leads to decreasing number of children because many people understand the difficulties raising children.” (session 3, Flesch score of 49.9)

Class 2:

“My brother became a soldier to get us money. We can eat food, but he does not get home. He has been at home for 1year. We miss him. And we concern about him. The place where he has gone is too dangerous to survive, so we can get much money, but it is not enough to live. 5 people are in my family, but worker is my brother only. This is because, there are no jobs in my town. In other words, we want to get a job, but we can not do it. My brother is only 16 years old. I want him to back home.” (session 5, Flesch score of 95.5)

“ 6 million children die of hunger every year and we are watching ‘THE BIG EATER’ on TV. If I lived in developing country and hungry every time, I would hate this. Developed countries people are enjoying it, even though they know children die. Many people include me know it, but a few people think I can’t solve this problem. When I study in junior high school, I know this problem first time and I think it is serious problem in the world.” (session 6, Flesch score of 54.3)

As is evident from the samples above, Flesch readability scores are highly dependent on the lexical level of the text. The simpler and more common the words employed are, the higher the readability score. Conversely, the more academic words are used, the lower the readability score. Considering that at the beginning of the timed writing exercise, the instructor reminded the students that grammatical and spelling errors would not be considered as long as they did not affect the understanding of the message, it can be inferred that the students selected vocabulary they were familiar with more often than not. Lower readability scores for Session 4 thus suggest that when confronted with an unfamiliar topic, the students tend to use more academic vocabulary as found in the passages they have just finished reading in their textbook.

Below are two samples from Session 4 with the lowest Flesch readability scores that illustrate this tendency.

“This clean energy did not exist in 2022. Not only countries but also scientists around the world cooperated and developed this clean energy. United Nations required developed countries to share this energy to developing countries. Now the world population becomes over 100 billion. But everyone in the world can eat enough to live. This is because this clean energy helps our agriculture.” (Class 1, Flesch score of 47.8)

“This clean energy did not exist in 2022.Today ,only water can produce electricity. This methods is more sustainable and easy to create elecricity. We can immediately produce electricity. We can produce electrici-

ty only water, so we can produce electricity everywhere. We do not need large machine, we can easliy start this methoed. It is kind for everyone.This is kind for environment.” (Class 2, Flesch score of 45.9)

Other perceived benefits of timed writing

One hundred two students, including the 79 students directly instructed by the researcher and one other group that engaged in timed writing activities with a different instructor, took an anonymous nine-item survey at the end of the semester designed to gauge their general attitude towards the timed writing exercise and its perceived potential benefits. Eight of the nine items in the questionnaire were multiple-choice-type inquiries, and the last one was a free comment or suggestion box. Below are the results of the survey. The groups are marked as C1 and C2 (reading-focused classes) for the study participants and C3 (writing-focused class) for the extra group that only participated in the survey.

The first question asked about the perceived general improvements in six separate English language skills over the course of the semester: reading, listening, speaking, writing, grammar, and vocabulary.

Perceived English skill improvement

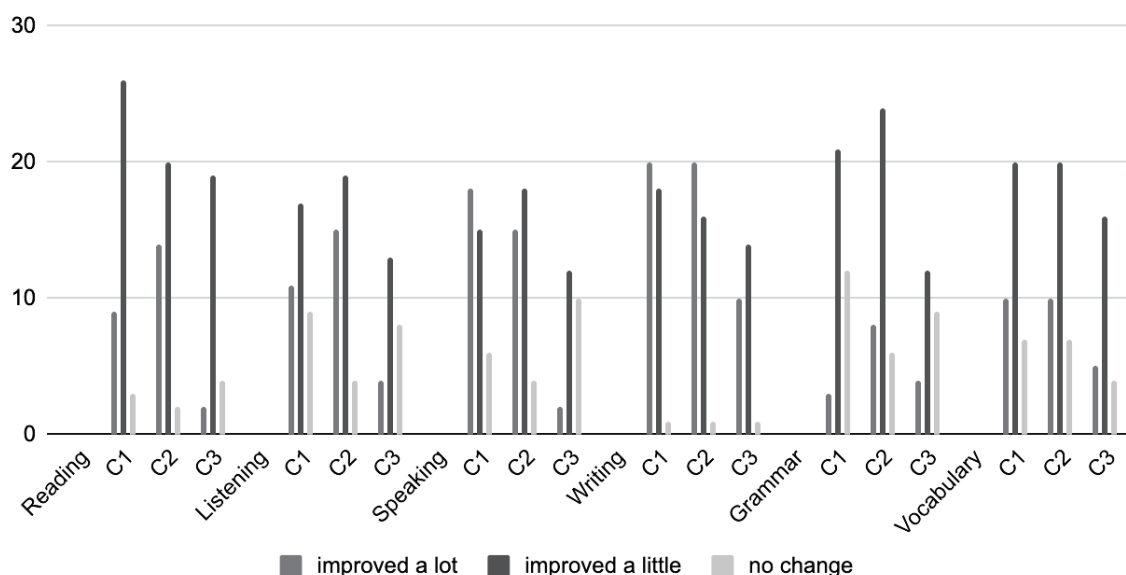


Figure 4: Responses to question 1 by skill by class

As the results show, students in all three groups feel that their writing skills have improved significantly, with the smallest percentage saying there was no change for this category. As classes C1 and C2 were reading-focused, it was expected that a large number of students would see improvement in their reading ability in these classes. A similar trend is observed for class C3, which was writing-focused, but students in this group felt that their listening ability and vocabulary had also improved significantly. Another interesting finding is that students in classes C1 and C2 also perceived high improvement in their speaking skill, which, as mentioned, is also a productive skill like writing. In these two groups, many respondents considered that there was not much change in their grammar, listening, and vocabulary skills over one semester. The English program during the semester in question provides reading-focused and writing-focused classes to all first-year students. However, the instructors have a high degree of freedom in choosing materials and teaching methods.

Question 3 asked about the perceived direct impact of timed writing activities on each of the same skills.

Timed-writing impact on language skills

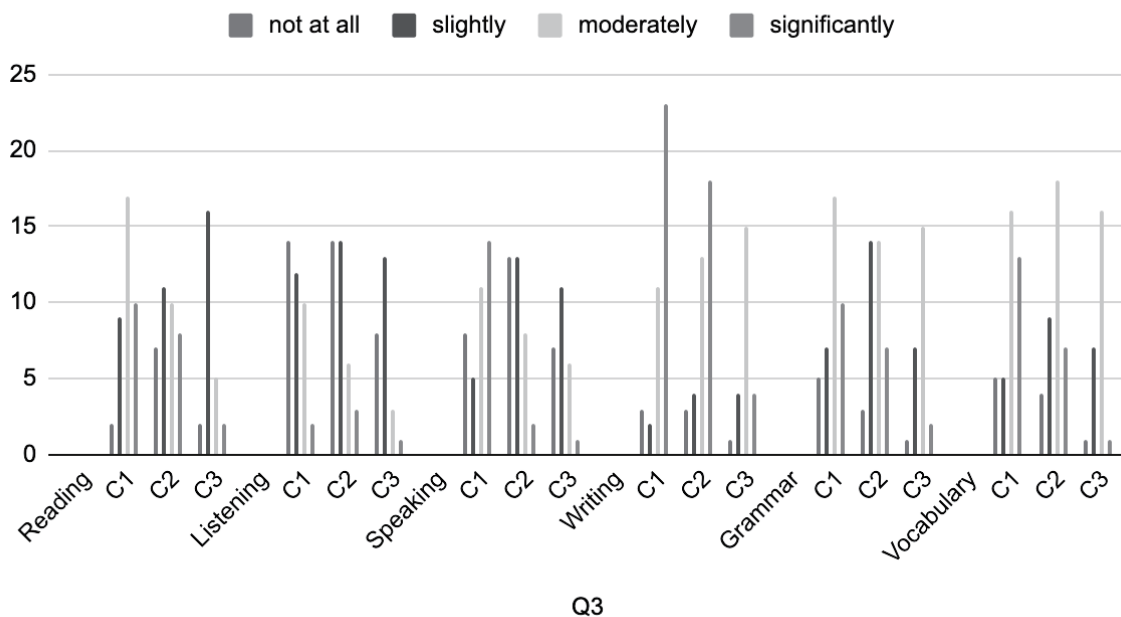


Figure 5: Perceived impact of timed writing activities on English skills

According to the results, timed writing activities are perceived to have had the most negligible impact on improving listening and speaking skills across all three groups. This finding is partially consistent with Dickinson's (2014) results that show the students are not necessarily aware of improvement in productive skills, in this case, speaking. Overall, respondents in groups C2 and C3 agree that the impact on listening and speaking skills is non-existent or slight. In contrast, group C1 maintains that timed writing activities also helped to improve their speaking skills 'moderately' or 'significantly.' At the same time, in contrast to Dickinson (2014), in this study, the highest perceived impact is on writing, vocabulary, and grammar skills. When combined with the answers to the previous question, these results appear to suggest that while overall, the students do not see significant improvement in their English grammar and vocabulary over one semester, whatever positive change they see is possibly attributed to their participation in timed writing activities.

The following three questions aimed to gauge the potential impact of timed writing activities on other skills related to communication ability in general, namely generating ideas quickly, managing time efficiently, and expressing thoughts coherently and concisely.

Timed-writing impact on other skills

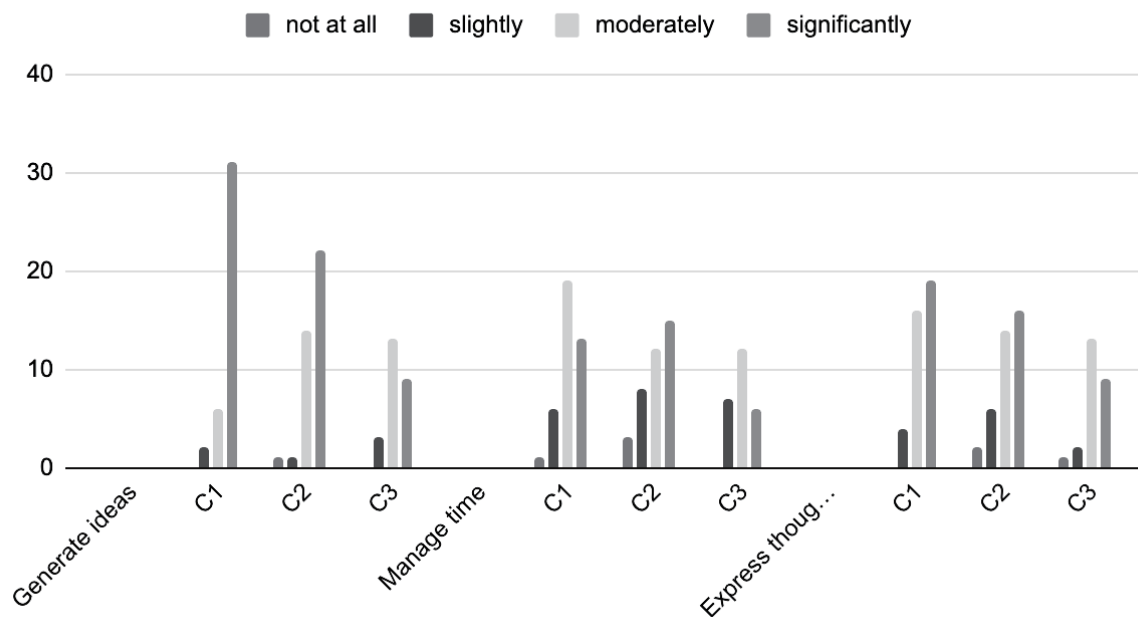


Figure 6: Perceived impact of timed writing activities on other skills

As Figure 6 shows, all three groups believe that timed writing activities also helped them to generate ideas quickly, express thoughts clearly and concisely, and, to a lesser but not insignificant extent, manage their time more efficiently. In contrast to groups C1 and C2, group C3 is more reluctant to recognize a ‘significant’ impact on any of the three skills they were questioned about but also does not deny such an impact, with one small exception (regarding expressing thoughts clearly and concisely). On the other hand, a small number of students in groups C1 or C2 did select ‘not at all’ for either of the three skills. The students who chose ‘not at all’ on these three categories also had a ‘somewhat negative’ or ‘negative’ feeling overall regarding timed writing activities and wrote comments such as: “The topics were too difficult” or “The writing time was too short.”

How do you feel about timed-writing activities?

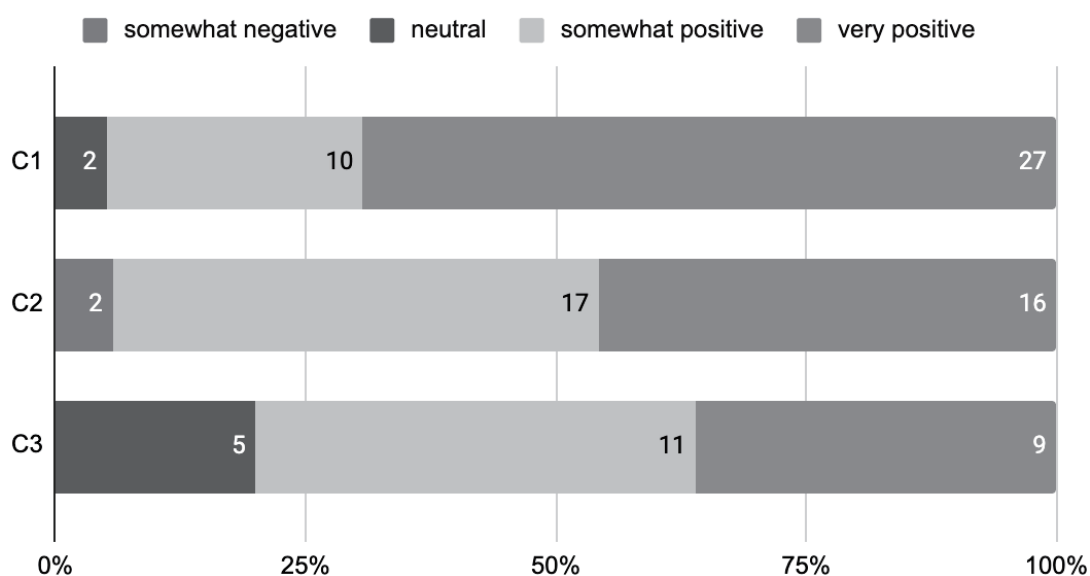


Figure 7: General sentiment about timed writing activities

Overall, the general sentiment about timed writing activities is overwhelmingly positive across all groups, with the highest ratios in groups C1 and C2, with the caveat that two students in each of these groups either remain neutral or have a somewhat negative view of these types of activities. Group C3 has the highest ratio of students who stay neutral vis-a-vis timed writing, although they are in a writing-focused group. Group C1 had an extra timed writing session compared to the other groups and also more substantial results in terms of speed and accuracy of writing. The case may be that the more the students practice, the more they become aware of improvements in not only writing skills but other skills as well and thus have a more positive general view regarding timed writing activities. However, bigger student cohorts and more data would be necessary to prove such correlations, an endeavor outside the scope of the current exploratory study.

The free comments that the students wrote also reflect this generally positive attitude toward the timed writing activities. Comments such as “It was difficult every time, but I gained the ability to come up with a story quickly” and “I learned to think of a story on a subject related to the class” also suggest that the activity potentially achieved another goal set by the instructor, which was to establish a more personal connection between the textbook topics and the learners by encouraging them to find how the topics are relevant to them. The students also pointed out issues such as “The prompts given by the teacher varied greatly: some were easy to write, and others were difficult to connect to a story” or “Occasionally, the theme is difficult for me.” The purpose of the activity was not to select easy-to-address topics only; naturally, some students found some of the subjects challenging. The instructor did try to provide a variety of prompts of varying grammatical and lexical difficulty, and also spent time explaining the meaning of the prompt right before the timed writing activity started. Interest in and previous knowledge of the topic are variables that this study could not control for.

Conclusions and Limitations

As mentioned, this exploratory study did not aim to control the many factors that may have affected the participants’ performance in either the timed writing activities they engaged in for nine weeks or the survey they completed at the end of the semester. In addition, although previous research findings suggest that greater writing fluency may be attained by giving the students control over the topics they write about, in this study, the topics and prompts were textbook-related and created by the instructor/ researcher. For these reasons, the results of this study, while partially supported by previous research in the field, need to be validated by bigger-scale controlled experiments.

While the majority of participants appear to have significantly increased their writing volume, speed, and sophistication level, readability was high on average from the beginning of the experiment and dipped when students wrote about unfamiliar topics. This study did not gauge grammatical and lexical accuracy, only overall readability as measured by the Flesch score. Whether any gains can be achieved in terms of grammatical and lexical accuracy and richness remains a topic for further study.

Student sentiment regarding timed writing is generally very positive, and many of the participants found the exercise to be a valuable and enjoyable experience. While many agreed that timed writing helped enhance their overall English writing skill, only some recognized it as a productive skill that may have also influenced their speaking ability, in line with earlier research findings. The survey participants also agree that they can generate ideas more quickly and, to a lesser extent, express themselves more clearly and manage their time more efficiently, thanks to this exercise. In their free comments, many students appreciate

the opportunity to express themselves freely and frequently in English through timed story-writing. As the primary motivation behind this study was to offer all the participants more chances to express themselves in English in every lesson, it is encouraging to see that many students recognized the exercise as such an opportunity.

Finally, the results of this small study may, in fact, be most relevant to the participants. As students today find the speed and efficiency of AI-generated writing more and more attractive, showing them that significant gains can be made even in a short time with sustained effort may help convince them of the value of such an effort.

Acknowledgments

The author is particularly grateful for the assistance of Prof. Uchio of Kagoshima University, Japan, in collecting survey data.

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大学の英語授業における時間制限付きライティング活動の 潜在的利点

キーワード：時間制限付きライティング、EFL、作文の流暢性

概要：

流暢さは言語学習者の習熟度を表す上で不可欠である。同時に、カリキュラムや時間的な制約から、通常の学校教育だけで流暢性を伸ばすことは非常に困難である。本稿では、EFL 学習者の作文の流暢性（文章量と質を含む）を向上させるために、週1回の時間制限付きライティング活動の可能性に焦点を当てる。2つのグループの大学生が作成した短い文章を分析した結果、9週間という短期間のライティング練習によって、文章の量と質の両方が向上することがわかった。また、内容の異なる時間制限付きライティングに取り組んだ3つの学生グループに対する調査から、英語教室で流暢なライティングを練習することには、他にもいくつかの利点があることがわかった。