

Using Freewriting in Journals to Improve Written Fluency

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Introduction

Journal writing has been a staple of my Writing Strategies course for first year students in the Department of Tourism and Transnational Studies at Dokkyo University since the department's inauguration in 2009. Although the departmental guidelines state that accuracy is the main focus of the course, they do allow that students should be provided with some free writing exercises to improve their fluency. The use of writing journals fulfills this aim by giving students the opportunity to do freewriting regularly both inside and outside the classroom. Freewriting can be defined as writing any ideas or thoughts that come to mind in a set time without pausing (Elbow, E. & Belanoff, P.: 2000). Freewriting can take several different forms. When students are permitted to choose their own topic to write about it can be classified as “unguided” free writing. If the topic is assigned by the teacher, then it is “guided” (Fontaine, 1991). Free writing can be private if written for oneself or public when it is to be shared with classmates (Elbow, 1994). This paper explains how I have experimented and implemented the use of journals for freewriting in my writing class to improve students' written fluency. Furthermore, it examines the procedure and benefits of this journal writing.

First experience with journal writing

Initially when I first began teaching my writing class, my decision to incorporate journal writing into the syllabus was simply to provide students with the opportunity to engage in regular writing practice. Having had previously taught for several years in a private girls' high school where writing had been largely ignored in the curriculum, I was sure my students at Dokkyo had had little formal writing instruction prior to entering the university. Subsequent conversations and discussions with students supported my premise. Results from a questionnaire (see Appendix A) administered to my present class this past semester, revealed that more than half of the 28 students had received little or no formal teaching on writing in high school. (see Table A)

In 2009 I would spend the first 15 minutes of class having students do guided, public freewriting in their journals. This activity produced some of the usual challenges when asking students to write. Some students were agonizingly slow in getting started on the task. Others were too dependent on their dictionaries or obsessed with grammatical accuracy. Any writing students had previously done in high school had been produced with the goal of grammatical accuracy. For students the transition

Table A

<i>In high school how much instruction did you receive about learning how to write? (please circle one)</i>					
none	a little	some	much	a lot	Total # Students
5	11	3	6	3	28
17.86%	39.29%	10.71	21.43%	10.71%	100%

to informal writing with the goal of quantity over quality was not an easy one. Of course I encouraged students to write as much as they could, however, I quickly realized they were being asked to write cold. It took students time to warm up. Casanave (2004) suggests that writing fluency is connected to the ability to produce a lot of writing without excessive hesitations, blocks or interruptions. In order to help my students develop their fluency, I had to reassess my procedure for doing journal writing.

I began having students do word counts to emphasize fluency. I also began to shorten the time allotted first to 12 minutes and later to ten minutes so students would feel more urgency to produce text. While some students clearly showed an increase of fluency, I could see the process was being influenced by various other factors. The quantity of writing students were producing was sometimes affected by their background knowledge and interest of the topic. Even the time of day or their physical condition was sometimes a consideration. An afternoon class or one right after lunch could impact their mood and motivation to write. Hence, I began to also assign journal writing as homework that students could do at the time of their choice and when they were in the mood to write. I also began to alternate between guided and unguided freewriting to allow student input, enhance their interest, and to try making the writing more meaningful to them.

Fast forward now to 2017 and my rationale for the use of journals has evolved. The sole purpose is no longer just to provide writing practice. That element does remain of course because there are long gaps between the times students have to submit typed paragraphs to be graded. Journal writing keeps their pens on the paper but the aim now is to improve their written fluency. Journals also allow students and teachers to see the regular progress of writing as they can monitor their word counts from week to week. I no longer ask students to write in their journals at the very beginning of class. I will ease into the writing by usually starting with a topic and speaking activity where language is introduced and students can engage with their partners or in a small group on that topic. Then I will have students do freewriting on that same topic in their journals where they can practice and apply the language they have just used.

Implementing journal writing

The implementation of writing journals for free writing is begun at the first class of the term. I provide students with a written handout (see Appendix B) explaining the concept and supplement it

with a detailed verbal explanation. Because very few students have done free writing in high school, a clear explanation of its purpose and the definition of key terms such as “writing fluency” are essential. To achieve a level of fluency in writing, students need to experiment with vocabulary, phrases, idioms and even slang in a safe environment. Journal writing provides this safety and opportunity and is, therefore, I believe an important tool for acquiring written fluency.

At the first class students are told to purchase a B5 notebook for their journal. I tell them not to skip lines and not to go to a new line when they begin a new sentence. I ask students to write for at least one hour a week outside the classroom and for a minimum of 200 words. Students are free to schedule their writing to suit themselves. They may write for fifteen minutes four times a week or twenty minutes three times a week. They are asked to write the time they start and stop writing in their journals. It is crucial to instruct students not to worry about spelling or grammar. I emphasize that spelling errors or incorrect grammar will not be considered when the journals are checked at the end of the semester. However, the journals are evaluated at the final class but the main criteria is quantity and not quality. Finally, I instruct students not to write anything in their journals that they are not comfortable sharing with their classmates. I will collect all the journals during the first couple of classes and just quickly check that students are doing the activity as instructed.

Procedure

When doing freewriting in class, I stress to students not to stop writing during the activity. By focusing exclusively on the writing and not attempting any editing, students can improve their fluency by producing text and not being distracted by what has already been written. Students are free to read and edit their journals later at home. This distinction enables them to separate the two processes of writing and editing. The fluency criteria is speed and volume. The aim is for students to write as many words or sentences as they can about the subject within the allotted time. Writing that is grammatically correct and well structured, is the goal for students when they are submitting typed compositions for evaluation.

After students write for ten minutes, I asked them to share their writing with a partner. At this juncture students will exchange journals and provide brief verbal feedback to each other on the content they have just read. Hammond (1991) advocates nonjudgmental feedback by sharing writing or discussing writing with classmates. He found this process aided students to deepen their thinking and obtain further insights. Journal writing done for homework is shared at the beginning of each class. I distribute journals randomly for reading and ask students to write a comment to the writer and also write a question. Students need some guidance to learn how to give feedback. After some practice they become readers who can convey their reactions and thoughts about the topic. When asked on the survey (see Appendix A) what students enjoyed most about journal writing, many indicated they enjoyed reading others’ journals and making and receiving comments. When I first did journal writing

I felt an onus to read everything students wrote. While I still check some of the journal writing, I have found it more practical and beneficial to include the students as the writing audience.

Benefits & concerns

After only doing freewriting for a few weeks at the beginning of each semester, I have been able to notice an improvement in my students' written fluency or the quantity of their writing. Students see the improvement, too. Almost all students indicated on the survey (see Table B) that they believed their written fluency had improved.

Furthermore, they enjoy writing in their journals. As well as reading others' journals and receiving comments from peers, students expressed other positive factors from the journal writing. Student A wrote they found pleasure in "Expressing my idea every week." Student B commented that they liked "To communicate things I'm interested in when I write journals of free topics." Student C enjoyed "Thinking about new things I have never thought." The same question elicited negative views about the journals and there were two common complaints. Several students said it was sometimes difficult to fulfill the minimum quota of 200 words a week. Others said sometimes they had insufficient ideas about the topic assigned. However, question #5 on the same survey showed that most students had no preference between guided and unguided freewriting. (see Table C)

Other research has also shown that freewriting can be a successful method for improving written fluency. A case study by Ju A Hwang in an EFL college-level setting in Thailand produced results that guided freewriting over an eight week period had improved students' written fluency (Hwang,

Table B

<i>How much has journal writing this term improved your writing fluency? (please circle one)</i>					
not at all	a little	some	much	very much	Total # Students
0	3	12	10	3	28
0%	10.71%	42.86%	35.72%	10.71%	100%

Table C

<i>For journal topics did you prefer when the teacher gave the topic or when you could choose your own topic? (please circle one)</i>			
Choosing my own topic	Teacher gave the topic	Both were okay	Total # Students
5	6	17	28
17.86%	21.42%	60.72%	100%

116). Furthermore, most of his students agreed that practicing guided freewriting had a positive effect on their confidence in English writing as well (Hwang 117). The results of that study further indicate the importance of utilizing freewriting and not just demanding writing from students that focuses on grammatical accuracy.

Some researchers do worry that a focus on fluency could negatively impact the quality of writing students produce (Mullin, 1981). However, the focus of freewriting is not on quality. Elbow (1994) counters this concern by claiming that what is accomplished by practicing freewriting is “separating the producing process from the revising process” (p.14). Also, Fontaine (1991) noted in her study that unguided freewriting allowed students to make meaning of language by allowing them to write about topics of their interest (13).

Discussion and conclusion

Teachers should use a combination of freewriting and formal compositions in writing classes. Formal compositions are necessary to check if students have learned what they have been taught. Freewriting is more for exploration and self-learning. Because its focus is not quality or accuracy, freewriting encourages students to experiment with new language and consider new ideas. I believe the freewriting process develops writing fluency and makes students more comfortable in writing before they are required to produce more formal compositions that will determine their course grades. While writing journals are not a substitute for composition writing, they can be used as a precursor to such writing. When students understand they are doing two very different kinds of writing, their compositions actually seem to get better because of their extensive practice with freewriting. Also, their journals become more thoughtful when it is perceived as practice for their formal writing.

There is still much to learn and consider when employing journals in writing classes. In 2009 the journals were used to initiate a dialogue with the teacher. That dialogue later shifted to dialogues with classmates. I am now interested in having students do some private journal writing and have each of them learn the concept of having a dialogue with oneself. Students feel much pressure in Japan from peers to only think or write what is acceptable. Some private writing in journals may provide a safe outlet to encourage students to foster their own beliefs. I am also interested in doing some group sharing and even having students read aloud their writing. However the way their use continues to evolve, journals will continue to be an integral part of my Writing Strategies class at Dokkyo University.

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Appendix A

Writing Strategies Journal Survey

July 10th, 2017

1. In high school how much instruction did you receive about learning how to write? (please circle one)

none a little some much a lot

2. Compared to speaking, listening and reading, how much teaching did you receive for writing in high school? (please circle one)

Much less A little less About the same A little more A lot more

3. One of the purposes of journal writing is to improve writing fluency (the speed you can write at). How much has journal writing this term improved your writing fluency? (please circle one)

Not at all A little Some Much Very much

4. How much did you enjoy writing in your journal? (please circle one)

Not at all A little Some Much Very much

5. For journal topics did you prefer when the teacher gave the topic or when you could choose your own topic? (please circle one)

Choosing my own topic Teacher gave the topic Both were okay

6. Please complete the following 2 sentences.

One thing I enjoyed about journal writing was . . . _____

One thing I didn't like about journal writing was . . . _____

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Appendix B

Journal Writing

This spring term you will be required to keep a writing journal to do freewriting. Your journal writing will help you to use English communicatively and improve your abilities to describe feelings, tell about experiences, and express new ideas. This writing will aim to help you improve your written fluency. This term you will make twelve entries in your journal. Each entry should be handwritten and at least two hundred words. Your journal will be evaluated as part of your spring grade. Its evaluation will consider primarily the quantity of writing you have done. Spelling and grammar will not be evaluated or corrected by the teacher. However, incomplete journals will adversely affect your grade. Usually you will have class time to write in your journals – up to ten minutes. However, you will have to complete your journal for homework. Some weeks I will assign you topics for your journal and sometimes you will have freedom to choose your own topics. You must bring your journal to every class.