

A Quickwrite Technique as a Way of Improving Writing Fluency

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Quickwrite Technique —学生のためのライティングスキル向上の方法—

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The quickwrite (quick writing) is a strategy that allows students to begin writing. The quickwrite has numerous benefits: it promotes spontaneity in writing, helps overcome writer's block, and builds writing fluency. It also helps students with coping with writing tasks of the tests, such as TOEIC SW, TOEFL, and IELTS where students need to write an essay/essays within the time limit.

The paper describes the quick write technique, how it can be modified depending on teaching circumstances, and provides some evidence of the effectiveness of this techniques in terms of increasing the amount of writing (words per minute).

クイックライティングは、これからライティングを始めようとする学生にとって有効な武器となる。クイックライティングには、様々な利点がある。例えば、ライティング本人の自発性を与え、時には行き詰まりを克服し、さらにはその流暢さを助ける工夫がある。また、TOEICやTOEFL、そしてIELTSのようなテストにおいて、学生が限られた時間に仕上げなければならないエッセイを書くのに有効である。

本論文は、教授環境に応じてどのように工夫をするのか、あるいはライティング量（単位時間あたりのワード量）を増やすための工夫の具体的なエビデンスは何かなどについて、その様々なテクニックを紹介している。

Introduction

Most researchers and ESL educators agree that learning how to write in a second language is one of the most challenging aspects of second language learning. As Hyland (2007) states the teaching of writing plays more central role than a few decades ago because the ability to communicate ideas and information effectively is dependent on good writing skills. However, in Japan many high school classes do not provide enough opportunities for students to write in English. Students have quite limited experience in writing, and as Nakanishi (2006) states “sentence-level translation and vocabulary translation is still the norm.” Moreover, even if building accuracy receives some emphasis, promoting fluency in writing is often neglected. As a result, college students who graduated from a school system which placed an emphasis on the acquisition of grammar rules and vocabulary over fluency are very slow when asked to create a text in class. This paper will share one activity I use to promote writing fluency in my classes—a weekly quickwrite activity that involves asking a question and giving students a set amount of time for writing.

Importance of Fluency Building

As Nation (2009) states, a well-balanced English program should incorporate four strands: fluency development, meaning-focused output, meaning-focused input, and language focused learning. The concept of fluency is not likely new to the students, but they may be more used to thinking of it in terms of spoken output rather than written. The main methods focusing on developing writing fluency are freewriting (Potter, 2008; Hwang, 2010), journal writing (Peyton & Reed, 1990; Holmes & Moulton, 1997; McGrail, 1996), and recently, blog writing (Ward, 2004; Pinkman, 2005; Fellner, & Apple, 2006).

Fluency is difficult to define, although it is a common term in language teaching and testing. Fillmore (1979) identifies four different kinds of fluency: the ability to produce language rapidly; coherently and densely; appropriately; and creatively. Rapidity refers to the quantity of production, or the ability to write without significant pauses for an extended period. One

way to define fluency (rapidity) is looking at the average number of words per composition of EFL students (Larsen-Freeman, 1978). Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, & Kim (1998) claim that the frequency measures such as the number of words are not a valid measure of fluency. Instead, they suggested fluency ratios such as words per minute. No matter what definition is more accurate, it is true that when students need to write a report or when they are taking a writing test and have to write it for a limited amount of time, it would be beneficial if they could write it quickly without hesitation (Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001).

Explanation of the Activity

Quick writing, sometimes also referred as “fast writing” or “freewriting”, is the “writing of ideas or thoughts that come to mind in a given time period without stopping and without editing” (Elbow and Belanoff (2000) cited in Hwang, 2010). There are two types of Quick writing: “unguided”, when a teacher does not give any specific topic/prompt and “teacher-sponsored” when a teacher provides a topic (Hwang, 2010).

In order to address the need for enough fluency writing practice, once a week I used a quickwrite activity. For a quickwriting activity to be successful, at the beginning of the semester I provided a clear explanation about the activity to the students. Also, I explained that doing a regular quickwrite can contribute to building writing fluency. Furthermore, doing a regular in-class quickwrite helps students:

- activate the knowledge they already have and use it in writing

- monitor their writing progress by recording their results (number of words per minute) on the Quickwrite Graph

- build their confidence in writing, especially in situations when students have to write within a limited amount of time, e.g., TOEFL, TOEIC SW, IELTS, etc.

During the spring semester 2015, once a week, the first ten minutes of the class was devoted to the quickwrite activity. Students had to write a response to a question within a limited amount of time (ten minutes). I used open-ended questions and encouraged them to write as much as possible

about the given topic. Students did not need to worry about spelling and grammar. They were asked to write as much as possible without stopping, but they had to write in complete sentences. The questions/prompts that I used are from the TOEFL Independent writing test (see Appendix A), and usually I posed a question orally and wrote it on the board.

After each session students recorded their result (the number of words) on the Quickwrite Graph (see Appendix B) and read (if time permits) what they wrote in groups. It would be more beneficial if I could also collect the students writing and give the feedback on content, whether they write on topic, and the amount of their writing. However, due to time constraint, I collected students' quickwrite writings only at the end of the semester.

The quickwrite can be modified in a numerous ways, depending on the teaching circumstances. I used quickwrite practice at the beginning of the class; alternately, this activity can be used as a wrap up of the class. In this case instead of the topics from the TOEFL test, the topics that are covered during the class can be used. Also it can be used as a brainstorming activity for generating ideas for writing a paragraph/essay, small group discussion, oral presentation, etc.

Benefits of the Quickwrite

The quickwrite offers an easy and manageable writing experience that can benefit students in a number of ways. First of all, it promotes spontaneity in writing. As a weekly activity, it encourages writing as a habit. It helps student to use vocabulary that they know in the meaningful way. Additionally, the activity gives students an opportunity to put on the paper their ideas freely without worrying about form, and as a result, it helps overcome writer's block. Also, this activity helps student to begin to build confidence as they witness their own clear improvements in writing speed and writing volume. Below there is a table that shows the progress made by the students of Writing Class in Spring Semester 2015. The table 1 shows increasing number of words per minute, although there are some occasional dips, the progress is clear. In addition, quickwrite practice can be beneficial

both for low-performing students (See Table 3) and high-performing students (see Table 2), as they all demonstrate the progress (increasing number of words per minute).

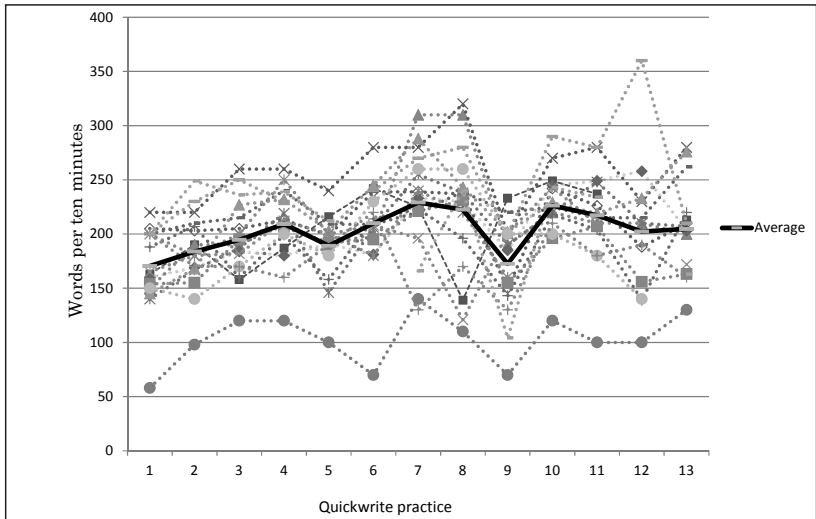


Table 1: Writing Fluency (all students)

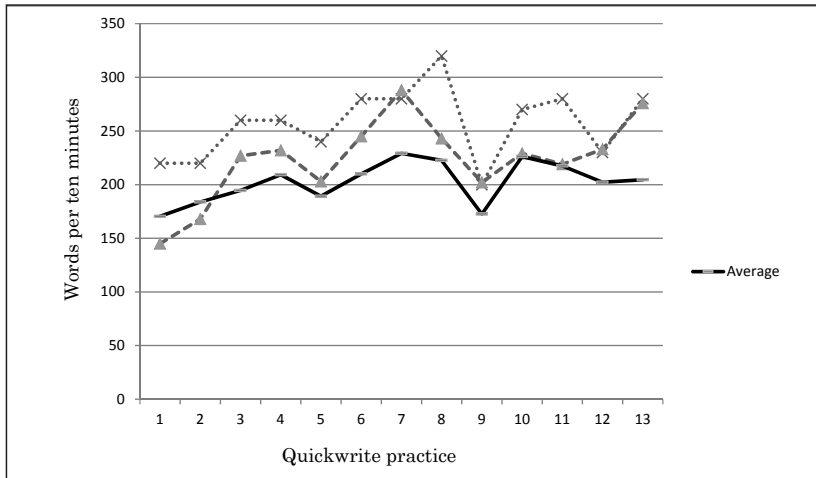


Table 2: Writing Fluency (some high performing students)

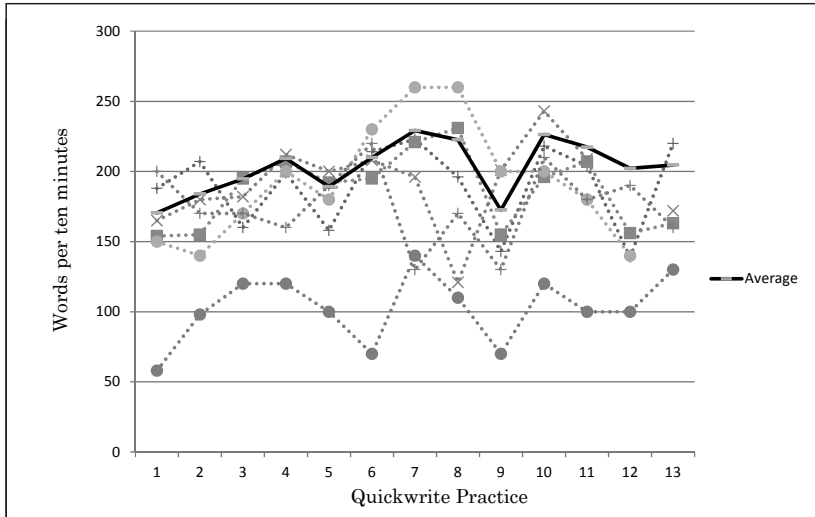


Table 3: Writing Fluency (some low performing students)

In addition, quickwrite can increase students’ confidence in writing. Cheng (2004) defines second language (L2) writing anxiety as “a relatively stable anxiety disposition associated with L2 writing, which involves a variety of dysfunctional thoughts, increased physiological arousal, and maladaptive behavior.” According to MacGowan-Gilhooly (1991), when fluency was emphasized before accuracy in classes, an increase in students’ confidence was most noticeable among the affective consequences; moreover, teachers were able to observe a decrease in students fear of writing, especially for low-level students, as well as “students’ essays had more depth and richness, more fluency, and better grammar.” Thus, implementing quickwrite can help students explore more in their writing without worrying about grammatical accuracy or grades.

This activity is also beneficial for instructors, as it is easy to implement and modify depending on the teaching objectives.

Problems and Possible Solutions

Although, the Quickwrite activity has a number of benefits, there are

some problems with implementing this activity. Some students do not write continuously, they stop after writing a few lines, and are reluctant to write. There are also students who stop frequently because they use a dictionary or erase what they wrote. As a result, these students cannot make improvements in writing speed and writing volume. Reminding students of the rules of quickwriting, as well as that building writing fluency, not producing a perfect piece of writing, is the main purpose of the activity, can help solve the above mentioned problems.

Limitations

Although this study shows that practicing quickwrite for 13 weeks helped increase students writing fluency and their confidence in English writing, it has the limitation of not being able to show for certain that quickwrite was the only reason for this improvement. While the present study was in progress, students also had other classes conducted in English that also might contribute to their English writing fluency. One possible solution of this limitation is to have a control group of students at the same level that participated in the same program but never did quickwriting. Then, it would have been possible to compare both groups and see whether doing quickwrite increases or not student writing fluency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, quickwriting, one of the methods for encouraging writing fluency, is a beneficial technique for students of English. This technique has worked well for my classes and I will continue using this activity in my future classes as a means of promoting writing fluency. However, more research is required in order to produce more convincing evidence on how quickwrite practice can promote writing fluency of ESL student writers.

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Appendix A

Topics for Quickwrite (adapted from TOEFL iBT, Independent Writing)

1. What is your favorite place to visit on weekends?
2. What is an important national holiday in Japan?
3. Students should not use cellphones in classes. Do you agree or disagree?
4. If you get some extra money, would you save the money or spend it immediately?
5. Some people like to watch action movies, others prefer comedies. Which type of movies do you prefer and why?
6. Some people prefer to travel alone, other people prefer to join a tour group. Which do you prefer and why?
7. Would you prefer to go out for dinner or stay at home and cook?
8. Would you like to live in a big or small town?
9. A company has announced that it wishes to build a large factory near your community. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this project.
10. It is better for children to grow up in the countryside than in a big city. Do you agree or disagree?
11. Some people spend their entire life in one place. Others move a number of times, looking for a better job, house, community. Which do you prefer, staying in one place or moving in search of another place?
12. Some people prefer to get up early and start their day's work. Others prefer to get up later and work until late at night. Which do you prefer?
13. Which discovery in the last 100 years has been most beneficial for people?
14. If you could go back to some time and place in the past, when and where would you go and why? Use specific reasons and details to support your choice.
15. Some people believe that a college or university education should be available to all students. Others believe that higher education should be available only to good students. Which view do you agree with?

Appendix B

Quickwrite Graph

Name _____ Student Number _____

# words	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	WPM
360															36
350															35
340															34
330															33
320															32
310															31
300															30
290															29
280															28
270															27
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160															16
150															15
140															14
130															13
120															12
110															11
100															10
QW#	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	