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The Effects of Integrating Conversation Questions and Timed Focused Freewriting on EFL Writing Fluency Development

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Abstract

The development of writing fluency is fundamental in improving English as a Foreign Language (EFL) skills. Unfortunately, language teachers occasionally overlook this important aspect of linguistic development and omit the opportunity for students to develop writing fluency in their classrooms. To examine the benefits of increasing writing fluency in this context, a combination of conversation questions and timed focused freewriting were administered to 120 freshman students (65 male, 55 female) studying at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, South Korea during the 2017 fall semester. The purpose was to determine if these combined methodologies employed over a three month period would increase the total amount of words written over time, or in other words, would it increase the participants writing fluency. The results revealed positive associations between writing fluency and the combination of conversation questions and timed focused freewriting in the language classroom in regard to the mean, medium, and mode of the results over time. This study is beneficial as it will allow an educator to create language curriculums that allow their students to talk more, write more, and increase their overall writing fluency.

Introduction

In EFL classrooms, we know that developing effective and efficient writing skills greatly improves overall writing fluency. It is also known that "fluency is an essential component in writing ability and development" (Latif, 2013, p. 99). One such teaching methodology that incorporates fluency is focused freewriting. An effective educator should incorporate focused

freewriting into writing curriculum and successful students must develop their writing fluency skills if they are to master the language. Improving fluency is an approach that will greatly help a new learner to become more able to write in the language they are learning.

Not only is it important to be able to write in a foreign language, but students must also be able to develop their speaking fluency. Sperling (1996) explains how “both research in the field of writing and writing pedagogy have been built to a large extent on the premise that, as a fundamental discourse process, writing has critical connections to speaking” (p. 1). Using open ended conversation questions based on easy to discuss topics is a great way for students to speak more in class and develop skills that will allow them to communicate with more fluency.

Due to the importance of developing writing and speaking fluency, this study will explore potential improvement in writing fluency among South Korean university students in communicative English classrooms when incorporating weekly conversation questions with follow-up focused freewriting activities. The goal was to identify improvement in total number of words written over time or, alternatively, distinguish the development of their writing fluency as the semester progressed.

Literature Review

In order to understand the context of this study, we must first define what focused freewriting is. According to Hwang (2010), “freewriting is defined as writing any ideas or thoughts that come to mind in a given time period without stopping” (p. 99). Brown (1994) stated that focused freewriting relates to “...writing a steady flow of language for a short period of time without any self- or other correction at all” (p. 113). Finally, Li (2007) described focused freewriting and its associated benefits as “...writing without stopping and editing about a specific topic, which has been viewed and used as a powerful tool for developing student writing in a wide spectrum of educational contexts” (p. 40). As we can see, focused freewriting activities concentrate on fluency and writing as much as possible in a certain amount of time without stopping.

Too often when students are learning to write in English, they focus more on form over content. Although understanding and developing form is a very important part of writing development, fluency also plays a major role as well. As Alemohammad (2014) stated “another implication is that timed writing activities can be considered as useful exercises for students to concentrate on the content of their writing rather than merely thinking about its form” (p. 361). An equal emphasis needs to be placed on developing writing fluency in addition to content based writing instruction in the EFL classroom.

There have been several studies which show how focused freewriting activities in the language classroom have beneficial effects on developing students writing fluency. Each support the use of focused freewriting during writing acquisition, and explain how this will improve overall academic performance. To illustrate the many benefits, Alemohammad (2014) stated that focused freewriting:

...improves the content of writing and the writing as a whole, enhances writing quality, benefits students while taking essay-type exams, helps overcome anxiety and improves confidence, reduces translating and thinking in first language, develops the ability to write under time restrictions, makes writing less blocked, provides an opportunity for learners to reflect on their learning, promotes reading-writing connections, helps students generate more ideas and finally improves speaking fluency. (p. 356)

In regard to the relationship between developing speaking fluency and focused freewriting activities, we see that this is a much less researched area in EFL. One study that revealed encouraging results states that their “analysis reveals that as the writer's experience with the language increases, fluency (as measured by words written per minute) increases, the average length of strings of words proposed between pauses or revision episodes increases, the number of revision episodes decreases, and more of the words that are proposed as candidate text get accepted” (Chenoweth and Hayes, 2001, p.1).

There is a need to incorporate speaking and writing fluency development methodologies in the language classroom and the research proves it has a positive effect on proficiency. For example, “studies on writing suggest that linguistic fluency is an important factor in writer's

abilities to manipulate sentence structures in order to produce comprehensible texts” (Kuhi, Rasuli, & Deylami, 2014, p. 1037). Given this information, the study that follows will reveal how this approach improves overall writing fluency among language learners and how it is essential to incorporate this into effective teaching pedagogy.

Methodology

Research Question

The main question set out to determine if the participants writing fluency improved in the form of total number of words written over time when combining conversational questions and focused freewriting activities in the EFL classroom.

Context and Participants

This study was conducted over a three month period from September to November 2017. This was separated into three periods named Period One (September), Period Two (October), and Period Three (November).

The participants were 120 freshman students (65 male, 55 female) studying at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies during the fall semester. Their age range was from 19 to 21 years old with the average being 20.2. The participants first language was Korean and they were learning English as a foreign language. The majority of the participants previously studied English in high school in addition to private language institutes. For the majority of the students, this was their only class in English and their only real opportunity to practice writing and speaking in English.

Measurements and Testing Instruments

To quantify and assess writing fluency development, the following two instruments were employed:

1. Weekly conversation questions based on easy to discuss topics
2. Focused freewriting activities related to the conversation questions

Research Design and Procedure

To test the main research question in the study, the process involved providing pairs of students with a long list of weekly conversation questions based on easy to discuss topics such as movies, music, and weekends to name a few. They would discuss for 10 minutes and focus on developing their answers by providing as many details as possible.

This was followed by ten minutes of timed focused freewriting based on a topic related to the conversation questions. They were allowed to write about anything related to the topic and could think of questions discussed during the conversation questions to help them write as much as they could.

The instructor constantly reminded students not to use erasers or smartphones, and just keep writing as much as they could about the topic. After the 10 minutes of focused freewriting was completed, the students counted their total number of words. They wrote this on their papers and submitted this to the instructor. The instructor quickly reviewed the amount of writing for each student and their total number of words.

The students total number of words per week were then put into an Excel sheet for further evaluation.

Results and Analysis

After carefully studying the collected data, many interesting outcomes began to emerge relating to the total number of words written over time. Some were anticipated results while others contradicted initial predictions.

The presentation of the results will be divided into mean, median, and range sections in order to focus on each element separately.

Mean

When we look at the mean scores from the three different periods (September, October, and November), we see a slight increase in total number of words written with scores of 186, 210, and 214 respectively. This represents an average increase of 28 total number of words written over time.

Median

The median scores during the three periods did show a slight increase as well. The results were 187, 208, and 212 respectively. This resulted in a 25 word increase in the statistical middle of the total number of words from all participants.

Range

The range was more sporadic in this study showing results of 361 in September, 550 in October, and 338 in November. This shows that the lowest number of total words and highest number of total words varied from period to period.

Discussion and Recommendations

Looking at the results, it seems that students do in fact write more words over time using this approach. Furthermore, they actually enjoyed discussing the questions first and they stated it helped them to think about ideas to use during their focused freewriting.

University students in South Korea do not get much time to practice their speaking and writing in everyday life. Thus, their abilities can be lacking in these areas. Using this approach, students were able to use all four language skills and greatly improve their speaking and writing proficiencies. First, they had to talk about the topic and share their ideas, then they had to write about that same topic, and finally read what they wrote afterwards. It combined all four language skills in one classroom activity and this proved to be an effective teaching approach.

The focus should not be on writing perfect English every time and limiting fluency development activities in the classroom has detrimental effects on developing writing fluency. Alemohammad (2014) reiterates this by stating, "accuracy is often overemphasized in most EFL situations, to the extent that fluency is either neglected altogether, or given very little value" (p. 355). Balancing form, content and fluency instruction in the language classroom is essential in developing English ability over time and all teachers should consider incorporating fluency activities into their writing classes.

Limitations

The instructor was not able to physically count the total number of words for each student. Thus, a slight variation due to input errors by the participants may have been present. To explain further, students may have made mistakes when counting their total number of words. This was investigated further and it was found that the variance could be as much as ten words above or below what they had actually written. It was decided that this was not a big enough variance to affect the results overall. Further studies that employ automatic word counts such as using Microsoft Word's word count feature would eliminate this variance and provide more accurate results.

Being such a small scale study conducted over only three months, caution must be used to generalize these results over a longer period. It would be beneficial to conduct this research over a longer period of time to see if students improve their writing fluency at a greater rate.

Conclusion

In any language learning environment, improving overall writing skills has an impact on writing fluency over time. It is this writing fluency that will allow a student to feel more comfortable composing in English and further increase their ability to express their ideas without focusing entirely on form. Thus, developing writing fluency is a very important part of language instruction and one that every instructor must incorporate into their classrooms. For example, "due to the importance of fluency instruction and the negative consequences rising from its

neglect, it is heavily required that different fluency activities be designed and implemented in the classroom” (Alemohammad, 2014, p. 355). There is a need to incorporate writing fluency activities and the teacher is the one who needs to identify this need.

The results presented in this study shows how conversation questions followed by timed focused freewriting increased the amount of writing over time which essentially means their writing fluency increased over time. These results are in line with Li’s conclusions as their results “...provided classroom-based evidence to support the use of focused freewriting as a useful pedagogical tool in the context of academic skills development, particularly in the area of academic writing” (2007, p. 51). These results also mirror Fellner and Apple’s study where “a simple word count of the students’ blog entries showed an overall increase in words produced from the beginning of the seven-day program through the end of the program” (2006, p. 20). Not only does writing fluency develop over time but students have a chance to practice their English speaking which results in speaking fluency development as well.

Essentially, more speaking and writing opportunities leads to a greater ability among EFL students to express what they are trying to say. This is all important as too many educators focus entirely on form and writing perfect English. To understand how important fluency is for English learners means an educator will be better able to help their students write more and move students along the track towards English language proficiency.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Summary Chart Representing Overall Responses

Period 1 September 2017	MEAN	186
	MEDIAN	187
	MODE	189
	RANGE	361
	MIN	41
	MAX	402
	RESPONSES	431

Period 2 October	MEAN	210
	MEDIAN	208
	MODE	238
	RANGE	550
	MIN	46
	MAX	596
	RESPONSES	336

Period 3 November	MEAN	214
	MEDIAN	212
	MODE	100
	RANGE	338
	MIN	74
	MAX	412
	RESPONSES	417

Appendix B. Graph Representing Mean, Median, and Mode Over Time

