

Investigating the Impact of Topic Selection Control on Writing Fluency

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This study is a partial replication of Joshua Bonzo's (2008) study on a group of second language learner's writing fluency in German. Both studies examine whether students write more if their instructor assigns them a topic or if they choose their own topic. 75 Japanese university students in four classes participated in six 10-minute freewriting sessions, three with teacher assigned topics and three with student chosen topics. In addition, students completed a post-study survey on their topic selection preferences. The overall results confirmed the Bonzo findings that students tend to write more when they choose their own topics.

INTRODUCTION

Fluency is a difficult to define and often ignored concept in language teaching but is one of the main goals of language learners. In layman's terms, fluency is usually referred to as the ultimate goal of language learning. Paul Nation (2007) includes fluency as one of his four strands of language teaching to redress this common imbalance in language learning classrooms. The speaker or writer's control over the language, the complexity and the volume of the text or utterance are often referenced in discussions of fluency. This paper will explore one aspect of fluency, EFL writing fluency. Does giving students autonomy over topic selection in freewriting promote more fluent writing?

This study is a partial replication of Joshua Bonzo's (2008) article "To Assign a Topic or Not: Observing Fluency and Complexity in Intermediate Foreign Language Writing." In his study Bonzo analyzed the freewriting samples produced by 81 German as a second language students at an American university. The students participated in 10-minute freewriting sessions eight times, with a topic assigned four times and a student self-selected topic four times. Writing fluency was significantly better when students chose their own topics. The complexity of the students' writing did improve but it was not statistically significant over the duration of the study's treatment. Bonzo argues that giving students autonomy in choosing their own writing topics was beneficial to improving writing and overall language fluency, and was in line with a trend towards more student-centered pedagogy. The researchers wish to add to these findings by replicating the study in a Japanese EFL setting.

As fluency is one of the main goals and "strands" of language learning, students and teachers need activities to improve this area of learning (Nation, 2007). According to Nation fluency activities have four main characteristics: a focus on meaning over accuracy, familiar topics and language, some pressure to perform at speed, and a focus on a large amount of output. With regards to writing fluency 10-minute freewriting is a common activity used by teachers and supported by Nation. One of the earliest writers to

describe freewriting was Peter Elbow (1998) in his book *Writing Without Teachers*. He claims freewriting is very important for improving writing, and details some characteristics of successful freewriting: 10 minutes is the optimum time, any topic the writer wants to write about is best, and it is important that there is no comment, evaluation, discussion, or editing - by anyone, including the writer. Bonzo and the researchers of this paper followed this model, with the obvious caveat being the necessity of including teacher-assigned topics against which to measure the students' self-selected freewriting samples.

For researchers, defining and operationalizing writing fluency is a crucial first step. Apple and Fellner (2006) note that there is no accepted technical definition of writing fluency in ESL/EFL literature. Abdel Latif (2013) details the various ways researchers have chosen to define and measure writing fluency ranging from simply dividing the number of words in the text by the time spent writing to measuring bursts of writing "chunks". In addition the ideas of lexical and grammatical complexity are often included. The researchers of this study have chosen to use the formula developed by Carroll (1967) which has also been used by a number of other researchers (Paris & Turner, 1994; Wolf-Quintero, Inagaki, & Kim, 1998; Bonzo, 2008; Cohen, 2013; LeBlanc & Fujieda, 2012; Dickinson, 2014). This formula is explained in detail in the methods section.

Though the general concepts of writing fluency and the effects of freewriting are not new, most of the well-known studies were not conducted in EFL environments. Since Bonzo's (2008) article, however, there have been several notable articles on this or connected topics. Hwang (2010) found that freewriting increased students' overall writing proficiency, Latif (2012) explored how to measure writing fluency, and most recently Muller, Adamson, Brown, and Herder (2014) published a book about fluency development in Asia with three chapters dedicated to EFL writing fluency. Most relevant to this paper are three studies by Leblanc and Fujieda (2013), Cohen (2013), and Dickinson (2014) that have also replicated the Bonzo study at universities in Japan. Each of these recent studies supported Bonzo's results that student topic selection during freewriting increased students writing fluency. This paper expects to confirm the findings of these previous researchers whilst also exploring student perspectives toward the freewriting itself.

Research Questions

This study looks to confirm the results of Bonzo's study and those who have recently replicated it in the Japanese context, but also to explore student preferences for and attitudes toward topic selection methods. The two research questions are, therefore:

Research Question 1:

Does the topic selection method affect writing fluency?

Research Question 2:

What are student preferences for the method of topic selection?

METHOD

Participants

TABLE 1. Participants

Class (Group)	n	TOEIC scores	Major
1 (1)	30	540-615	Social Sciences
2 (2)	18	540-615	Social Sciences
3 (1)	14	340-490	Literature
4 (2)	13	480-500	Literature

Participants were 75 second year undergraduate students (19 male, 56 female) from a private university in Central Japan, with 72 of the 75 participants being either 19 or 20 years of age, and no participant being older than 23. Students were drawn from four intact, compulsory English writing classes, comprising a convenience sample. As Table 1 indicates, classes 1 and 2 were comprised of social science majors who had been streamed into the class based on university-administered TOEIC scores. Classes 3 and 4 were comprised of literature majors.

Participants were informed that their writing samples would be collected and analyzed for research purposes, that they would not get their samples back, and that the samples were not being graded in any way. Consent forms, informing students of the nature of the study and explaining that participation was entirely voluntary, were distributed, signed by those students willing to participate, and collected by the instructor. Six students declined to participate.

Procedures

TABLE 2. Design of the Study

Week	Conditions Group 1 (n = 44)	Conditions Group 2 (n = 31)
1	assigned	self-selected
2	assigned	self-selected
3	assigned	self-selected
4	self-selected	assigned
5	self-selected	assigned
6	self-selected	assigned

Students in each of the four classes were introduced to the freewriting activity immediately before they engaged in the activity for the first time. So as not to influence subsequent writing samples, the instructor gave no example of freewriting for reference, and unlike previous iterations of this study, no practice session was conducted. General encouragement was provided orally by the instructor during class. Students were encouraged to write without consulting dictionaries but were not prohibited from doing so.

Six samples were collected. 21 students did not complete all six samples and were eliminated from the study. Group 1 began with three weeks of assigned writing topics and then ended with three weeks of self-

selected topics. Group 2 produced samples in the opposite order (see Table 2, above). Teacher-selected topics were *life after university*, *the differences between men and women*, and *leisure time*. These topics were selected because they were three of the four topics used in the original study, with *relationships*, the fourth topic, being eliminated due to the need to reduce the data collection period (Bonzo, 2008). Due to concerns about potential differences in typing speed, students hand-wrote all compositions and the researchers then transcribed those compositions into electronic format before running them through text analysis software.

Fluency Index Calculation

Student compositions were analyzed electronically at UsingEnglish.com (King & Flynn, 2002-2014), and total (T) and unique (U) token counts were recorded. When calculating total (T) and unique (U) tokens, the researchers considered the merits of discounting what LeBlanc and Fujieda (2013) referred to as “uncommon Romanized Japanese words” such as *katana* and *takoyaki* (p.246), however what exactly constituted *uncommon* seemed highly subjective. Moreover, as Fellner and Apple (2006) defined writing fluency as total words written in a set amount of time and “irrespective of spelling and content, provided that the writer’s meaning is readily understandable,” the researchers decided to count Romanized Japanese words (p.19).

Writing fluency was measured using the following formula developed by Carroll (1967):

$$F = \frac{U}{\sqrt{2T}}$$

In this formula, fluency (F) is calculated by dividing total unique tokens (U) by the square root of two times the total tokens (T) in the composition. This formula has been employed by multiple researchers to calculate writing fluency (Bonzo, 2008; Cohen, 2014; Dickinson, 2014; Leblanc & Fujieda, 2013; Paris & Turner, 1994; Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, & Kim, 1998). When attempting to accurately quantify writing fluency, a simple unique tokens (U) over total tokens (T) ratio is insufficient. Such a ratio may be useful in some way, but when measuring for *fluency* is inadequate. For example, the highest total word count of all compositions measured in this study was 237 (U = 137), and the lowest word count was 28 (U = 20). Consequently, in the case of these two compositions, the longer composition ends up with a score of .578 (137 divided by 237), while the shorter composition actually ends up with a higher score of .714 (20 divided by 28). This is problematic and fails to distinguish between the difference in output between the two compositions. When Carroll’s formula is employed, the longer composition ends up with a fluency score (F) of 6.29 and the shorter with a fluency score (F) of 2.67. This is a superior calculation, as it distinguishes the longer sample as more *fluent* than its substantially shorter counterpart.

Post Study Survey

On the final day of each of the classes, a voluntary post-study survey was conducted (See Appendix I). Comprised of six Likert items and two open-ended questions, the survey was designed to identify student preference for topic selection method in freewriting exercises, and to gauge their interest in continuing the freewriting activity in the future. Of the 75 participants who completed all six writing samples, 51 completed the survey. The survey was written in English and Japanese. Most students provided responses in English,

and those responses which were written in Japanese were translated by a Japanese L1 speaker.

RESULTS

Topic Selection Control and Writing Fluency:

Mean fluency index scores (F) were calculated for teacher-selected topic samples and self-selected topic samples for each participant. A paired-samples t-test was conducted using the free statistical analysis software available at VassarStats.net (Lowry, 2014) using these mean fluency index scores. In total, scores for teacher-selected topics ($M = 4.24(.48)$) were significantly lower than scores for self-selected topics ($M = 4.46(.48)$), $t(74) = -5.28$, $p < 0.0001$, two-tailed. These results indicate that students wrote more fluently when allowed to select their own topics. Results are summarized in greater detail in Table 3, below.

TABLE 3. Mean Fluency Scores by Group and Class

Week	Condition	Group 1 (n = 44)		Condition	Group 2 (n = 31)	
		Class 1	Class 3		Class 2	Class 4
		M (SD)	M (SD)		M (SD)	M (SD)
1	assigned	4.07 (.51)	4.46 (.49)	self	4.67 (.55)	5.03 (.49)
2	assigned	3.98 (.61)	3.97 (.65)	self	4.49 (.62)	4.91 (.43)
3	assigned	4.25 (.49)	4.25 (.54)	self	4.46 (.57)	4.80 (.51)
4	self	4.43 (.61)	4.33 (.55)	assigned	3.99 (.54)	4.71 (.56)
5	self	4.28 (.60)	4.26 (.60)	assigned	4.14 (.61)	4.71 (.41)
6	self	4.29 (.48)	3.99 (.54)	assigned	4.41 (.50)	4.59 (.63)
Total	assigned	4.09 (.57)	4.23 (.58)	assigned	4.18 (.59)	4.67 (.47)
	self	4.33 (.53)	4.19 (.57)	self	4.54 (.55)	4.91 (.53)

Post Study Survey Responses

In terms of preference, student responses to the open-ended question “*Do you feel your writing was better when you chose the topic? If so, why? If not, why not?*” were used to categorize survey respondents into two categories: Those who prefer assigned topics ($n = 22$), and those who prefer self-selected topics ($n = 29$). As Table 4 illustrates, responses to Likert items indicate that participants had preferences for either being allowed to select their own topics or being given an assigned topic. Furthermore, while mean fluency index scores were still higher on self-selected topics than on assigned topics, Table 4 indicates that the difference in mean fluency score was greater for those who preferred self-selecting ($F = 4.24$ assigned, 4.58 self) than for those who indicated a preference for writing on assigned topics ($F = 4.23$ assigned, 4.33 self).

TABLE 4. Participants' Topic Selection Method Preference

	n	<i>I prefer writing about a teacher-selected topic</i> *M (SD)	<i>I prefer choosing my own topic to write about</i> *M (SD)	Fluency Index Score (assigned) M (SD)	Fluency Index Score (self-select) M (SD)
Prefer self-selected topic	29	2.52 (.82)	4 (.85)	4.24 (.56)	4.58 (.57)
Prefer assigned topic	22	4.09 (.68)	2.41 (.59)	4.23 (.37)	4.33 (.38)
All respondents	51	3.27 (1.06)	3.32 (1.04)	4.23 (.48)	4.47 (.51)

*Responses based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5)

DISCUSSION

Overall, self-selected writings yielded significantly higher fluency index scores (FL). Taken at face value, we can agree with Bonzo (2008) and previous iterations of his study (Cohen, 2014; Dickinson, 2014; Leblanc & Fujieda, 2013) which have been conducted in the Japanese university context: Students tend to produce more fluent writing samples when given autonomy to select their freewriting topic. Thus, our first research question - *Does the topic selection method affect writing fluency?* - is answered in the affirmative.

The researchers' approach to the second research question - *What are student preferences for method of topic selection?* - was to turn to the participants themselves and ask them a very straightforward question: *Do you feel your writing was better when you chose the topic? If so, why? If not, why not?* Tables 5 and 6, below, consist of sample student responses to this question, with the samples in Table 5 being drawn from those students who prefer self-selecting, and samples in Table 6 being from their counterparts who prefer writing on teacher-selected topics. The responses in Table 5 were selected because they seemed to capture the most common themes present in the responses from the 56.9% of post-study survey respondents (n = 29) who indicated a preference for choosing their own topic. Responses 1 and 2 indicate that the vocabulary required to complete the composition seems to be more accessible when writing on self-selected topics, while responses 3 and 4 reveal that writing about themselves and their "true thinking" also make self-selected topics preferable. These student responses seem to align with previous research, as there is ample evidence suggesting that students produce better writing when they are familiar with the writing topic (Lee, 1987), due perhaps to the lighter cognitive load required by familiar topics (Aitchison, 2012; Laufer & Nation, 1995), or because self-selected topics are more authentic and provide more motivation for writing (Edelsky & Smith, 1987, from Lee, 1987, as cited in Leblanc & Fujieda, 2013, p.248).

TABLE 5. Sample Responses of those Students who Prefer Self-Selected Topics

Response #	Response Text
1	<i>Yes, I do. This is because I don't know many English words, so I feel that it is easy to write them when I chose my topic.</i>
2	<i>Yes, because if I choose the topic, I may have many words which I know.</i>
3	<i>Yes. Because I like to talk about me. I'm good at introduce me.</i>
4	<i>Yes, I think so. Because my chosen topic is my true thinking that I often think about.</i>

Interestingly, however, 43.1% of post-study survey respondents (n = 22) indicated that they did not feel their writing was better when they wrote on self-selected topics. While fluency scores were higher on self-selected topics for both preference groups, those who preferred self-selected writing did have higher fluency scores than their peers who preferred writing on teacher-selected topics (See Table 4). Considering both groups had nearly equal mean fluency scores on teacher-selected topics, this may indicate that students who prefer teacher-selected topics struggle to identify their own topics and begin writing.

TABLE 6. Sample Responses of those who Prefer Teacher-Selected Topics

Response #	Response Text
5	<i>I don't feel. Because it is difficult to find topics right away. And, I feel topic which teacher chooses is easy to write than I choose.</i>
6	<i>No, I don't because I don't know what I should write about.</i>
7	<i>I think the topic that teacher give us is good. Because it took a lot of time to decide the topic. So, I think that.</i>
8	<i>I prefer writing about teacher-selected topic. Because, it is difficult to choose topic. And I can't come up idea immediately.</i>

The post-study survey responses shown in Table 6 center on the difficulty of choosing a topic. In a ten minute freewriting activity, losing even a single minute in deciding on a topic could subsequently impact the volume a student is able to write, which may explain why those students who self-identified as preferring teacher-selected prompts had lower fluency scores than their peers who enjoyed choosing their own topics.

The results of the post-study survey revealed that many participants prefer a teacher-selected topic to the freedom - or perhaps the burden - of selecting their own. Ferris and Hedgecock (2004) warn language instructors that freewriting activities may be stressful for some learners and that “some resist the procedure entirely because it contradicts their innate predispositions as planners, as well as their prior literacy training” (p.148). Compelling students to choose a topic and then plan, formulate, and execute a composition while under time constraints has been shown to have a negative impact on not only fluency, but also accuracy and complexity in narrative writing (Ellis & Yuan, 2004). While their study was not conducted in the academic realm of SLA or an EFL environment, Iyenager and Lepper (1999) found Asian-American students were equally motivated to complete a task when given guidance as when given choice. This was in stark contrast to their non-Asian-American peers who “preferred working on a task, worked it longer, and performed better on it, if they had made some superficial choices regarding the task than if others made the same choices for them” (as cited in Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, 2010). Some Japanese students appreciate having a choice in what they write, while others may prefer classroom activities be dictated by their teachers.

Implications

The results of this study indicate that allowing students to self-select their freewriting topics will generally yield more fluent writing samples. Freewriting has a history of being used as a fluency-focused, unevaluated writing activity that allows writers to explore ideas and experiment with language. While it was beyond the scope of this research to track whether freewriting helps develop writing fluency, there is long line of research that supports the use of freewriting as an activity that tends to *produce* more fluent writing than other varieties of writing activities (Elbow, 1998; Hwang, 2010). Given that freewriting is a fluency-focused activity, it is

worth knowing that self-selected topics tend to yield more fluent writing.

While our research also indicates that while many students express a preference for writing about their own topic, a good number of students do not. In practice, it would seem wise for teachers to give students the option of a teacher-selected topic or a self-selected one. This way the freewriting activity truly is free for those who want it to be, and those students who struggle to select their own topics can fall back on a teacher-selected topic if need be. Such practice is endorsed by Nation (2013), who provides a substantial list of potential writing topics. To take it a step further, instructors may even attempt to formulate contextually-relevant, student-informed lists of potential writing topics. While this blurs the line between what constitutes a self-selected topic and a teacher-selected topic, the efficacy of the freewriting activity may be increased through such an approach when we consider that the list of back-up topics should have a greater number of appealing topics if the students themselves are stakeholders in the development of the list(s).

Limitations

A larger sample would be preferable in future iterations of this study or others like it. Also, the fact that 21 students failed to complete all six compositions may have impacted the results. Extending the data collection period in order to allow participants more time to produce the adequate number of compositions necessary for inclusion in the final analysis would have been preferable.

Although students were not being graded in any way, the fact that their writing samples were not returned to them may have been a confounding variable. It could be argued that no feedback - outside of supportive oral feedback to the entire class - may have decreased the motivation of some students as the semester progressed. Two participant responses to open-ended questions on the post-study survey explicitly stated that feedback was something they desired. While Fathman and Whalley (1990) advocated “writing assignments without feedback and teacher intervention” (p.16), and Elbow (1998) emphasized that “the main thing is that a freewriting must never be evaluated in any way; in fact there must be no discussion or comment at all” (p.4), it could be that some students prefer consistent feedback even on ungraded, fluency development focused activities such as freewriting. Moreover, while ungraded freewriting samples are in some aspect ideal for measuring fluency, it is possible these samples are not totally reflective of the type of writing which is typically required of language learners, which may present another confounding factor. Future research should consider collecting a greater variety of writing samples produced under varying conditions, and analyzing those samples not only for fluency, but for complexity and accuracy as well.

Participant responses to the question “*Do you feel your writing was better when you chose the topic? If so, why? If not, why not?*” while revealing, do not ask students about fluency specifically. We thought it impractical to spend time defining fluency for the participants, and that doing so might have had the potential to influence their responses. Therefore, we simply asked the students if they thought their writing was “*better*” or not, and why. Perhaps future research in this area will design a more robust post-study survey.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study are in line with the findings of previous studies on writing fluency. When students are allowed to self-select their freewriting topics they are more likely to produce longer compositions and use a greater variety of unique lexical items. Therefore, it can be argued that language instructors who

wish to focus on developing their students' writing fluency may be served well by introducing freewriting activities into their classrooms. Instructors should remember, however, that the process of choosing what to write about is not a simple or enjoyable one for all students, and therefore it may be beneficial to provide a backup list of teacher-selected topics for students to consider. In so doing, language educators can be more certain that their freewriting activity is more immediately accessible to the majority of their students, which may encourage them to write more.

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APPENDIX: Post Study Survey

NAME _____ STUDENT ID# _____

FINAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Please rate your abilities for each of the items below on a scale between 1 and 5. Circle your choice.

下記の項目に対して、1から5で自分の能力を評価して下さい。選んだものに丸をつけて下さい。

Strongly Disagree 全くそう思わない	Disagree そう思わない	Neutral どちらでもない	Agree そう思う	Strongly Agree 非常にそう思う
1	2	3	4	5
It became easier to write for 10 minutes after doing the activity at least 6 times. 少なくとも6回目になるころには、10分作文をすることが簡単(楽)になってきた。				1 2 3 4 5
I prefer writing about a teacher-selected topic. 教師が選んだトピックについて作文するほうが好ましい。				1 2 3 4 5
I prefer choosing my own topic to write about. 自分が選んだトピックについて作文するほうが好ましい。				1 2 3 4 5
My ability to write for 10 minutes improved by the 6 th writing. 6回目に突入する頃には、10分間作文の能力が向上してきたように感じる。				1 2 3 4 5
I enjoyed writing for 10 minutes. 10分間作文を楽しんでいる。				1 2 3 4 5
I would like to continue doing timed writing activities in this or other classes. 10分間作文のような時間制限のある作文をこのクラスや他のクラスでも、今後続けていきたい。				1 2 3 4 5

Do you feel your writing was better when you chose the topic? If so, why? If not, why not?

あなた自身が選んだトピックのほうが、より良いライティングができると感じますか。そうなら、なぜだと思えますか。そう思わないなら、なぜそう思わないのですか。

How would you feel about continuing the 10-minute writings?

10分間ライティング(作文)を毎回続けていることに関してどう感じていますか。

THANK YOU !!

要 約

ライティングの流暢さに対するトピック選択統制の影響に関する調査

スポンセラー・アーロン

広島大学大学院

ウィルキンス・マイケル

立命館大学

本研究は、L2 ドイツ語ライティングの流暢さを調査した Joshua Bonzo (2008) の部分的な追従研究である。Bonzo と本研究は、学習者がより多く書くのはトピックを指導者が与えた場合であるか、学習者自身が選んだ場合であるかを調査したという点で共通している。調査では日本人大学生 75 名を 4 つのクラスに分け、10 分間の自由英作文への取り組みを全 6 回実施した。さらに、学習者は、トピック選択の好みに関する事後調査に回答した。全体的な結果は、学習者自身がトピックを選択した場合により多く書く傾向にあるという Bonzo の結果を支持するものであった。