【論文】

Reflections: Supporting A1 and A2 Learners in an EFL Writing Classroom

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ライティングの授業におけるA1およびA2レベルの英語学修者支援についての考察

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a classroom observation investigating the incorporation of fluency-focused writing activities, combined with the process writing approach, to support A1 and A2 level students in a university EFL writing classroom. By employing student-centered strategies, including the activation of prior knowledge and providing differentiated guidance in teacher feedback, we not only reduce anxiety in the classroom but also enhance writing fluency. The outcomes demonstrate the creation of a positive and supportive learning environment, proving particularly beneficial for students with low English proficiency.

Introduction

Scholars agree that one of the biggest challenges EFL learners face is mastering the skill of writing. In fact, writing is the most challenging task for students learning English as a foreign language (Alharthi, 2021; Bailey, 2003; Barkaoui, 2007; Hussain, 2017; Tashima, 2015). Latif and Mahmoud (2012b) also explains that writing is the most mentally demanding among all language skills because it is more than just printing words as it involves various processes such as planning, checking, evaluating and retrieving. Teachers find it equally challenging to teach writing to L2 learners (Barkaoui, 2007). This challenge stems from students' inadequate linguistic ability and the limited social and cultural familiarity that are necessary in composing texts in the L2 (Yu, 2020). This is apparent among Japanese university students.

Background

Most Japanese students are not armed with enough vocabulary and grammatical proficiency necessary to effectively organize their thoughts and ideas into coherent and comprehensible texts. Furthermore, there is inadequate writing instruction in Japanese high schools (Herder & King, 2012, Komiyama, 2017, Yazawa, 2017). High school education provides insufficient

writing practice in both English and Japanese (McCarthy, 2021). In a MEXT survey in 2012, more than 20% of high school teachers report that their writing classes involved no writing activities and more than 40% indicated minimal to no engagement in essay writing activities throughout the academic year (Mulvey 2012). In a similar survey conducted by the MEXT in 2014 and 2015, more than half of teachers reported that they do not assign students the task of writing about their thoughts or synthesizing information from their readings or listening exercises (Komiyama, 2017). Consequently, over 80% of 12th grade students, who were supposed to be at A2 level of the CEFR in their writing skills, were performing below this standard as reported by MEXT in 2016 (Komiyama, 2017).

With the limited commitment to enhance students' writing skills in the secondary level, students are left inadequately prepared for the writing demands they will encounter at university. Many students find themselves feeling anxious or even frightened when required to write in English due to the lack of classroom and post-class writing exercises (Takahashi, 2010; Yu, 2020). When time is designated for writing practice, the writing instruction tend to be intensive emphasizing on accuracy (Gettings, 2023; Hosoda, 2018). This results in students being inclined to restrict their writing to minimize mistakes and students miss the opportunity to fully utilize their linguistic knowledge by foregoing to at the least attempt exploring more complex grammatical structures (Hyland 2009).

Especially students with low English proficiency find it frustrating to express their thoughts, ideas and life experiences in writing since they are faced with the challenge of simultaneously learning the writing process and learning English as they go through the developmental stages of language learning (Hyland, 2003). Such is the case for the students in the Writing Strategies Course for the Global Communication Department in Hiroshima Bunkyo University.

This article observes a combination of different principles, methodologies and exercises implemented in the writing classroom that have supported A1 and A2 learners experiencing difficulties in an EFL writing course. It also discusses the teacher's observations of students' attitude towards writing in English and how those attitudes evolved by the end of the semester. Two classes—A1 level and A2 level were observed for 15 weeks.

Course Goals: Writing Fluency

The Writing Strategies Course is a two-semester required course for second year Global Communication department students who have had one year of Basic English Communication, General English Communication, Reading and Writing classes. Students fall within the A1 and A2 proficiency levels in the CEFR scale. The course is aimed at developing students' writing skills to achieve writing fluency. By the end of the course, students should be able to produce coherent and meaningful texts that communicate their ideas, stories and experiences.

Many scholars agree that writing fluency has been neglected because accuracy has been prioritized in the writing classrooms in Japan. To balance such discrepancy, educators need to shift the focus on developing writing fluency in the EFL writing classroom (Dickenson,

2014; Farmer, 2020; Gettings, 2023; Herder & King, 2012, Hosoda, 2018; Lavin, 2003).

There has been much confusion in defining writing fluency despite it being the end goal in language learning (Sponseller & Wilkins, 2015). Latif and Mahmoud (2012b) has the most balanced view of writing fluency describing it as the writer's ability to produce large amounts of texts which is measured by the length of real-time fluent written production in line with the writer's cognitive and writing ability. This view looks beyond text quantity and composing rate as it also considers writing task performance variables such as the writer's knowledge of the topic, pre-task requirements like word count and the writer's negative affect towards writing (Latif & Mahmoud, 2012b).

Another factor considered in this course is the typing skills of the students. In the classroom, students are equipped with iPad minis, and a notable portion of them is still adjusting to the qwerty keyboard layout. This is a transition for many, as they are more familiar with the multi-tap keyboard commonly used on their smartphones for typing the English alphabet. Despite the availability of the qwerty layout, a considerable number of students continue to rely on the multi-tap keyboard for their typing preferences.

One important and strong variable that influences learning and performance in the Writing Strategies course that Latif and Mahmoud (2012b) mentioned is negative affect. While writing enjoyment is not the primary objective of the course, it is important for learners to find writing a pleasurable experience. It is crucial for students to feel a sense of security in the writing classroom, even if their language proficiency is limited. They should not be afraid of making spelling and grammar mistakes and should not feel the burden of negative evaluation.

Writing Anxiety in the L2 Writing Classroom

Cheng (2002) established that writing anxiety is common among L2 learners. Students who have writing anxiety feel fearful, worried, tense or disheartened (Rohmah & Muslim, 2021b), due to the challenges brought about by the task or writing. Sugahara (2022) used Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory in her study and found that the highest form of writing anxiety exhibited by Japanese high school students is avoidance behavior due to fear of evaluation. Japanese students tend to steer clear of activities that might lead to unfavorable evaluations which impacts class participation and class attendance (Brown, 2004). Participating in class is very important in writing because it helps students activate their schema and helps them come up with ideas that they will utilize in their writing process. When learners participate in class, they become active learners. In active learning, students develop higher order thinking skills apart from acquiring language (Wonder, 2021). In writing, students need both: critical thinking skills and the language they have acquired.

To understand my students' attitude towards writing, they were given a focused free writing task at the beginning of the course to write about how they feel about writing in English. In both the A1 and A2 classes, a significant number of students, 58% and 56% respectively, experienced negative feelings towards writing in English. These sentiments, stemming from a combination of fear and dislike, were attributed to their perceived

challenges with English proficiency and the perceived difficulty of the writing task. This result was consistent with Takahashi's (2010) study on the writing anxiety of Japanese students where their writing apprehension not only negatively affected their learning motivation but also their perception of their language ability, English proficiency as well as their final grades. Olagbaju (2021) finds the need for teachers be aware of learning anxiety in the classroom and help students overcome such concerns in the language teaching and learning process.

Activating Prior Knowledge Alleviates Writing Anxiety

Studies show that students experience anxiety in the writing classroom when they lack prior knowledge, which is essential for recalling or applying what they've learned or experienced as well as forming a basis for new knowledge (Farid, 2021; Olagbaju, 2021; Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019; Sun 2014; Wenk, 2017). At times, students struggle to generate and organize ideas because they lack sufficient knowledge about the topic of the writing task (Küfi, 2023). Yuli and Halimi (2020) recommend writing teachers to select subjects that have a direct relevance to students' lives and are closely tied to their personal experiences to motivate students and facilitate the expression and development of ideas.

Olagbaju (2021) describes Anderson's Schema theory as the brain's mental tool (called schemata) responsible for collecting, recalling and organizing information quickly suggesting that we can organize new information effortlessly. When activated, these schemata provide students the words, content, and how they organize their writing significantly influencing the writing planning, revising, and editing processes (Sun, 2014). In the research conducted by Küfi (2023) on Turkish university students, it was revealed that the activation of content schemata, referring to specific background knowledge about the writing topic, significantly contributed to the improvement of the overall quality of the students' essays.

Recognizing the significance of prior knowledge in both writing and alleviating classroom anxiety, it emerged as a pivotal consideration in the development of the Writing Strategies curriculum. The writing assignments were based on the same topics covered in the General English Communication curriculum for sophomore students. Topics such as self and family, future goals, health and lifestyle, and food and shopping are covered in the curriculum. Students can access the language they have learned in the General English Communication course and apply them in the writing class. The students would already have the prior knowledge of both content and language to develop their skills in writing in the L2. Writing about familiar and meaningful topics improves fluency by making it easier for learners to access vocabulary, enabling them to express themselves on subjects they have deeply discussed or contemplated (Dickenson 2014).

Extensive Writing

According to Lavin (2003) if extensive reading is reading large quantities of texts, extensive writing is writing large quantities of texts with the goal of fluency and pleasure.

Participating in extensive writing supports learners in structuring their thoughts, articulating opinions, and enhancing fluency in a natural context, leading to improved English comprehension, language use, and self-confidence over time (Nordin et al., 2019; Piccolo, 2017). Since extensive writing is quantity focused, it helps train students to write more thus increasing their word count with continued practice. The Writing Strategies course employs two extensive writing activities: focused free writing and timed extensive writing.

Focused Freewriting

Evolving from the idea of freewriting, initially championed by Peter Elbow which is writing continuously about anything that comes to mind without stopping or editing for a short duration, focused free writing is similar except students write about a specific topic and later on go back to refine content (Asraf et al., 2018). Students are not given any rules or restrictions regrading word count, format and form. Li (2007) explains how Elbow used this technique to relieve students' mental strain of simultaneously thinking about words and worrying if they are the right choices. It also unburdens students' worry of teacher evaluation since students' writing are not assessed (Elbow, 1998). While freewriting was originally designed to be done in the L1, Chen (2019) found that this technique helped offset the anxiety L2 learners have in the EFL classroom because students didn't need to worry about grammar or structure or using unsuitable English words.

Focused freewriting has been found to benefit students in the L2 writing classroom. Asraf et al. (2018) found it helped to generate ideas faster and write with greater fluency and independence in the prewriting phase. Their findings also showed an increase in students' confidence in writing (Asraf et al., 2018). Saito (2022) saw how it helped Japanese university students facing difficulties to develop a writing routine, enhance fluency, lessen apprehension, and find pleasure in writing. Shaarawy (2014) found focused freewriting through journal writing helped develop Egyptian students' critical thinking skills as well as prevented the decline of students' cognitive skills. Li (2007) used the focused freewriting technique to develop students' academic writing skills and understand the nature and process of academic writing better.

The goal of incorporating focused freewriting in the curriculum was mainly to address students' writing apprehension by getting students get used to putting pen to paper and letting ideas flow freely.

At the beginning of the first semester, the A1 class averaged 61.33 words per minute. 33% of the class wrote more than 100 but less than 150 words. By the end of the semester, their word count increased slightly to 61.88 words per minute and students who wrote more than 100 words but less than 150 increased to 42%. In the A2 class, the average word count was 85.20 words per minute and 6% of the class wrote more than 200 words but less than 250. By the end of the semester, their word count increased to 115.73 words per minutes and students who wrote more than 200 words but less than 250 increased to 16%.

Timed Extensive Writing

One of the effective ways in developing fluency in the EFL writing classroom is through timed-writing, another form of freewriting. Hull (2022) describes timed-writing as a writing activity where students are required to finish a passage within a designated time frame. Timed writing exercises mimic the writing tests in international standardized tests like TOEFL and IELTS both in topics covered and time constraints giving students a good chance to practice writing at a similar level but in a low-stakes classroom atmosphere (Hull, 2022). In a timed extensive writing exercise, students are typically given five to twenty minutes to write about a particular topic with a focus meaning, task completion and quantity (Gettings, 2023). Hull (2022) describes fluency focused writing activities as possessing four key components which Nation (2013) proposed: (1) it uses familiar material to allow students to focus on expressing ideas rather than dealing with unfamiliar content, (2) prioritizes conveying meaningful messages to encourage effective communication over perfect language use, (3) pushes students to perform at a faster pace than usual to promote a natural and quick language production process and (4) students must write extended pieces, for instance, around 250 words.

While most timed-writing activities are usually a pre-writing activity, it was used as main writing assignment. Prior to a timed-writing activity, students do a variety of pre-writing activities such as warm-up activities using visual prompts or videos, vocabulary games or exercises, graphic organizers, reading short passages and pair or group discussions for brainstorming to prepare them for the main writing assignment. Students are also introduced to the basic features of academic essays such as following formatting standards like margins, alignment, line spacing, indenting paragraphs, having a title, a hook, a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence in the hope that students get in the habit of observing basic formatting standards common in academic essays. Students are also provided with a writing sample or model not to be copied or reproduced but for students to see what good writing looks. Learning from good examples of help students understand how information and ideas are presented and organized.

In the A2 level class, students are required to write a 200-word essay for 20 minutes while the A1 level class has a 150 word count requirement for the same time limit.

At the beginning of the semester, only 19% of the A2 level class could reach the 200 word count and only 37% could follow academic writing formats. In the A1 level class, over 70% reached the 150 word count and 46% could follow academic writing formats. By the end of the semester the A2 level class showed a 100% achievement in following academic writing formats and 69% of the class exceeded the 200 word count requirement. In the A1 class, 46% of the class exceeded the 150 word count and 62% could successfully follow academic writing formats.

Process Writing Approach for Final Papers

Each semester, the course requires 3 final papers. The course utilizes the process writing approach to produce the final papers. In process writing, language learners pay more attention to how they create their written work rather than just the final results (Onozawa, 2010). The foundation of this approach is the understanding that writing goes through different stages: planning, drafting and composing, editing, and proofreading—a continuous cycle where the writer evaluates and revisits each stage. (Khan et al., 2024). Teachers aim to help students express themselves freely, plan and organize ideas before writing, and revise drafts, while fostering collaborative learning through group activities such as peer feedback or group projects (Abas et al., 2016). Engaging in dialogue with peers during pre-writing and post-writing exercises grants students valuable insights into different viewpoints and experiences, ultimately enhancing their writing process. In addition, students perceive a sense of camaraderie throughout the entire process thereby lessening anxiety in the writing classroom. Students are given sufficient time to identify and rectify errors, leading to the creation of well-crafted writing that boosts their confidence in English composition. By the time students submit their final paper, the majority of their work typically contains few to no mistakes. For the final paper, the A1 level class's overall average word count was at 208 words at the beginning of the semester. This number jumped to 357.63 average word count by the end of the semester. For the A2 level class, the overall average word count at the beginning of the semester was at 267.5 words. By the end of the semester their overall average word count increased to 391 words.

Teacher Feedback

In the EFL writing class, teacher feedback is imperative as it is the most important feedback students will receive (Wen, 2013). It is an indispensable pedagogical technique in teaching students how to revise and ultimately improve their work (Kim Dung, 2020) and provides insight on how students are progressing towards their learning objectives (Saxhaug, 2017). Much like Flower's (1979) reader feedback, Keh (1990) echoes this perspective for teacher feedback noting that it typically comes in the shape of comments, questions, and suggestions. Giving corrective feedback to minimize errors during the writing process is crucial for actively involving students in their learning and cultivating a culture of continuous improvement, fostering a more effective and supportive learning environment (Khan et al., 2024). When giving feedback, teachers must consider both how the student thinks and how they feel, factoring in the writers' personality, such as self- confidence, self-esteem (Wen, 2013). While corrective feedback is important in improving students' writing, Wen (2013) emphasizes the power of providing positive feedback as much as possible to evoke and reinforce students' positive feelings as they work on improving their writing. Byrd and Abrams (2022) confirm that feedback that highlights students' strengths such as displays of creativity, interesting details or compelling arguments despite the presence of errors create a supportive and encouraging environment for learners' writing improvement. Carless and Winstone (2020) points out that for students to be receptive and responsive to
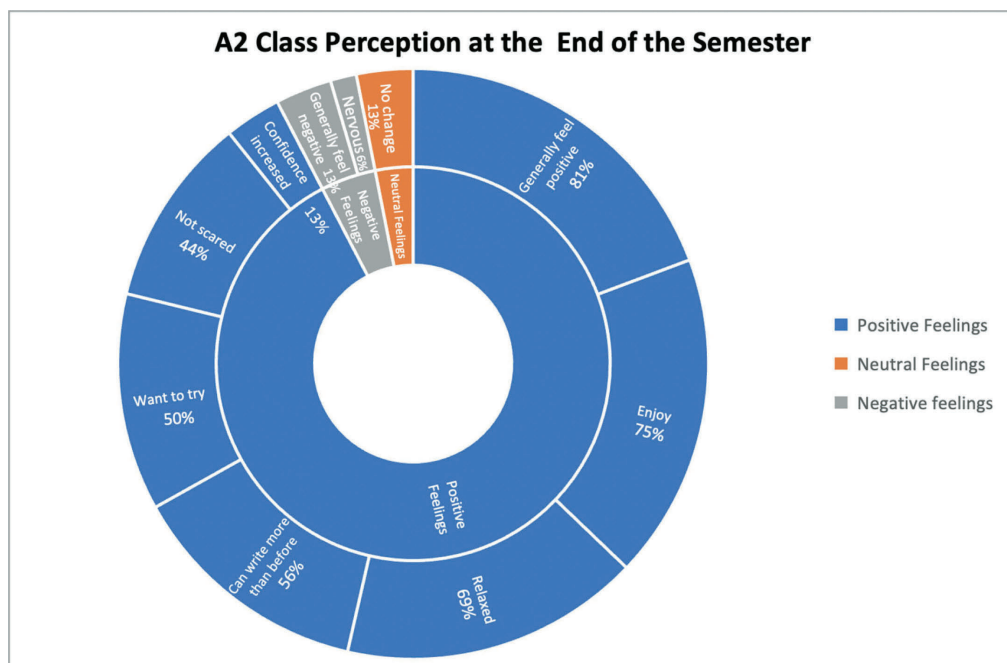
feedback, teachers must be approachable thus creating a supportive teaching and learning environment. Siekmann et al. (2023) found in their study that feedback seen as encouraging was connected to better writing quality.
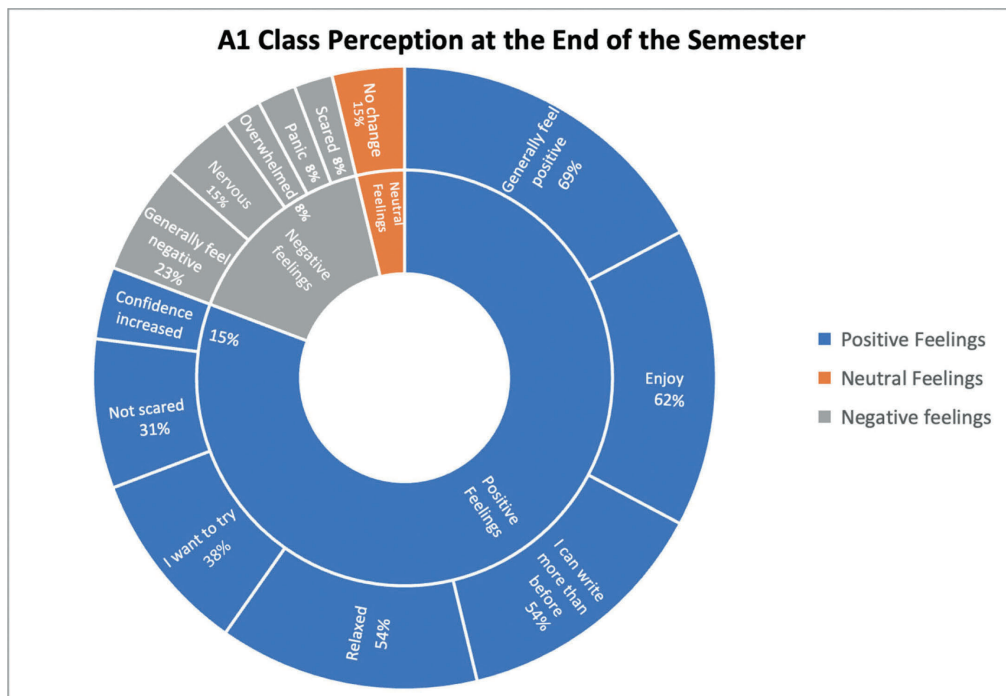
Upon careful observation, it has become clear that the motivation of L2 learners with low English proficiency is rather delicate which requires teachers to provide considerate and thoughtful feedback. A combination of oral and written feedback, encompassing suggestions and corrections, is crucial. Special attention should be given to recognizing and commending specific strengths exhibited by students. While some students have the tendency to become dependent on teacher feedback to complete their writing assignments, it remains vital to offer insightful guidance, especially for challenging concepts or instructions.

Teacher feedback serves as a means to provide differentiated assistance, addressing the diverse challenges students face in their writing endeavors. Some grapple with generating ideas or meeting word count requirements, while others struggle with organizing ideas or limited vocabulary. It is important to convey to students that teacher feedback serves as navigational cues, guiding them through the completion of a writing assignment. This ensures students feel supported rather than lost or isolated in the writing process.

Improved Student Perspective

At the conclusion of the 15-week period, students participated in a final reflection and feedback session, which included a brief questionnaire survey. In response to the prompt "How I feel about writing in English now compared to before," students indicated their sentiments by checking the relevant boxes that aligned with their feelings.

A2 Class Perception at the End of the Semester

- Positive Feelings
- Neutral Feelings
- Negative feelings

A1 Class Perception at the End of the Semester

By the end of the semester, 81% of the A2 class felt positively about writing in English. This is a 37% improvement from 44% at the beginning of the course. The A1 class showed a 27% improvement in student perception from 42% to 69%. Both the A1 and A2 classes demonstrated significant levels of enjoyment, with 62% and 75% respectively. Notably, 44% of the A2 class reported no longer feeling scared of writing, compared to 31% in the A1 class.

Conclusion

Selecting an appropriate writing textbook is an ongoing challenge for L2 teachers, given that writing is fundamentally personal and affective. Approaching writing as a purely technical and academic pursuit is difficult, as the writer's emotions play a central role in and around the writing process. Creating a student-centered writing curriculum is essential, addressing both the technical aspects of academic writing and fluency, particularly for L2 students with limited English proficiency. Likewise, teaching writing requires an eclectic approach that carefully combines methods to guide students towards their learning goals without undermining their motivation and self-confidence. We must commit to actively mitigate, if not entirely eliminate, anxiety among lower-level learners in the writing classroom. This involves communicating to students that making mistakes is a significant aspect of the writing process. Mistakes serve as catalysts for improved ideas, enhanced sentence construction, and better organization. The absence of mistakes hinders the development of a final work that one can take pride in. It is also crucial to thoughtfully choose topics that align with students' high interest while also facilitating new discoveries

and learning growth. Activating prior knowledge through familiar topics and scaffolding new concepts using communicative activities that promote critical thinking lead to language and academic gains in A1 and A2 learners in the writing classroom. Lastly, we must recognize the diverse learning needs of students. Teachers must remain flexible, providing encouraging feedback and thoughtful, tailored guidance to support each student effectively. Ensuring a positive and supportive learning atmosphere is crucial for students not only to cope but to thrive. Ultimately, a positive classroom experience encourages students to explore their studies further, cultivating effective writing habits that will benefit them in their future learning endeavors.

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