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### The Effects of Freewriting Exercises on Adult Korean Students' English Learning

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Elbow's freewriting (1989, 1998, 2011) is an exercise where a participant writes for a set period of time without stopping or editing. Data obtained from 102 Korean university EFL students were analyzed to explore the use of freewriting to enhance adult learners' overall English proficiency. Participants were divided into freewriting and non-freewriting groups. Results show that the students in the freewriting group made significantly greater improvement than their counterparts in English speaking, writing, listening, and reading. Further evidence is found that qualitative improvement in the students' freewriting implied a parallel increase in their overall English proficiency. This study suggests that freewriting could provide a safe outlet for Korean EFL learners to practice English, and enhance their capacity to think in the target language. The study supports the use of freewriting exercises as a context-sensitive pedagogical strategy to promote adult EFL learners' linguistic development of English.

**Keywords:** freewriting, English proficiency, Korean learners of English as a foreign language

#### Introduction

Freewriting is the exercise of writing for a set amount of time without stopping and editing on one or more topics (Elbow, 1989, 1998, 2011). It has gained great popularity not only as a writing strategy (Fishman, 1997; Hsui, 1993) but also as a learning tool for other subject areas such as reading (Bintz, 2000; Collins, 1990), psychology (Hinkle & Hinkle, 1990), and poetry (Hammond, 1991). A large portion of the literature on freewriting, however, primarily discusses its benefits for L1 learners, with little attention to L2 learners. Previous studies in L1 writing and other subject areas have found that freewriting has multifaceted pedagogical benefits – facilitating the generation of ideas for writing (Hsui, 1993), promoting fluency (Stover, 1988), lessening writing anxiety (Belanoff, Elbow, & Fontaine, 1991), and facilitating comprehension and learning in other subject areas (Fishman, 1997; George & Young, 1991). Those few studies in L2 writing have also identified benefits of

freewriting: enhancing L2 learners' writing fluency and reducing writing anxiety (Hsu, Wang, Lao, & Chan, 2010; Hwang, 2010).

The present study explores the use of freewriting exercises to promote L2 learning, beyond what has been identified in the literature, particularly for adult EFL learners. The hypothesis for the study is that freewriting exercises will facilitate adult EFL learners' overall English proficiency, including speaking, listening, and reading proficiency. Given the established literature on the speaking-writing connection (Constanzo, 2009; Perrin, 1994; Sterling, 1996) as well as the reading-writing connection (Grabe, 2003; Hirvela, 2004), adult EFL learners whose written language skills surpass their oral language skills likely experience positive transfer from writing knowledge and practices to other areas of language. Several researchers and pedagogues have suggested that an instructional incorporation of writing to L2 speaking (Fudao, 2007; Kaye & Matson, 2000; Li, 2001) or to L2 reading classrooms (Carson, Carrell, Silberstein, Kroll, & Kuehn, 1990; Ferris & Hedgecock, 2004) has positive effects on L2 learners' speaking or reading skills. This study adds to the literature by exploring the possibility of a regular freewriting exercise to facilitate the development of adult EFL learners' speaking, listening, and reading skills.

In addition, among the studies on L2 learning by adults, Pavlenko (1998; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000) examined autobiographical documents about L2 learning processes by successful bilingual writers who learned their L2s as adults. Based upon her analyses, she defined L2 learning as the process of "self-translation" (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 162) by which they gradually experienced the emergence of a new voice and a self, often first *in writing*. L2 learners' mastery was initially achieved through writing, particularly "first-person tellings" (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 157), as it allowed "a luxury of simultaneous privacy and distance" (Pavlenko, 1998, p. 9). As an implementation of this principle, the act of keeping freewriting journals can be a powerful tool not only to bring out L2 learners' untapped creative power (and resolve unsettled personal issues), but also to reconstruct their personal experiences using the target language.

Based upon the synthesis of the literature about freewriting's positive effects on L2 writers' fluency and anxiety, the interconnection between oral and written language processes, and the role of L2 learners' first-person writing for L2 learning, the current study examines the hypothesis that freewriting exercises will facilitate Korean EFL learners' overall English proficiency by allowing them to practice English in an emotionally safe and personally meaningful way. To the best of our knowledge, freewriting has not been employed as a regular writing activity in any Korean English classroom so far. The results of this study could provide insight in how to create pedagogically safe conditions, in particular for low-level adult EFL learners, to experiment within their target language.

## Theoretical Background

### Freewriting

The concept of freewriting was first proposed by Brande (1981). Later, Elbow (1998) refined it as a more defined writing exercise, believing it to be a solution for developing students' writing. This exercise requires putting words down on paper without stopping. Freewriting allows vague or half-formed thoughts to gradually grow, change and evolve, and "unlocks information stored in the brain" (Murray, 1982, p. 81). Since its introduction, studies have suggested that freewriting could aid students to explore various subject matters in greater depth, evaluate their personal feelings and experiences, and search for answers and solutions to their personal and academic problems (Belanoff et al., 1991; Fishman, 1997; Fontaine, 1991; George & Young, 1991; Stover, 1988). Despite its documented benefits, there are concerns that freewriting lacks control and focus (Fox & Suhor, 1986; Rivers, 2007). The technique of focused freewriting offers a response to this concern. Teachers can select specific topics which are closely related to the course subjects or students' interests (Fishman, 1997;

Hinkle & Hinkle, 1990). Several studies have employed focused freewriting for various pedagogical or research purposes (Hwang, 2010; Li, 2007). For example, Hwang (2010) analyzed 208 focused freewriting outcomes written by eight EFL college students in terms of fluency by words per minute. The results showed that practicing focused freewriting over eight weeks yielded a statistically significant improvement in the students' writing fluency along with increased confidence.

To our knowledge, no study has explored if and how freewriting exercises could facilitate L2 learners' overall proficiency of their target language. Nonetheless, there exist indications which suggest a possible connection between freewriting and L2 learning (e.g., Jacobs, 1986; Rivers, 2007). Jacobs (1986) raised the possibility that freewriting exercises could hasten and promote L2 students' thinking and writing in the target language. Rivers (2007) also underscored that during freewriting, due to the time constraint (5 to 15 minutes), L2 students are pushed to think in the target language, instead of thinking in their mother tongue and then translating it into the target language.

### **Incorporation of Writing Within the L2 Speaking or Reading Classroom**

The incorporation of writing within the L2 speaking or reading classroom has been a topic of growing interest. Several studies have proposed an instructional progression from writing to speaking as beneficial for L2 learners' oral communicative skills (Fudao, 2007; Hubert, 2011; Kaye & Matson, 2000; Li, 2001). Li (2001) conducted an experiment on the effect of English writing on Chinese college students' English speaking skills. The results showed that writing as a major component in the classroom could support students' speaking fluency. Further, the integration of writing into L2 reading has been found to have positive effects on L2 learners' literacy skills (Carson et al., 1990; Ferris & Hedgecock, 2004; Kirin, 2010; Spack, 1985; Zamel, 1992). Spack (1985), in particular, argued that writing in L2 helps L2 learners become better readers. She recommended the 'write-before-you-read' technique, which asks students to write about their personal experiences in relation to the topic of the text they are about to read.

### **Studies on L2 Learners' First-Person Writing**

In previous studies, L2 learners' first-person writing (in the forms of diary, dialogue journal, and blogs) assisted in the development of their L2 proficiency and new L2 identity (Casanave, 1994; Kamberi, 2015; Liao & Wong, 2010; Pavlenko, 1998; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Peyton, 1990). Through these personal writings, the L2 learners were able to engage in the formation of their L2 identity in a non-threatening way as well as develop their linguistic abilities from practicing the target language. For example, Casanave (2004) examined 16 ESL students' journal writing over three semesters. Based on her analysis of the students' journals in terms of various T-unit counts and contents, she concluded that journal writing promoted the students' cognitive processes and writing fluency. Liao and Wong (2010) examined the effects of English dialogue journal writing. Forty-one Taiwanese high school students each wrote 24 journal entries over a 12-week period of time. The journal writing helped the students to become aware of self-growth and self-understanding as L2 learners and increased their measured intrinsic writing motivation.

Based upon a synthesis of these three areas of research, the present study examined the effects of freewriting on Korean EFL learners' proficiency, as measured by their English speaking, listening, reading, and writing proficiencies. The study adopted a between-group comparison design with two different time periods. The following research question guided the study: Do freewriting exercises significantly influence Korean students' English proficiency? To answer this question, this study examined whether the students in the freewriting group show significantly greater improvement than those in the non-freewriting group in their English proficiency. It further examined whether the time-wise increase in the freewriting students' writing is parallel to the increase in

their overall English proficiency.

## Methods

### Participants and Setting

Participants consisted of 102 college students whose first language was Korean. They were enrolled in a prerequisite English course at a private university in South Korea. The course is designed to prepare beginning-level students to take major English courses. By its end, students are expected to read English textbooks in their fields. The course content heavily focused on grammar, vocabulary, and test-taking skills such as TOEIC.

The participants were placed into two classes: freewriting (treatment) versus non-freewriting (comparison). The English course met once per week for 100 minutes for 16 weeks. Of the 51 freewriting group students, 41 (80.4%) were females and 10 (19.6%) were males. Their mean age was 20.35 years, ranging from 19 to 24 years old ( $SD = 1.23$ ). The 51 comparison group students consisted of 40 females (78.4%) and 11 males (21.6%). Their mean age was 20.45 years, ranging from 19 to 24 ( $SD = 1.40$ ). The participants' English reading and listening proficiencies, measured by a TOEIC test, averaged 203.58 ( $SD = 89.71$ ). According to Trew (2007), grades under 470 in TOEIC are considered low-level and students who belong to this level generally possess minimal communication skills. None of the students from either group had taken an English writing course or had done freewriting exercises before.

### Measures

#### Speaking test

Two speaking prompts were provided and each student was allowed to choose one of them. The topics are shown in Appendix A. Students who chose the first prompt the first week (pre-test) were asked to respond to the second prompt on the week 16 (post-test) and vice versa. Ten minutes were allowed for answering each prompt. Their responses were audio-recorded and evaluated using Nakatsuhara's (2007) Analytical Rating Scale (See Table 1). The scale consists of five subareas of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and interactive communication. Given that the participants produced first-person accounts in response to the given prompts, the first four subareas were used to score students' speaking. Each subarea was rated on a 0 to 5 point scale (0 = *inadequate for the simplest conversation*; 5 = *appropriate and sufficient range of vocabulary*), so the highest possible total score was 20 points.

TABLE 1  
Nakatsuhara's (2007) Analytical Rating Scale

Areas	Scores					
	5	4	3	2	1	0
Pronunciation & Intonation	Appropriate word stress/rhythm	Some L1 interference but easy to understand	L1 interference / occasional strain on the listener	Minimal assimilation/ frequent strain on the listener	Very frequently mispronounce	Gross errors/ very heavy L1 influence
Grammar	Uses a wide range of structures	Most basic structures are sound / some inaccuracies	Basic structures / Just enough grammar	Frequently inaccurate	Almost entirely inaccurate	No awareness of basic grammatical functions

Vocabulary	Uses appropriate, sufficient range of vocab	Generally uses adequate range of vocab	Occasionally inaccurate / limitation in vocab	Frequently inaccurate	Lack of vocab makes even basic communication difficult	Inadequate for even the simplest conversation
Fluency	Has comfortable, nearly natural speed	Noticeable hesitation / slow speech	Slow and hesitant speech / occasionally unreasonable patience	Very slow and hesitant speech / frequently unreasonable patience	Slow and disconnected speech / almost impossible to follow	Speech is halting and fragmentary
Interactive communication	Almost wholly effective at communication	Communicates effectively	Communicates adequately	Ineffective	Unable to interact	No awareness of other speakers

Two independent raters scored the students' responses. One rater was a native speaker of English with a master's degree in English and the other rater was a Korean-English bilingual doctoral student in TESOL. Both have taught English for over 10 years at various levels and settings. They first examined the evaluation criteria and scored ten response samples independently, then compared their scores and discussed the reasons in reference to the evaluation criteria until they reached a consensus. Interrater reliabilities, as tested by Pearson correlation, were .97 for the pre-test and .89 for the post-test, which are considered reliable for this work (LeBreton & Senter, 2008). In addition to the analytic scoring, the length (total word count) of each participant's oral response was calculated. Any Korean words and fillers such as *hm*, *uh*, or repeated words were not counted, as they do not constitute the target language.

## Writing test

The participants were asked to introduce themselves in writing the first week (pre-test) and week 16 (post-test). Given that freewriting is self-directed expression of thought, a first-person narrative such as a self-introduction seemed plausible for measuring progress in writing proficiency. They were given 30 minutes for writing. A subset of Wiseman's (2012) Analytic Scoring Scale was used to rate the students' essays, which is presented in Table 2. The scale consists of task fulfillment, content development, organizational control, sociolinguistic competence, and grammar. Only the latter four subareas were used because the task fulfillment category seemed to be beyond the writing proficiency that could be measured by the given task. Each subarea was rated on a 1 to 6 point scale (1 = *fails to develop topic*; 6 = *thorough development of topic*), for a total of 24 possible points.

TABLE 2  
*Wiseman's (2012) Analytic Scoring Scale*

Areas	Scores					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Task fulfillment	Fail to take a position	Limited success	Minimally succeeds	Adequately succeeds	Competently succeeds	Exceptional success
Control of content development	Fails to develop topic	Limited development of topic	Minimal development of topic	Adequate development of topic	Substantial development of topic	Thorough development of topic

Organizational control	Follows no clear organizational pattern	Limited evidence of clear organizational pattern	Discernible organization pattern	Generally organized	Effectively organized	Clearly and logically organized
Sociolinguistic competence	Narrow range of vocab, word choice or usage	Limited range of vocab, word choice or usage	Minimal range of vocab, word choice or usage	Adequate range of vocab, word choice or usage	Competent range of vocab, word choice or usage	Extensive range of vocab, word choice or usage
Grammar control	Frequent errors with little control	Frequent errors with uneven control	Frequent errors with minimal control	Frequent errors with developing grammatical control	Some errors but control of language is apparent	A few errors are noticeable

The same raters who scored the spoken responses scored the written responses independently. The interrater reliabilities, as measured by Pearson correlation, were .95 for the pre-test and .93 for the post-test, again considered reliable (LeBreton & Senter, 2008). In addition to the analytical scoring, the length (total word count) of each participant's written response was calculated. Any emoticons and Korean letters were not counted; although they contain meaning, they could not be considered as target language words.

### Listening and reading tests

To measure the participants' proficiencies in listening and reading, a TOEIC test was utilized since it is a standard measure of English proficiency of non-native speakers in many countries. The test consists of 200 multiple-choice questions: 100 listening questions and 100 reading questions. The possible test scores are from 5 to 495 for listening and reading, respectively. Using the school library test program, two different sets of TOEIC test were administered to the participants the first week (pre-test) and week 16 (post-test).

### Instructional Procedure

Both the treatment and comparison groups were taught by the first author, using the same textbook and classroom activities. The overall instructional procedure consisted of a brief review of the previous lesson, introduction of new grammar and vocabulary, and language-focus exercises. Every class began with a vocabulary quiz. After going over the questions and answers, the teacher gave a lecture on new grammar structures and vocabulary using the examples presented in the textbook. Then the students were given a grammar/vocabulary exercise worksheet which included questions similar to those from a standardized English proficiency test such as TOEIC (e.g., fill in the blanks from given options).

The two groups differed only in the ten minutes before the end of each class; the treatment group freewrote and the comparison group had an in-depth Q&A session. During the Q&A session, the instructor went over the part of the lesson where the students lacked sufficient understanding, provided extended exercises to consolidate their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, and elicited use of the target items using recast and negotiation techniques. The students in the treatment group did freewriting exercises for ten minutes. The freewriting group was fully briefed on the purpose and details of the freewriting exercises on the first day of the class: what freewriting is, how they would do it in class, and why it is beneficial for them to practice. Then the instructor demonstrated how to do freewriting. The students freewrote from weeks 2 to 14. It was made clear that their final course grade would not be related to this writing exercise.

Focused freewriting was used in the current study given that it could reduce unnecessary time and stress spent searching for a topic. Freewriting topics were given each week (See Appendix B for the topics). The topics were closely related to the themes and lessons covered in the course work so that students could practice the vocabulary and grammar learned during the class in their freewriting. Students were asked to bring a notebook to class for freewriting. Each freewriting outcome was collected at the end of the class by the instructor and returned to the students after being perused. The instructor acknowledged that she read each freewriting sample they wrote to ensure the students' active participation and regular practice of freewriting. No feedback was given either on grammar or on content. If students did not want a particular freewriting entry read by the instructor, they could simply glue or staple the page which they wanted to keep private. Figure 1 below describes the timelines for both groups' instructional procedure.

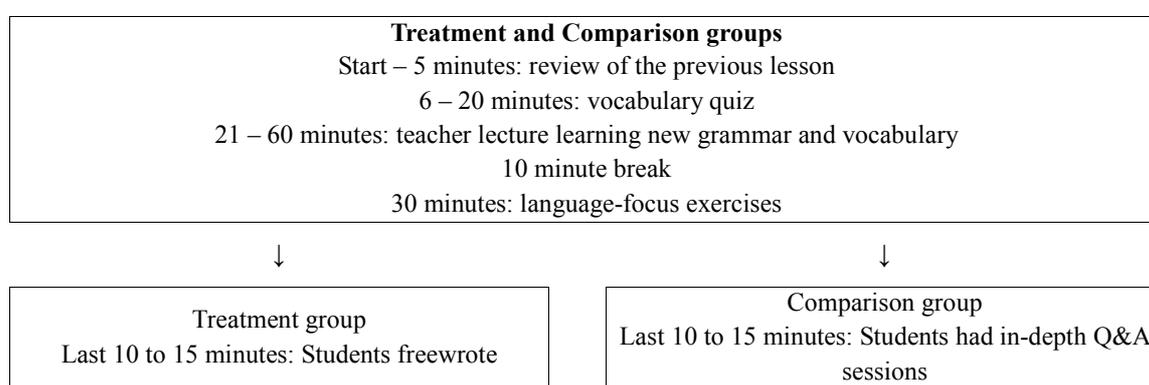


Figure 1. The timelines for instructional procedure.

A total of 663 pieces of focused freewriting outcomes were collected. To understand how the students' freewriting changed over time, their freewriting outcomes produced at the beginning (Time 1: Weeks 2-4), middle (Time 2: Weeks 7-9), and final points in time (Time 3: Weeks 12-14) were examined. The total word count (TWC), number of different types of words (Type), and type/token ratio (TTR) in each student's three sets of freewriting outcomes were calculated.

## Results

### Effects of Freewriting on English Proficiency Improvement

#### Comparison of pre-post improvement in four English skills

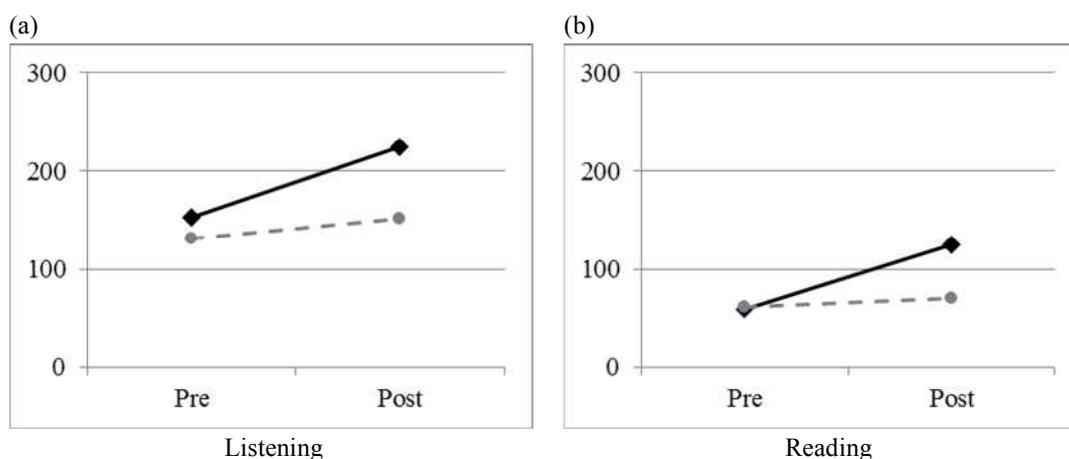
To examine whether the students in the freewriting group show significantly greater improvement than those in the non-freewriting group in their English proficiency, a two-factor repeated measures MANOVA test was performed to assess whether the degrees of pre-post improvement in English proficiencies significantly differed between the two groups. In this analysis, the dependent variables were the four proficiency variables (listening, reading, speaking, and writing), and the independent variables were Group and Time. In Table 3, the means and standard deviations of the pre-post scores of English proficiencies are presented for the two groups.

TABLE 3  
Means and Standard Deviations of the Pre-Post Scores of English Proficiencies

Measures	Freewriting Group ( $N = 51$ )		Non-Freewriting Group ( $N = 51$ )	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
	$M$ ( $SD$ )	$M$ ( $SD$ )	$M$ ( $SD$ )	$M$ ( $SD$ )
Listening	153.33 (58.73)	225.00 (83.67)	132.35 (63.34)	151.67 (77.73)
Reading	59.02 (38.87)	125.39 (70.82)	62.45 (39.35)	71.08 (53.82)
Speaking	6.41 (3.22)	10.63 (3.01)	6.67 (4.16)	5.16 (4.10)
Writing	7.08 (2.59)	12.69 (3.17)	6.96 (3.01)	7.14 (3.32)

The results revealed an overall, statistically significant multivariate effect for Group, Wilks'  $\Lambda = .69$ ,  $F(4, 97) = 10.71$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .31$ ; Time Interval, Wilks'  $\Lambda = .42$ ,  $F(4, 97) = 33.64$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .58$ ; and a Group  $\times$  Time interaction effect, Wilks'  $\Lambda = .38$ ,  $F(4, 97) = 39.24$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .62$ . The overall degrees of English proficiency improvement significantly differed between the two groups. The follow-up univariate test for the Group  $\times$  Time interaction revealed that the improvement in the treatment group was significantly higher than that in the comparison group in Listening,  $F(1, 100) = 11.35$ ,  $p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .10$ ; Reading,  $F(1, 100) = 23.40$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .19$ ; Speaking,  $F(1, 100) = 55.24$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .36$ ; and Writing,  $F(1, 100) = 67.43$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .40$ . As can be seen when the effect sizes are compared, the largest effect of freewriting was found in Writing and the smallest in Listening.

As seen in Figure 2, the results suggest that the students in the treatment group showed significantly greater improvement than those in the comparison group in their proficiencies of English listening, reading, speaking, and writing.



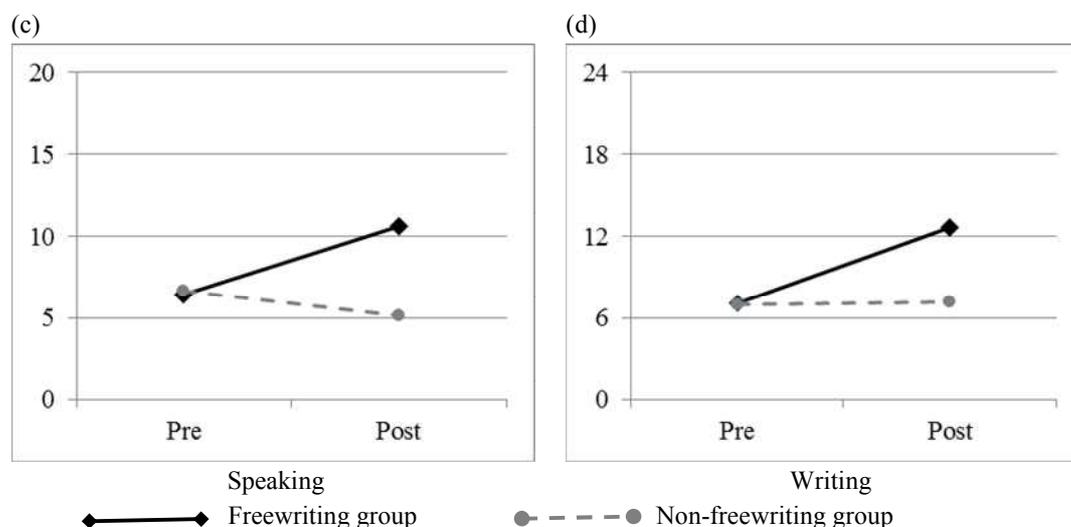


Figure 2. Pre-post mean differences of English proficiencies between the two groups.

To illustrate the changes in the students' writing, a freewriting student's pre-writing (Week 1) and post-writing outcomes (Week 16) are presented below. In the writing samples, the student, Kate<sup>1</sup> showed improvement in content development (1.5 → 4), organizational control (1 → 3.5), sociolinguistic competence (2 → 4.5), and grammar (2 → 4).

Week 1: Pre-writing outcome

My name is Kate. I am 24 years old. I return to school this time. I live in Incheon. I interested in Chinese language. I prepare a HSK license. I don't speak English. So I wanted to study English. Starting with the basics. (43 words)

Week 16: Post-writing outcome

Let me introduce my self. My name is Kate. I'm twenty four years old. I'm university student. My major is Hotel Tour Management. My family is four people father, mother, bother and me. My father very kind person. Always smile. So I love him. My father job is plastic whole sale, he every day work. My mother is warm person. She very loved me. She always nags to me but I like her. Sometimes I heard that "You look like mother". My mother and me is very similar. My younger bother is 22 years old. He was gone to army. He is J University student. He is very smart and cut guy. I loved them! My hobby is watching TV, listening the music, reading a book and eating food. I like food but I can't eat coffee and dog meet. I have caffen allergy. So I hate coffee and red tee. My favorite movie is Sunny, 3 Idiots. 3 Idiots movie is very good movie I want to recommend for all of students. My dream job is service teacher. I want to be announcer but I small women. So I give up my dream but I continue look for my job. I don't know what can I do. I'm very seriously though recently I study English and Chinese I want take a English high score. 1 of June I'm going to China language exam. I'm very nervous. These day is my birthday. I can't hang out with friends because I have final exam next week I'm so sad ㅠㅠ After final exam, I'm going to shopping for stress out! And I will study hard. I will attend to university English program (TOEIC, TOEIC speaking) and I'm going to study chinese every week ends I hope take a license (HS: chinese

<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym was used to preserve confidentiality.

exam). My parents always worried me. I'm weak so I often sick. I am going to exercise everyday. I will take health body!! (323 words)

As a post hoc analysis, a paired samples *t*-test was conducted for each group to examine the significance of the pre-post improvement in English proficiency scores. The results indicated that while the treatment group showed significant improvements in all the four skill areas ( $p$ 's < .05), the comparison group did not show any significant improvement in Listening,  $t(50) = 1.69$ ,  $p = .10$ ; Reading,  $t(50) = 1.15$ ,  $p = .26$ ; and Writing,  $t(50) = .34$ ,  $p = .74$ ; they even regressed in Speaking,  $t(50) = -2.59$ ,  $p = .01$ . This indicates no beneficial effect of the instruction on the treatment group students' improvement in English proficiency outside of the course's scope.

### Comparison of pre-post improvement in speaking and writing subscales

In searching for corroborating evidence for the effect of freewriting on English proficiency, it was further queried whether the two groups also significantly differed in their improvements on the subscales constituting speaking and writing proficiencies. Table 4 shows the means and standard deviations of the two groups' pre-post scores for the speaking and writing proficiency subscales as well as the lengths of their spoken/written responses.

TABLE 4  
*Pre-Post Scores of Speaking and Writing Subscales*

	Subscale	Freewriting ( $N = 51$ )		Non-Freewriting ( $N = 51$ )	
		Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
		$M$ ( $SD$ )	$M$ ( $SD$ )	$M$ ( $SD$ )	$M$ ( $SD$ )
Speaking	Pronunciation	1.57 (.83)	2.73 (.83)	1.71 (1.01)	1.33 (1.14)
	Grammar	1.43 (.92)	2.53 (.86)	1.61 (1.11)	1.24 (1.09)
	Vocabulary	1.57 (.92)	2.63 (.80)	1.65 (1.09)	1.25 (1.06)
	Fluency	1.84 (.88)	2.75 (.84)	1.71 (1.12)	1.33 (1.09)
	TWC	66.67 (56.56)	107.02 (62.18)	75.45 (70.77)	70.29 (70.81)
Writing	Content	2.02 (.73)	3.59 (.75)	1.98 (.97)	2.16 (.97)
	Organization	1.53 (.70)	2.96 (.98)	1.59 (.67)	1.61 (.87)
	Sociolinguistic Competence	1.61 (.75)	2.92 (.93)	1.59 (.75)	1.61 (.85)
	Grammar	1.92 (.82)	3.22 (.92)	1.80 (.87)	1.76 (.93)
	TWC	58.69 (33.57)	123.90 (73.06)	49.84 (23.06)	68.53 (43.84)

Note. TWC = total word count.

A two-factor repeated measures MANOVA test was performed to assess whether the pre-post differences in the speaking subscale scores as well as the TWCs in spoken response significantly differed between the groups. The results revealed an overall, statistically significant multivariate effect for Group, Wilks'  $\Lambda = .78$ ,  $F(5, 96) = 5.49$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .22$ ; Time Interval, Wilks'  $\Lambda = .83$ ,  $F(5, 96) = 3.98$ ,  $p = .003$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .17$ ; and a Time  $\times$  Group interaction effect, Wilks'  $\Lambda = .60$ ,  $F(5, 96) = 12.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .40$ ; indicating that the overall degree of improvement in the speaking subscale scores significantly differed between the two groups. The follow-up univariate test for the Time  $\times$  Group interaction revealed that the improvement in the treatment group was significantly higher than for the comparison group in Pronunciation,  $F(1, 100) = 54.89$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .35$ ; Grammar,  $F(1, 100) = 42.28$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .30$ ; Vocabulary,  $F(1, 100) = 48.38$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .33$ ; Fluency,  $F(1, 100) = 34.98$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .26$ ; and TWC of spoken response,  $F(1, 100) = 11.78$ ,  $p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .11$ .

Subsequently, another two-factor repeated measures MANOVA was conducted to test whether the pre-post differences in the writing subscale scores as well as the TWCs of the written response significantly differed

between the groups. Due to the significance of Box's M test ( $F[55, 32293.11] = 1.88, p < .001$ ), Pillai's trace values, rather than Wilks'  $\Lambda$ , were used, following the suggestion of Mertler and Vannatta (2005). The results indicated an overall, statistically significant multivariate effect for Group, Pillai's trace = .28,  $F(5, 96) = 7.56, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .28$ ; Time Interval, Pillai's trace = .50,  $F(5, 96) = 19.04, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .50$ ; and a Time  $\times$  Group interaction effect, Pillai's trace = .42,  $F(5, 96) = 14.11, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .42$ ; indicating that the overall degree of improvement in the writing subscale scores significantly differed between the two groups. The follow-up univariate test for the Time  $\times$  Group interaction revealed that the improvement in the treatment group was significantly higher than for the comparison group in Content Development,  $F(1, 100) = 46.66, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .32$ ; Organizational Control,  $F(1, 100) = 63.94, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .39$ ; Sociolinguistic Competence,  $F(1, 100) = 52.11, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .34$ ; Grammar,  $F(1, 100) = 42.56, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .30$ ; and TWC of written response,  $F(1, 100) = 16.96, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .15$ .

As shown by the results of a series of repeated measures MANOVA here, the treatment group showed significantly greater improvement than the comparison group across the four areas of English proficiencies, as well as all the subscales of speaking and writing proficiencies. Thereby, the answer to the research question, whether the freewriting exercises significantly influence Korean EFL students' English proficiency, is affirmative.

## Correlations Between Freewriting and English Proficiency Improvement

### Time-wise increase in writing fluency and lexical knowledge

To examine whether there was an increase over time in the freewriting students' writing parallel to the increase in their overall English proficiency, we first examined whether the freewriting group students' writing fluency and lexical knowledge, as manifested in their freewriting outcomes, significantly increased over time, in association with the improvement in their freewriting exercises. A one-factor repeated measures MANOVA was performed to assess whether the text length (TWC), lexical variability (Type), and lexical density (TTR) obtained from the students' freewriting outcomes significantly differed for three consecutive time points (Time 1: Weeks 2-4, Time 2: Weeks 7-9, and Time 3: Weeks 12-14). In this analysis, the independent variable was Time. In order to minimize the possibility that the TWC, Type, and TTR in the freewriting outcomes were sensitive to weekly topics, the mean scores of the three indices obtained from the adjacent three weeks for each time point were used. Means and standard deviations of the three dependent variables are presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5

*Means and Standard Deviations of the TWC, Type, and TTR in Freewriting (N = 51)*

Freewriting Indices	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
TWC	71.99 (21.83)	77.85 (27.64)	89.50 (29.74)
Type	47.91 (12.04)	50.79 (14.96)	58.18 (15.83)
TTR	.68 (.06)	.66 (.06)	.67 (.07)

*Note.* TWC = total word count. Type = number of different types of words. TTR = type/token ratio.

The results indicated an overall, statistically significant multivariate effect for the Time Interval, Wilks'  $\Lambda = .53, F(6, 45) = 6.69, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .47$ . This indicates that the freewriting group students' writing fluency and lexical knowledge significantly changed over the three time points. The follow-up univariate test results revealed statistically significant differences in TWC,  $F(2, 100) = 15.63, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .24$ ; and Type,  $F(2, 100) = 18.60, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .27$ ; but not in TTR,  $F(2, 100) = 1.34, p = .27$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Multiple comparisons with a Bonferroni correction showed that significant differences existed between Time

1 and Time 3 as well as between Time 2 and Time 3, in both TWC and Type (all  $p$ 's < .01). These results indicate that the students' writing fluency (i.e., TWC) and lexical knowledge (i.e., Type) significantly increased after 11 to 13 weeks of freewriting exercises. No significant change in lexical density (i.e., TTR) during the time intervals suggests that both the text length and lexical variability increased relatively evenly in time. The results suggest that the time-wise increase in the students' freewriting came in parallel with the increase in their writing fluency and lexical knowledge.

### Link between improvement in freewriting and English proficiency

In searching for further evidence corroborating the link between the time-wise improvement in freewriting and in English proficiency, two correlation analyses were compared between (1) Time 1 TWC and Type in freewriting and pre-proficiency scores of English, and (2) Time 3 TWC and Type in freewriting and post-proficiency scores of English.

As seen in Table 6, the summary of the correlation analysis between Time 1 freewriting indices and pre-proficiency scores of English revealed significant correlations between TWC and Speaking ( $r = .31, p < .05$ ) and between Type and Speaking ( $r = .34, p < .05$ ). This may suggest that the students' initial speaking proficiency possibly transferred to their freewriting, but not to the other proficiency areas.

TABLE 6  
*Correlations between Time 1 Freewriting and Pre-Scores of English (N=51)*

	Pre Listening	Pre Reading	Pre Speaking	Pre Writing
Time 1 TWC	.08 (.58)	.17 (.24)	.34* (.02)	.24 (.09)
Time 1 Type	.09 (.52)	.17 (.25)	.31*(.03)	.28 (.05)

Note. TWC = total word count. Type = number of different types of words.

The initial correlation patterns changed for the Time 3 TWC and Type in freewriting and post-proficiency scores of English. As seen in Table 5, the TWC and Type significantly correlated not only with Speaking ( $r = .32, p < .05$  for TWC;  $r = .28, p < .05$  for Type) but also with Writing ( $r = .40, p < .01$  for TWC;  $r = .33, p < .05$  for Type) and Reading ( $r = .31, p < .05$  for Type). These results indicate that given a certain period of freewriting exercise, the students' increased writing fluency and lexical knowledge through freewriting significantly correlated with their increased speaking, writing, and reading proficiencies.

TABLE 5  
*Correlations between Time 3 Freewriting and Post-Scores of English (N=51)*

	Post Listening	Post Reading	Post Speaking	Post Writing
Time 3 TWC	.21 (.15)	.26 (.07)	.32* (.02)	.40** (.00)
Time 3 Type	.26 (.06)	.31* (.03)	.28* (.04)	.33*(.02)

Note. TWC = total word count. Type = number of different types of words.

Based on the results from the repeated measures MANOVA and correlation analyses, the time-wise improvement in students' writing fluency and lexical knowledge through freewriting are significantly associated with their increased proficiencies of speaking, reading, and writing. This suggests the possible transfer from English knowledge, developed through the freewriting exercise, to the other English proficiency areas. Hence, the increase in freewriting was parallel to the increase in overall English proficiency. The answer to the research question, whether the freewriting exercises significantly influence Korean EFL students' English proficiency, is further affirmative.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the possibility of implementing freewriting exercises for promoting adult Korean EFL learners' practice of English as an aid in the enhancement of their English proficiency. The results of the study showed that the freewriting exercise had significant effects on the improvement of Korean EFL learners' English proficiencies including listening, reading, speaking and writing. The results provide evidence that structured freewriting which draws on their personal experiences liberates students to use writing to develop speech and other linguistic competencies.

Adult beginning level students do not possess communicative competencies which they can easily transfer from writing as native speakers can. As Liebman-Kleine (1987) underscored, for EFL students "language is not cheap. The words do not often come out easily, thoughtlessly. They must be labored over, thought through (p. 108)." However, this research has found that the freewriting exercise pushes these EFL learners to think and write in the target language in subtle, affective ways. Their writing competence measurably transferred to oral skills. Analysis of the students' freewriting outcomes found that as the students freewrote, they were able to write longer and use more varied words over time. This suggests that as the students' practice through freewriting continued, their capacity to use the target language significantly increased over time.

The comparison between the pre-post correlation patterns of writing fluency and lexical knowledge in freewriting and English proficiency scores further corroborated the link between the temporal improvement in freewriting and English proficiency. At the beginning, the text length and lexical variability in the students' freewriting outcomes correlated only with their speaking scores, reflecting that one's freewriting is heavily dependent upon one's speaking proficiency (Belanoff et al., 1991; Jacobs, 1986). Yet, after 11 to 13 weeks of freewriting exercises, the text length and lexical variability in the learners' freewriting outcomes showed significant correlations not only with their speaking scores but also writing and reading scores. This indicates the possible transfer from enhanced writing practice and knowledge to other English proficiency areas including reading and writing. No correlation between the learners' freewriting outcomes and their listening scores seems to resonate with the result of this study where the effect size of freewriting for listening was the smallest ( $\eta^2 = .10$ ). In fact, while much strong evidence exists for writing-reading (e.g., Grabe, 2003; Hirvela, 2004) and writing-speaking connections (e.g., Constanzo, 2009; Hubert, 2011; Perrin, 1994; Sterling, 1996), few suggest a strong link between writing and listening. Taken together, the present study's results indicate that freewriting strengthens all four areas of English skills but helps listening less than the other three skills.

It should be noted that in this study the comparison group did not show any significant progress in their overall English proficiency; they even regressed in their speaking scores. This was rather surprising because the treatment and comparison groups showed no statistical difference in their achievement on the final exam to assess their retention of the grammar and vocabulary taught during the course. No progress in the comparison group on the English proficiency measures may be attributed to the classroom activities, which provided sufficient language-focus exercises but no actual language-use practice. The comparison group students may have acquired linguistic knowledge, but with no opportunity to use the language through speaking, listening, reading, and writing, they may have failed to incorporate it into their communicative skills (Wilkins, 1979). In contrast, the treatment group students used the newly learned vocabulary and grammar in a personal, expressive, and meaningful way. This result may also highlight the greater pedagogical benefit of freewriting as an actual language-use practice than that of language-focus exercises.

Thirteen students in the comparison group directly contributed to the decline in the speaking scores. They responded in their first language to the post-test, resulting in scores of zero. The fact that 13 out of 51 students (25.49%) in the comparison group avoided speaking in English at all could suggest low-level Korean EFL learners' heightened fear and resistance. On the other hand, only one student in the treatment group relied on

Korean on the post-test, suggesting that the treatment group students' significant engagement in autobiographical writing in the form of freewriting gave them courage and confidence (Lannin, 2007).

In essence, the results of the current study provide solid empirical evidence that utilizing freewriting has an affirmative effect on adult Korean students' English learning. By engaging in a regular freewriting exercise, low-level Korean EFL learners achieved a significant improvement in their English proficiency. Furthermore, the results of the study add to the existing L2 freewriting literature by expanding the value and importance of freewriting beyond a writing aid (Hwang, 2010; Lannin, 2007) which facilitates L2 development. Given these results, it appears reasonably safe to say that freewriting exercises confer advantages for EFL learners from East Asian countries in particular, in which saving face is an important cultural concept (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004) and English is regarded as a difficult school subject (Sawir, 2005). Logically, they would feel more comfortable with practicing their target language in writing than audibly in public. In addition, freewriting is easily applicable in various settings, classrooms, and venues. Teachers can easily graft freewriting exercises onto the beginning or end of the class. Via the regular exercise of freewriting, the students could have a safe space to rehearse and try out the target language.

### **Conclusion**

This study was guided by the pedagogical motivation to help low-level Korean EFL learners improve their English proficiency. Elbow's freewriting (1989, 1998, 2011) as a regular writing practice was implemented to help 102 Korean EFL students express their personal experiences through an L2. Results revealed that the students in the freewriting group made significantly greater improvement than their counterparts quantitatively and qualitatively. As is empirically demonstrated by the results obtained in this study, a freewriting exercise can provide a safe outlet for Korean EFL learners to free their voices (Belanoff et al., 1991) and enhance their capacity to think in English. The results of the study may expand to other adult EFL learners from East Asian countries (e.g., China, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam) on the basis of their collectivistic cultural values (e.g., saving face) and common focus on English grammar and reading. Some limitations of the study should be acknowledged. Considering that the first author of this paper taught both the treatment and comparison groups, the demand characteristics (Orne, 1962) or experimenter effects might bias the results. In addition, the current study does not go far enough to examine individual variations in English improvement in the medium of freewriting. Learners' initial levels of English proficiency, amounts of language use in freewriting, or degrees of enjoyment in the activity could have different effects on their improvement in English proficiency. Whether or how learner variations influence the link between freewriting and English improvement also warrants for further investigation. Finally, the sample size is relatively small; this indicates that the present exploration has opened fruitful new avenues for further, more systematic, research. Further investigations are warranted to find the pedagogical devices by which teachers (e.g., of child learners) could use these insights to further their students' L2 learning. Future study can be done with various populations, levels, subjects, and learning contexts as well.

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## Appendix A

### Two Speaking Prompts

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1. Do you prefer to spend your free time with other people or on you own?  
Which do you prefer and why? Give specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.
  
  2. When taking a college course, do you prefer on-line lectures or classroom lectures?  
Which do you prefer and why? Give specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.
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## Appendix B

### Freewriting Topics

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Week 2	My college life
Week 3	My family
Week 4	My Mr. Right / Miss Right
Week 5	My major
Week 6	What is your favorite subject? Why?
Week 7	My dream job
Week 8	Which country do you want to visit? Why?
Week 9	My best friend
Week 10	My favorite food
Week 11	My favorite movie
Week 12	My favorite drama
Week 13	My favorite childhood memory
Week 14	My plans for summer vacation

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