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### ‘Free Writing’ versus ‘Writing Fluency’

Divya John

*SSN College of Engineering, Chennai, India*

#### Introduction

Experienced teachers are aware that students hate writing because they appear miserable when a writing task is given in the classroom. Usually, during a writing task, students read and edit their sentences often, thus hampering the writing process, and end up with nothing much on paper (Elbow, 1998). He ascertains: “The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn’t just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead. Your voice is damped out by all the interruptions, changes and hesitations between the consciousness and the page” (p. 6). In this respect, I had a remarkable experience when free writing was introduced to my students as suggested by Elbow (1998): Write as fast as you can; do not rush; be cool; do not read what you have written but keep on writing; forget about your grammar and spelling; never stop for anything (p. 3). Listening to the principles of ‘free writing’ the students were delighted at the idea of non-editing, especially given their concerns about grammar and spelling. Under these free writing activities, the study aimed to answer the following research questions: 1. Does free writing enable students to develop their writing fluency? 2. What activity empowers students to write the maximum words? 3. How much time should be allotted for free-writing activities? 4. What are the students’ views on their experience of free writing and writing fluency?

#### Literature Review

##### The Experts’ Input on ‘Free Writing’

Free writing has been used for developing writing skills for years. Elbow (1998) defines free writing as a smooth flow of written words – an easy and unaffected way of writing. And claims it is the best way to learn how to write. Belanoff, Elbow, and Fontaine (1991) maintain that “the most accurate and useful definition of freewriting is a negative, prudent one,” because as they say, free writing is the end-result when the normal constraints involved in writing are removed. It means that there is no need to show the words to anyone; no need to think about spelling, grammar and mechanics; no need even to make sense; no need to be understandable even to oneself; no need to stay on topic; no need for any kind of quality, excellence, rightness or caring. That is, the writing can be well below standard; however, there is one imperious constraint, and that is, the need to put words down on paper without stopping (Belanoff, Elbow, & Fontaine, 1991).

Elbow (1998) supports freewriting because if practised regularly, it will enhance writing fluency as words will come out more easily and thus make writing less forced. Elbow (1998) explains that in one's natural way of producing words, there is a texture, a rhythm, and a voice that is the main source of power in the writing. It is better to get back into it because regular practice can change the writing into something better. Such a free-writing text is just the first draft, and not the final product.

Another argument that free writing enhances writing fluency is made by Belanoff (1991) who says that free writing makes students better writers because it gets the writing muscles (all of them: hands, eyes, brain) working at full speed and it produces a rich and rough first draft. Knapp (2009) reinforces the view that what is more important for writers is fluency because free writing increases students' fluency. As students learn to free write, he asks them to focus on ideas and to write as quickly as they can because the brain moves so much faster than the hand. He believes, at the initial stages, they have faith in him, and in course of time, they have faith in themselves.

Another argument in this study is that the topic-selection plays a major role in gaining writing ability. Wang (2010) points out how the choice of the topic is an important aspect in L2 writing. Ji (2011) highlights the topic-effects on the writing performance of students – like enhanced fluency, syntactic complexity and lexical sophistication. Six tasks were chosen for this study to see how the students could write on six different topics: free writing on an incident, free writing to the universe, free writing on a film, free writing on a debatable topic, free writing for a diary, and free writing on the art of free writing.

### **The Experts' Input on 'Writing Fluency'**

The term 'fluency' according to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary is "the quality of being able to speak or write a language, especially a foreign language, easily and well" and "the quality of doing something in a smooth and skilful way." Fluency initially referred to fluency in the spoken form of the language. Gradually, written fluency measures emanated from measures of spoken fluency. The idea of measuring fluency by words per minute comes from that of words per minute in speaking studies.

Wolfe-Quintero et al. (1998) refers to 'writing fluency' as the ability to produce "written language rapidly, appropriately, creatively and coherently" (as cited in Abdel Latif, 2013, p. 99). Bruton and Kirby (1987) define 'writing fluency' as the richness of the writers' processes and the ability to organise composing strategies.

Researchers differ in estimating the quantity and quality of writing fluency. Writing fluency is measured by the "length of the writers' proposed text between pauses" (Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001) and the "length of translating episodes written between pauses" (Abdel Latif, 2009). Referring to how writing fluency was measured in the previous studies, Abdel Latif (2013) divides writing-fluency measures into two types: (1) Product-based measures depending on the written texts regardless of how they were produced, and (2) Process-based measures drawing upon the online observation of the writers' composing processes. In product-based measures, the most common way of measuring writing fluency is to assess the composition rate or the text quantity by evaluating the words per minute. However, Abdel Latif (2013) argues that such an evaluation is based on faulty assumptions and concludes that, "writing fluency can be operationally defined as the writers' ability to produce texts in large chunks or spans and is optimally measured by using the length of writers' translating episodes or production units. This process-based measure assesses real-time fluent-written production and is compatible with the cognitive characteristics of the writing performance" (Abdel Latif, 2013). The most recent studies use product and process-based measures e.g. eye tracking movements and computer software to measure fluency, so that the understanding of fluency would become more holistic. However, for this study, writing fluency is measured by the number of words written per minute. This is obtained by dividing the quantity of the text produced by the time spent in writing. A pertinent question remains: When a teacher advocates free writing ignoring grammar and spelling, how can its quality be judged? This paper reflects on free writing only as a procedure that celebrates the process of writing. The stress is on the quantity of the text produced and not the quality. Therefore, this teacher-researcher in this study, considers just the quantity

of the text, that is, the number of words written by the students, and the time taken by them to write, for analysis.

## Method

The study analysed the written fluency of first-year engineering students in 2016 at the SSN College of Engineering, affiliated to Anna University, Chennai, where admission is on the basis of merit – that is, the marks they get for science and maths subjects. Their proficiency in English is not taken into consideration. The students are of a mixed-ability group – those who come from good English-medium schools are proficient in English while those from the regional-medium schools (where their regional language is the medium of instruction) have varying levels of proficiency in English.

Most of the newly-admitted students struggle with writing and find it difficult to put their thoughts down on paper. As they need to write technical reports, they require practice in writing. The students agreed that they had been introduced to free writing in the college for the first time. They learn Technical English I and II in the first and second semester respectively. The syllabus followed is based on listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, writing being a major component of the course. The students have to face an end-semester written examination in both semesters. The written examination in both semesters contains Part A (grammar questions) for 20 marks and Part B (a compulsory reading passage and writing composition) for 80 marks.

Six free-writing activities, in synchrony with the syllabus, were completed in the English classes to enable students learn the art of free writing. A class of 64 students were initially involved in the study. Forty students participated in all the six activities and so only their writing was analysed. The free-writing activities of varying duration were organized during four weeks (see John, 2017 for a detailed description of the procedures):

TABLE 1  
*The Six Free-writing Tasks*

Task No	Topic	Duration	Aids	Exercise
Task 1	Free writing on an incident	20 minutes	The students were introduced to extracts from autobiographies. The teacher narrated a personal incident from her life.	The students chose an incident from their lives and wrote about it step by step.
Task 2	Free writing to the universe	10 minutes	A few hints were given: “Who am I?” “Why am I here?” and “Why should I go through all this?”	The students wrote a personal letter to the universe.
Task 3	Free writing on a film	20 minutes	The students watched the movie, “Forest Gump.” The students read the plot of the movie from Wikipedia.	The students wrote an informal movie review.
Task 4	Free writing on a debatable topic	15 minutes	The students surfed the Net <idebate.org> on the topic, “Should children below 18 use mobile phones?”	The student wrote for or against the topic.
Task 5	Free writing for a diary	10 minutes	The students were introduced to diary-writing.	The student wrote the diary entry of the previous day.
Task 6	Free writing on the art of free writing	5 minutes	The prompt given was, “Comment on your experience of free writing.”	The students wrote on free writing.

The tasks are given below in detail (John, 2017):

**Task 1 – Free writing on an incident**

As a prewriting exercise, students were introduced to extracts from autobiographies like Kalam and Tiwari's (1999)<sup>1</sup>. In the following class, the teacher narrated a personal incident from her life, and encouraged the students to choose an incident from their lives and write about it for 20 minutes developing it, step by step.

**Task 2 – Free writing to the universe**

This task was writing a personal letter to the universe for 10 minutes about their aspirations and secret desires. As guidelines, a few existential queries were given: "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" and "Why should I go through all this?"

Prior to the above-mentioned two activities, the students were informed that they were supposed to write only for themselves and that the scripts would not be collected. The purpose was to build up their confidence and enable them to accept the exercise as a private affair with the paper. In line with Dickson's (2001) view, free writing tasks were not administered to be critiqued by the teacher because students needed to relax and let their ideas flow easily.

However, the students' scripts were collected for the later four activities which are detailed in John (2017)

**Task 3 - Free writing on a film (20 minutes)**

The prewriting activity was to watch the Academy Award movie *Forest Gump* for two periods of 50 minutes each. The viewing of the rest of the movie was given as homework. In the third period, 15 minutes was allotted for reading the plot of the movie from Wikipedia. Prior to the writing, the teacher instructed the students thus: "Write an informal movie review; write whatever you think fit and feel like; comment on the actors, acting, direction, cinematography and theme." This was enough motivation.

**Task 4 - Free writing on a debatable topic (15 minutes)**

The prewriting exercise was to surf the Net <idebate.org> on a very common topic, "Should children below 18 use mobile phones?" The exercise was to write for or against the topic for 15 minutes.

**Task 5 - Free writing for a diary (10 minutes)**

The students were introduced to diary-writing. The exercise was to write a diary of the previous day for 10 minutes.

**Task 6 - Free writing on the art of free writing (5 minutes)**

The task was to write on free writing for 5 minutes to check whether they grasped the art. The prompt given was, "Comment on your experience of free writing."

At the end of each of the four activities, the students were asked to count the number of words written and note them down on their respective scripts. The time for the activities was given according to the topics chosen. For example, Task 1 and Task 3, a free write on an incident and a movie were given 20 minutes as students would require a longer time to develop the story line and get the hang of free writing. The longer free writes also teach the students how to write as they get totally involved in writing.

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<sup>1</sup> *Wings of Fire* (Hyderabad, Universities Press, India)

## Results and Discussion

### Results

The results are demonstrated by the two graph figures given below:

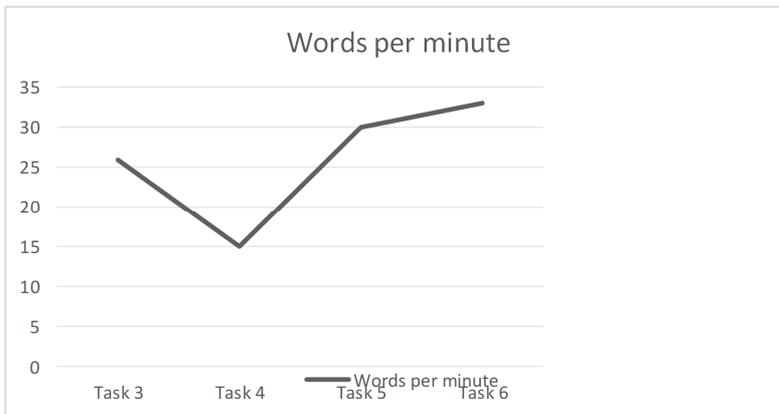


Figure 1. Words per minute.

The average number of words per student, and the average number of words written by a student per minute for each activity was determined. The average number of words written for Task 3 to 6 is: 527, 229, 300 and 163 respectively. The average number of words written for Task 3 to 6 per minute for each activity is: 26, 15, 30 and 33 respectively, as shown in Figure 1.

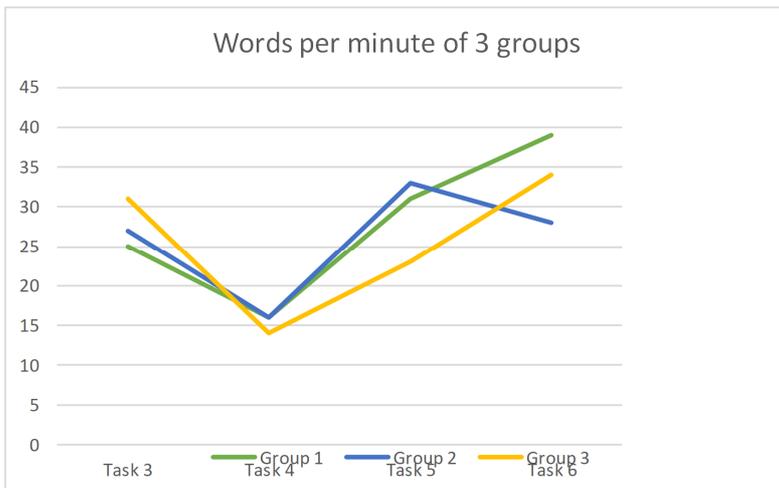


Figure 2. Words per minute of 3 groups.

Depending on similar tendencies regarding the words they wrote per minute, they were divided into three groups:

- Group 1: 16 students produced 25, 16, 31 and 39 words per minute for Task 3 to 6
- Group 2: 18 students produced 27, 16, 33 and 28 words per minute for Task 3 to 6
- Group 3: 6 students produced 31, 14, 23 and 34 words per minute for Task 3 to 6

These results are explained in Figure 2 above.

## Discussion

As per Figure 1 and Figure 2, in the tasks 3, 5 and 6, the students showed an increase in the number of words they wrote per minute. The dip in Task 4 probably indicates that the topic given, “Should children below 18 use mobile phones,” was too cliched for them, suggesting that fluency depended on the task. Hwang (2010) and Frances (2014) assert that studies on writing fluency have proved that an 8-week period of practice in guided free writing helped EFL college-level students develop their writing fluency and confidence in writing. Penn and Lim (2016) also indicate that the students’ writing fluency and lexical knowledge increased after 11 to 13 weeks of free writing exercises. Many studies have proved that journal writing on a regular basis can enhance the students’ writing fluency. The study by Honsa and Ratanapinyowong (2005) indicates that writing journals in English increased the students’ fluency and accuracy and their English proficiency in general. So, the increase in the number of words for Task 5 was only natural.

Equally, Figure 2 indicates that in Tasks 5 and 6, Group 1 were more fluent, in Task 5, Group 2 could write more, while in Task 3 & 6, Group 3 had an enhanced fluency, indicating that they were empowered to write the maximum words in the activities. Dickinson (2014) admits that the topic selection does have a positive effect on writing fluency. Lubold et al. (2016) too agree that free writing improves writing fluency. Sponseller and Wilkins (2015) also confirm that self-selected topics over teacher-selected topics increased writing fluency, a view supported by Figures 1 and 2.

According to Figure 1, the students produced a greater number of words comparatively for the 5-minute free-writing task. Similarly, in Figure 2, two groups (Group 1 & Group 3) produced 39 and 34 words per minute for the 5-minute free-writing task. The natural conclusion arrived at is that the shorter the time, the better the fluency. Marcus (1980) says, “... it’s best to introduce free writing with one to three-minute time limits. After students have become accustomed to the procedure, the time span may be increased to five minutes or longer.” Sheryl (1991) refers to 10-minute free-writes with which she encourages students to record and transform their experience. Nguyen’s (2015) study views the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of the students’ writing in English. He confirms that the 7-minute writing practice enabled the students write fluently. In general, the free writing tasks developed the students’ writing fluency activity after activity.

## The Students’ Output

The purpose of Task 6 (“Free writing on the art of free writing”) was to collect the students’ feedback on their experience of freewriting. The students admitted that free writing increased their speed of writing and flow of thought. In fact, they were surprised that they could write so much in such a short time. Some extracts from their feedback are: “*Free writing helped us to realize our capability of writing fast.*” Another student wrote: “*I have started improving my speed of writing. I am writing as fast as I can, without rushing.*”

Students commented on their smooth flow of thoughts and ideas during the free writing tasks. One student remarked: “*I just write my heart out! Any literature or language lover must surely try free writing task as it is just amazing.*” Another observed: “*Free writing... actually helps to bring out the creative you and enhances your thinking process.*”

Some students acknowledged the effect of the brain-hand coordination and how it helped in activating their thoughts and writing speed. One of them stated: “*Free writing opens our mind and enhances our fastness in writing.*” Another noted: “*Our brain is conditioned to activeness. If we use it fast it will be fast, the same thing happens here. If we write fast our words will come soon and it is a practice session.*”

Yet another mentioned: “*It is actually pretty cool task where it tests your ability to think fast and put that into words at the same pace. It actually helps you to improve brain-hand co-ordination. It is a process wherein the stuff comes out naturally from the mind. It actually becomes better with practice as it*

*enables open minded thinking... I personally am able to feel the difference comparing the first task and the last task in free writing.”*

Each student liked different writing tasks and showed interest in different topics. One pointed out: “The task which I liked most was freewriting on *Forrest Gump*. I really wrote about 700 words that day within a short period. I was surprised that I could write that much which I didn’t know up to that time.” Another liked Task 5: “I see free writing similar to diary entry coz it lets you speak your mind out on the paper and ink your thoughts as smoothly as the ink follows on the paper and thoughts flow into your mind (yeah, you have a writing pen and a brain XD)” (sic).

Some students admitted that the non-editing part was an attractive part of free writing – a fact that led to their increased speed in writing. One of them thought: “Rules in free writing is quite interesting. No worries for grammatical mistakes. How cool can anything get? The advantages include -- it helps increase one’s writing speed. It also helps us to sharpen our minds, to think quickly, to write words, form sentences and write simultaneously.”

This teacher-researcher was excited to chance upon a comment: “Free writing is one of the best and beautiful experiences I had in my life. It makes me feel good and relaxed.”

## Conclusion

This study evaluates six free-writing activities conducted in an English classroom for first-year engineering students in four consecutive weeks. Out of these, four activities of 20, 15, 10, and 5 minutes’ duration were taken up for analysis. The students demonstrated varying levels of fluency according to the kind of task given. Two graphs displayed support the finding that the activities enabled the students to increase the number of words written per minute, thus increasing their writing fluency. The two graphs show that the shorter the time taken for free writing, the greater is the number of words produced. The emphasis of writing fluency is on the quantity of the words produced and not the quality of the end product.

## The Author

*Divya John*, PhD, is now serving as Assistant Professor, Department of English, SSN College of Engineering, Chennai. She has 14 years of experience and presented papers in 25 national and international conferences on ELT. She has 12 publications on ELT in journals like *Modern English Teacher*, *TESOL-SPAIN Newsletter*, *IATEFL’s Voices*, *The IATEFL ESP SIG Journal*, *MEXTESOL Journal*, *ARTESOL ESP Journal*, *Teaching English with Technology*, *Humanising Language Teaching*, *The Journal of English Language Teaching [India]*, *The English Classroom*, and *Fortell*.

Department of English  
SSN College of Engineering  
Chennai, India 603110  
Mob: (91)9486480491  
Email: DivyaJohn@ssn.edu.in

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