



The Impact of Implementing Homework on the Development of Japanese EFL Students' Writing

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Introduction

Japanese EFL students are generally underprepared for English writing at post-secondary level. As they enter college, they have difficulty in developing writing skills (Okada, 2018). Even though Japanese students take high school writing classes before entering college, many of them do not overcome their fear of writing. In addition, others have not yet developed proper study habits (Kominato, 2016). This is due to the difficulty they experience with written composition in general as well as with idea-generating techniques (Doi, 2013; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002). As a result, students may experience writing fear, also known as “writing anxiety.” In this research, writing anxiety is cited as “negative feelings that writers experience when attempting to generate ideas and words” (Tsao et al., 2017, p. 223).

As a strategy for potentially mitigating writing anxiety among students, instructors at all levels of education have used homework as an out-of-class task to reinforce learning beyond the classroom (Azizah, 2018; Kominato, 2016; MacDonald, 2017). It has been reported that there is a strong, consistent positive correlation between students' academic achievement and the time they spend on homework (Carr, 2013). Hong et al. (2015) also show that homework achievement and self-efficacy may reduce anxiety. According to Qashoa (2014), promoting self-confidence among students and making non-judgmental tests are some of the strategies capable of alleviating writing anxiety and enhancing writing proficiency.

Although a number of studies regarding writing tasks have been conducted in EFL Japanese contexts, few have focused on the use of homework to improve writing skills specifically for such students. Writing anxiety can cause some students to skip class, and a high frequency of absenteeism eventually leads to failure in mandatory classes. Some students may even drop out of college altogether. Therefore, teachers should take measures to motivate students to engage in writing and thus help them pass their courses. To tackle problems such as high absenteeism, creating effective homework should be encouraged.

In response, homework was designed to develop motivation and improve overall writing skills. The objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of this experimental homework. Specifically, the assigned homework was implemented for taking advantage of online teaching, which has recently become widespread due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Literature Review

Numerous strategies and tools designed to improve students' writing skills have been discussed in the literature. This section will provide a brief summary of such strategies, including implicit instruction, visual aids, and homework.

Implicit Instruction

A number of researchers have discussed grammar teaching and error corrections. Truscott (1996) argued that correcting grammatical errors was detrimental to students hoping to improve their writing. However, Truscott's position has led to controversies in the language learning field. While some researchers have addressed the benefits of providing explicit instruction (Bitchener, 2012; Ferris & Roberts, 2001), others advocate implicit or indirect feedback as being more appropriate for anxious students, as this approach may help learners internalize grammatical features unconsciously (Chandler, 2003; Godfroid, 2016; Han, 2012; Ji, 2015). For example, indirect feedback has been shown to have long-term impact on improving grammatical accuracy in the Thai EFL context (Tan & Manochphinyo, 2017). In summary, studies regarding the use of direct or indirect error corrections need to be further explored (Hyland & Hyland, 2019).

The Effects of Visual Aids

Innovative technological advances have continued to impact language learning. Among them, visual aids drastically help beginner-level students follow second or foreign language learning instruction. According to Izumi (2002), output and visual input enhancement tasks promote noticing. Moreover, these stimuli not only foster creativity, but media-rich learning environments can be an enjoyable experience, resulting in more positive learning attitudes toward writing (Kishi, 2008; Lan et al., 2011). Learning through visual aids such as movie clips and anime can foster both teachers' and learners' emotions and reflection. Among the various visual aids mentioned above, the use of concept mapping can have positive effects on writing motivation and achievement (Flanagan & Bouck, 2015; Negari, 2011). Novak and Cañas (2007, p. 29) define concept maps as "...graphical tools for organizing and representing relationships between concepts indicated by a connecting line linking two concepts." Concept maps assist in developing a student's logical thinking when writing supporting sentences in paragraphs. This pre-writing planning stage can help create coherent paragraphs and build up logical arguments. Machida and Dalsky (2014) also point out that concept mapping can improve the writing quality of low-level students through anxiety reduction. Thus, this task seems highly suitable as part of the pre-writing stage.

Homework

As time spent in class is limited, complementary learning methods outside of the classroom may be required to ensure proper learning by students (Nunan & Richards, 2014). Homework has been shown to have numerous beneficial effects such as consolidating learning from the classroom, broadening and sharpening language skills, and fostering self-regulation and self-efficacy (Amiryousefi, 2016; Azizah, 2018; Kominato, 2016; MacDonald, 2017; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011). This is of particular importance to EFL students, who often lack a sense of security when they are required to write in a language other than their L1 (Abadikhah et al., 2018).

Kominato (2016) shows that homework is effective not only for children but also for post-secondary students, especially those who are underprepared for writing. Effective homework should therefore be assigned to students even at the post-secondary level. However, research on the use of homework at that level is limited, especially in the field of ESL or EFL teaching (Amiryousefi, 2016; Corwin, 2016; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011). Some studies argue that homework does not help improve academic

achievement and is therefore a waste of time and energy for both teachers and students (Loveless, 2016). Too much homework can also impose stress on students' physical health and social life (Kralovec & Buell, 2001). Unless teachers step back and reflect on what they are doing and why they are setting homework, the practice may be excessively time-consuming for both teachers and students (North & Pillay, 2002). A potential source of problems lies in the fact that instructors and students may have different perceptions and attitudes toward homework (Corwin, 2016; MacDonald, 2017). Consequently, EFL instructors should design homework that aligns with their students' interests and needs through the incorporation of purposeful and effective tasks designed to motivate students for successful homework completion (Amiryousefi, 2016; Büchel, 2016; MacDonald, 2017), thus boosting students' motivation, effort, and achievement (Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011; Suamuang et al., 2020). Kominato (2016) also suggests that homework must not overwhelm students and cause them to lose confidence in their ability to complete the homework assigned.

In short, effective homework assignments can help students develop motivation, self-regulation skills, and self-efficacy provided teachers apply strategies designed to assist students in overcoming their weaknesses (Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011), leading to gains in self-confidence in the ability to achieve individual learning goals through completing homework.

Research Question

How do homework assignments improve Japanese EFL students' writing skills?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 39 second-year English majors (males = 20, females = 19), who had failed their first-year mandatory English classes taught by native English-language speakers in a Japanese university. The study took place in the first spring semester of the participants' second year in college. Their English proficiency level ranged from about 300 to 800 on the TOEIC Listening & Reading Institutional Program Test offered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). The test consists of listening and reading sections, and total scores can range from 10 to 990 (with a maximum score of 495 for each of the listening and reading sections).

Materials and Procedures

The experiment was divided into four phases (four consecutive lessons in the middle of the semester), the first three of which consisted of classroom activities that led up to the homework in the final phase. To address the research question, an in-class handwritten pretest and a typed homework posttest were administered.

- 1) The in-class handwritten pretest on the subject of "My Hometown" took place without dictionaries for 30 minutes.
- 2) Students corrected errors on two occasions in short paragraphs taken from the textbook *Great Paragraphs 2* (Folse et al., 2010). Errors pertained mostly to indentation, capitalization, and punctuation. This assignment was intended to draw students' attention to specific forms of correct grammar subconsciously. In other words, this was an implicit task.
- 3) With the help of visual aids and using a projector, the teacher demonstrated to students how to develop ideas for paragraphs. To assist students in comprehending the process, concept maps and

pictures were used to help them visualize the organization of the supporting sentences in each paragraph.

- 4) A deadline for homework was announced for students to complete and submit their paragraph with topic-related pictures.

Results

To analyze the students’ writing development, a two-way within-subjects ANOVA [(pretest, posttest) X 2 (rater 1, rater 2)] was conducted, and a significant difference was found between pretest and posttest results (see Table 1). Assessment was carried out by two English language teachers, who analyzed the results of the in-class writing test and the homework. To measure the students’ performance, three criteria were applied as follows; the development of paragraphs was evaluated for the topic sentence (two points), supporting sentences (two points), and concluding sentence (two points), for a total possible score of six points. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics of the results of the writing tests, showing means and standard deviations. Scoring from both raters shows that the mean increased from pretest to posttest. In contrast, standard deviation decreased from pretest to posttest.

To examine the descriptive statistics, an ANOVA was conducted with pretest and posttest and two raters as the factors. This revealed a significant interaction between the both tests and the raters, $F(1, 38) = 72.68, p < .01$. In addition, there was a simple main effect between pretest and posttest, $F(1, 38) = 8.65, p < .01$, and $F(1, 38) = 52.43, p < .01$. Furthermore, there was a simple main effect between the two tests for both raters, $F(1, 38) = 76.22, p < .01$, and $F(1, 38) = 6.23, p < .05$. (Figure 1).

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Pretest and Posttest (N = 39)

	Pretest		Posttest	
	M	SD	M	SD
Rater 1	1.95	1.65	4.82	1.41
Rater 2	2.49	1.45	3.23	1.11

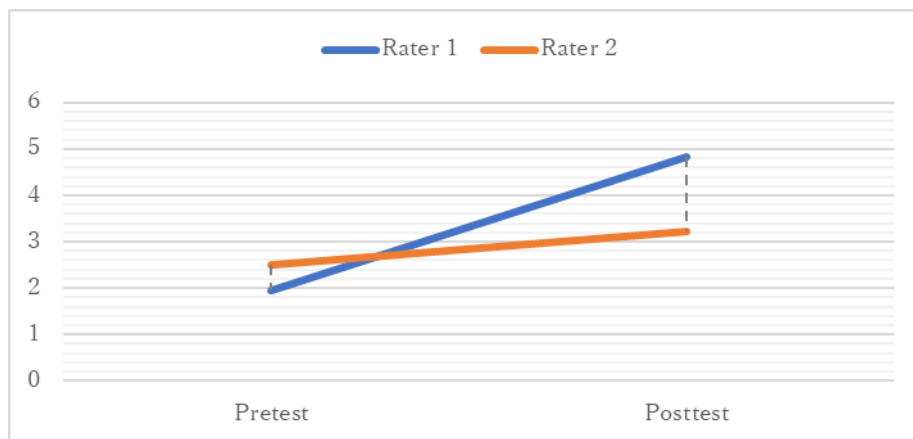


Figure 1. Results of writing tests (N = 39).

Moreover, the total number of words dramatically expanded (Figure 2). Students who used more vocabulary in the pretest also tended to use more vocabulary in the posttest. Thus the use of typing functioned not only to increase their vocabulary but also to decrease their punctuation and spelling errors through editing. Another possible factor is for them to use the Internet as a source to consult when typing.

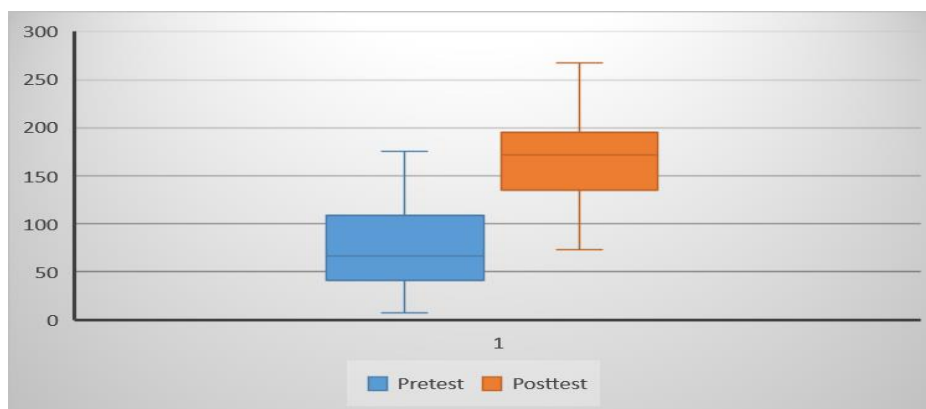


Figure 2. Results of range of vocabulary (N = 39).

Discussion

There was a significant difference between pretest and posttest results. Based on the evaluation of students' writing skills by the two raters, the mean score increased while the standard deviation decreased from pretest to posttest homework. This implies that the students' writing skills improved on average while the variation in skills between students became smaller. Moreover, the paragraphs became more descriptive and included more supporting details. This led to higher scores by the raters. This implies that students were able to spend more time researching examples on the internet, developing ideas, and editing their writing. Compared with the handwritten pretest done during class, they were able to recall their organized ideas by consulting the concept mappings with key supporting details they had worked on in-class.

Students' reflections collected after the homework also indicate that most of them enjoyed writing homework as they were able to research information on the Internet and choose various facts at their own pace. In general, those who tend to be shy and reluctant to join group work tend to select self-study or teacher-assisted studies. Thus, homework may relieve psychological stress and writing anxiety experienced inside the classroom. However, this is only a tentative suggestion that will require further research.

It should also be noted that of the 39 students, only one student's performance decreased in terms of vocabulary. This student originally wrote more than 100 words in the handwritten pretest but only 96 words in the typed homework posttest. One possible reason is that she may have been demotivated to do homework after class and that such students may consider any homework to be an additional workload. Thus, more varied approaches should be devised for such cases as different types of strategies and feedback are required to accommodate students with different learning needs (Gitsaki & Althobaiti, 2010).

Conclusion

We examined whether homework can improve Japanese EFL students' paragraph writing regarding supporting details, fluency, and punctuation skills. The study indicates that doing homework helps students learn language with greater flexibility and more effectively. In summary, students seemed to be broadly motivated by homework because it allows them to spend more time visualizing and organizing their ideas and search for examples on the Internet at their own pace. The use of visual aids was another key factor in inspiring and generating ideas. Moreover, concept mapping allowed them to create clear outlines. Both visual aids and concept mapping are therefore useful resources for successful homework completion.

One limitation of this study was its short duration. In response, repeated long-term experiments should be conducted. In addition, insights about writing strategies and their ability to alleviate anxiety should be further explored. According to Cheng (2002), writers' affective responses such as writing anxiety have received little attention from writing researchers. If homework is to be used more extensively, low-proficiency students may be less likely to experience writing anxiety and become more engaged in their own language learning. To help them become autonomous writers, typed homework using online resources appears to be beneficial because it allows students to conduct self-evaluation and to work at their own pace (Bailey, 2019).

Future studies should also conduct comparisons of in-class handwritten activities and typed homework with equivalent types of assignments being provided. Even though online teaching has become relatively common, both qualitative and quantitative methods should be developed for the assessment of their effectiveness. The goal of future research should therefore be to foster students' autonomous writing through different platforms in order to accommodate students with different needs, including the use of computer and mobile device applications (Petersen et al., 2020). Especially under current pandemic conditions, teachers should design specific approaches, develop materials outside of the classroom, and foster interaction through various platforms.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP18K00900.

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(Received May 23, 2021; Revised August 20, 2021; Accepted September 18, 2021)

Appendix

Error Correction in a Paragraph

The following paragraph contains errors in indentation, capitalization, and punctuation. Read the paragraph and make corrections. There are 10 mistakes.

There is a lot to know about the sport of hockey. Hockey is popular in many countries, including canada and the United states. the game is played on Ice, and the players wear skates to move around A hockey player can score a point if he hits a special disk called a Puck into the goal. However, this is not as easy as it seems because each goal is guarded by a special player called a Goalie The goalie's job is to keep the puck away from the goal The next time you see a hockey game on television, perhaps you will be able to follow the action better because you have this information.