

Helping Students Find Their Writing Voices

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フリーライティングを通して、学生自身の言葉を流暢に書く能力を引き出していく

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要旨

本稿は毎週の課題であるフリー・ライティング後の心理状態をセルフ・モニタリングすると言う予備的研究の報告である。これは、フリー・ライティングがフロー到達の手段の一つとなり、英語や日本語の流暢さ (fluency \Rightarrow increased written output) に良い影響を及ぼすと言う仮説を検証するものである。チクセントミハイ (1975) によれば、フローとは、能力の水準と課題の難易度とのバランスの均衡が保たれている場合の精神状態を表す。これは心身を融合させる活動における最高の集中状態と本質的な価値による動機づけがなされていることを意味する。フリー・ライティングはその流暢さに重きがおかれ、一定の身体的な動きも伴うため、フローへの到達に適していると考えられる。この仮説に基づき、筆者は学生に時間制限を設けたフリー・ライティングを毎週の課題とした。そして、どれぐらい書いたかを明確にするため、課題終了時に、日付と語数をグラフに印してもらった。学生は学期半ばに自己評価を行った。最終クラス前に、学生はチクセントミハイのフロー状態を示すグラフを見た上で、心理状態の自己評価を行った。フローは覚醒 (arousal) の次に多く報告された。更に、学生は英語や日本語のフリーライティングで違った精神状態を示した。不安、リラックス、制御、心配、無気力、倦怠感などが挙げられた。これら、それぞれの心理状態は、活動の難易度と学習者のスキルとのバランスを表している。15週間の間、約1/4が覚醒、さらに1/4の学生がフローを体験したと報告している。最初から最後まで15週間のフリーライティングの練習は学生が日本語ではなく、英語でより書けるようになったことを示した。学生自身にフローを認識させ、その体験を増やすことにより、学びの質を高めることに繋がると考えられる。

Key Words: English free writing, Japanese free writing, timed writing, output, Flow, autonomy, English communication, university

Introduction

This paper reports on a pilot study in which students were asked to self-monitor their psychological state after doing free writing for weekly homework. My hypothesis was that free writing might be one way of accessing a state of flow and might impact positive-

ly on English and Japanese written output, the writing voice. "Flow" was identified by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) as a psychological state in which the challenge is in balance with the learner's skills. According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow equates with a high degree of engagement and intrinsic motivation in the practice of

activities which integrate the mind and the body, in optimal ways. Free Writing is characterized by emphasis on output leading to increased fluency and also by a certain level of physical engagement, all of which make it suitable for promoting the state of flow. I believe that if we can help students to recognize and increase flow experiences, it will impact on the quality of learning in not only English classes but, especially when practiced in Japanese, and in other areas of their life, too.

In this paper I will first explain more about “flow” before outlining how the project was presented to students and how graphic representations of “flow” and other psychological states were used by students to record their states after writing. I will give details of how students reacted to both free writing and graphing their psychological states. Then I will introduce the essential finding that needs to be considered by educators outside the field of English education. I will present data of student feedback that is in favor of free writing in Japanese. The majority of students feel that recommending Japanese free writing to next year’s students would be useful and beneficial to some or many. Results show also however, that the psychological states reported in Japanese free writing are much different than the psychological states reported in English. Therefore, instructors who introduce Japanese free writing need strict emphasis on correct form and encouragement in order to get the most beneficial results. Finally, I will argue that the combination of awareness-raising through graphic representation of psychological states can help students to develop skills in self-monitoring both self-study and in-class study, with important consequences for their ability to select self-study tasks and to give helpful feedback regarding classroom learning.

More about flow

The psychological state called “flow” is inherently connected to self-expression, autonomy and life-long learning. People with autotelic personalities have more complex flow activities in their life. “Flow” is the key characteristic found in autotelic activities.

These are activities that we do for their own sake, not for some external goal but because they are important and valuable in their own right (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 116). In terms of learning, flow is a psychological state in learning in which the challenge is in balance with the learner’s skills. Other psychological states include arousal, anxiety, relaxation, control, worry, apathy, and boredom. Each state reflects the balance between the challenge and the learner’s skills. (Please see Figure 1, below). With practice we can learn how to assess the balance between skills that we possess and the challenges we face in activities that we do, and manage our learning process by having the goal to increase our daily “flow” experiences. This is significant because experiencing peak performance and the additional by-product of increased feelings of well-being is beneficial psychologically, spiritually and physically. The state of “flow” promotes positive learning cycles and has positive long-term effects such as higher self-esteem and the ability to work longer without stress-related illnesses (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 186). Meaningful learning experiences result when enough skills are mastered to find “flow” in complex activities. Passive and simple activities often result in inner turmoil, frustration and disappointment and unsatisfying results or progress (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 191 & 321).

In terms of Japanese free writing, asking students to review what they have learned in class (in the last 10 minutes, today, last week) including anything else that they want to write about, is an excellent starting point to increase output which, with practice, is seen to impact positively on fluency, increase communication with one self about what one is learning which in effect is preparing the mind to clarify better what is remembered or not remembered, and indirectly planning what to do and assessing what has been done. The by-products of these activities are 1) increased fluency results in the development of the writer’s voice which is essential for all kinds of writing that students will do in their futures, including academic writing; 2) we can find examples where increased confidence in their

writing voice impacts positively on speaking in general, therefore, there potential to use free writing as a stepping stone to conversation and discussion of what has been written about; 3) increased ability to sort out what is not understood from what is understood results in knowing what questions to ask, and what information is most pertinent 4) adequate planning and assessing results in increased autonomy and autotelic experiences. Students come to understand what they need to do by them selves and see the personal benefits of the activity.

Characteristics of the psychological state of flow include the following:

- developing peak performance: balance between arousal and control
- focused energy
- being aware and in the moment
- being in touch with our emotional lives – communication with ourselves
- consistent engagement with tasks that demand a high degree of skill and commitment. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 31)

Free Writing Graph

Free Writing = 10 Minutes of non-stop, trying to write as much as you can while making mistakes. Don't erase mistakes. Keep writing until the 10 minutes is up. Use a Timer or your cell phone on manner mode.

- ◆ Use a color pen, a color that you like, not red & not a highlight pen ;
- ◆ Don't erase mistakes – circle or correct mistakes after you finish;
- ◆ Don't relax! Push yourself to write and think at the same time;
- ◆ Focus on trying to write all the English that you can remember;
- ◆ Focus on writing lots of grammatically simple sentences;
- ◆ Focus on simple expressions that you learned in high school;
- ◆ Focus on you, your self introduction and details about your day;
- ◆ Focus on your own personal language. What new words do you need to learn that will help you communicate you ideas;
- ◆ Focus on **Re-using** new ideas and words, **Recycling** new ideas and words, **Reducing** worry about mistakes and **Refusing** to believe in your self. Mark your total words & mistakes on the graph below.

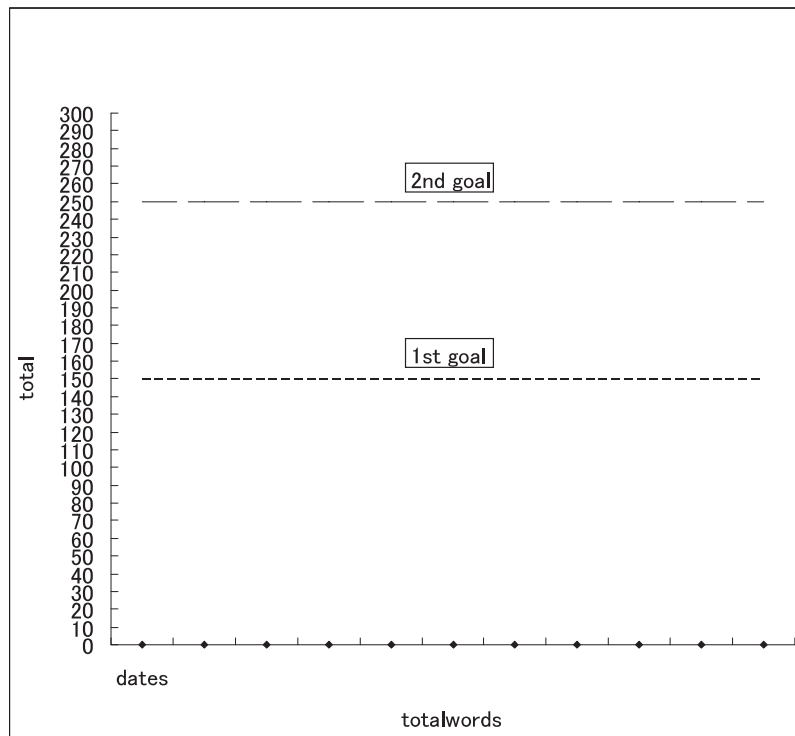


Fig.1

Introducing timed free writing to students as a possible flow experience

A pilot study was done to investigate the effectiveness of free writing to increase English writing fluency and the possibility of using graphs of the psychological states related to “flow” as a way of raising awareness of how psychological states reflect students’ engagement with class activities. First year students in the pilot study were from the following faculties at Nagasaki University: Economics, Education, Fisheries, Technology and Environmental Science. Data was collected from 129 first year students in the second semester of 2009. Previously, data collected from students who answered a questionnaire in Japanese about their motivation to do English class activities indicated that motivation to do writing in English at university is lower than that for speaking, listening, and reading in English. It was hoped that regular free writing practice would increase both students’ level of performance and motivation in relation to writing in English and in Japanese.

Introducing Free Writing

Free Writing is introduced to students as a timed exercise which is part of a weekly basic homework regime. Students set their cell phone timers and write for 10 minutes without stopping and continuing, without erasing, even if they make mistakes. Students are encouraged to use colored pens and to change colors if they get stuck. It also helps to remind students to go back to grammar basics. For example, they are advised to continue writing with a focus on grammatically simple sentences, changing only the pronouns such as, “I’m hot. She’s hot. They’re hot.” Or, “This is a pen. This is a chair.” In addition, when students feel at a loss about what to write, they can be encouraged to continue with positive self talk such as, “I don’t know what to write now. What can I write now? Who can I write about? What can I write about?” This kind of practice keeps the students focused on the possibilities and potential to write about something that they know about. After writing, the total including words/Japanese

moji and mistakes is noted next to the writing and then transferred to a Free Writing Graph, with “date” on the x-axis and “number of words/mistakes” on the y-axis. It’s important to make sure students understand that every effort is counted. Making mistakes is considered valuable and worth something. We all know the adage, “we learn from our mistakes”. Free writing is the appropriate place to make mistakes and notice mistakes. Therefore, students are not asked to count each others’ totals or read each other’s free reading. Free writing aims to be a safe place in which writers are developing communication with self; as their fluency develops, free writers need privacy and self love to tame their inner critic (Brandt, 1934; Cameron, 1998). Writers should feel free to express themselves without inhibitions, or worry of being “found out”. Any criticism or slight correction from not only the inner critic, but an insensitive classmate could have a negative effect on what we are trying to nurture: a focus on what can be written by us instead of what the “critics” think should be written. Instead of reading each other’s free writing, talking about free writing and what they wrote about is encouraged. A quick glance at a classmate’s writing is recommended to ensure that students 1) feel a sense of responsibility to write as much as they can, 2) feel that their writing efforts are validated or encouraged and 3) in order to gauge the increasing length or consistency of student writing. Not only is it interesting to look at each others’ writing styles but students will feel their writing efforts are not going unnoticed with a quick peer check. The following goals are set for English free writing: 150 words (including mistakes) in 10 minutes by midterm and 250 words in 10 minutes by the final class check. In Japanese free writing, the midterm goal is 400 moji and the final class check goal is 600 moji.

Weekly free writing topics are given in English and Japanese. However, students were reminded and encouraged to write about anything they choose and anything that they can write about. Mental lists are encouraged before beginning. The result is that students gradually become familiar with the activity, but also

feel a pressure to perform within the 10 minutes, and they are able to see their growing totals at a glance on the graphs. While a variety of timed activities are done weekly for homework, students report that free writing in English has had the most impact on them. It is reported to be both the most challenging activity to become familiar with and the activity with the most satisfying results. Many students struggle with free writing initially. Some advice on how to support students in the beginning is based on the 4R rules of being environmentally friendly:

1. Recycle – Recycle all the English that you remember, and that you know and that you see around you.
2. Re-use- Reuse new English words and expressions that you want to remember or that you remember from TV, high school etc.
3. Reduce – Reduce fear of making mistakes. Focus on using what you know and what your message is.
4. Refuse – Refuse negative thinking and self destructive behaviour. Remember the purpose is to develop communication with yourself, so be your own best friend!

Getting to “flow” by way of anxiety and arousal

Anxiety and Arousal are the states in which the challenge is greater than the skills. When low skills are met with easy challenges, the psychological states of relaxation and boredom increase. Introducing a certain level of stress can shift the psychological state to arousal, worry and anxiety. Free Writing was made into a 10 minute activity using a timer to enforce a sense of pressure, a need to hurry to write enough on time. After a few weeks, the students can see some improvement; students also notice that improvement is often not a straight line, rather a line that is up and down. One student commented, “At first I cannot understand my free writing. But now I can so fast write my free writing. 10 minutes is just time for me.” Despite the ups and downs, data shows that there is clearly an increase in free writing totals. Feedback shows that for one third of the students, free writing become an “autotelic” activity. That is, the outside goal to

write as much as possible in 10 minutes is transformed into an activity that is done for its own sake.

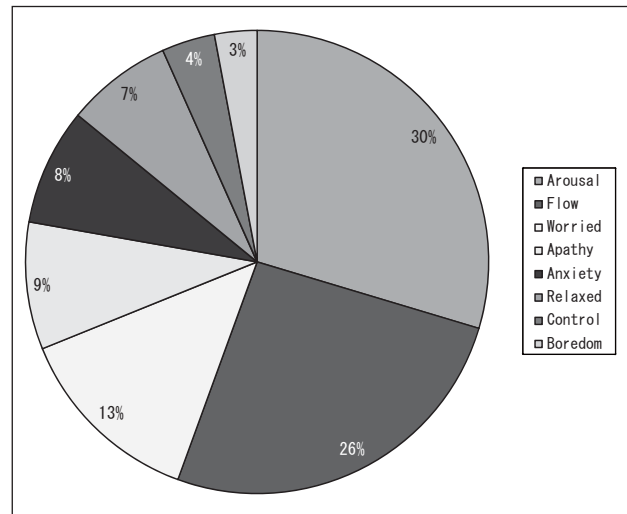


Fig. 2 : Percentage of Psychological States in English Free Writing

Japanese free writing however, did not induce the same psychological states that were reported regarding English free writing. Anxiety, arousal and flow were not reported nor did Japanese free writing seem to promote the increased written totals that characterized English free writing. Without adequate output, fluency cannot be expected and Japanese free writing output was lower than English free writing output. This puzzling data confirms what we already knew: students have a rather negative image of writing in Japanese. Therefore, instructors need to take extra precautions to introduce Japanese free writing in ways that do not reinforce this negative Japanese writing experience. Initially increasing output must be the number one goal, including all mistakes and improper Japanese in the totals is essential for supporting students’ Japanese writing development. A focus on descriptive writing rather prescriptive writing in Japanese is in order. Promoting free writing for self expression and as a tool for reviewing, planning and goal setting should be encouraged. Most importantly, students need to be made aware of their responsibility for learning. In other words, students must be encouraged to identify their own inconsistencies, contradictions and mistakes, their

own dissatisfaction with their writing, if they are to become more thoughtful and reflective. Helping students find their Japanese writing voices needs to become a priority in 1st and 2nd year university education because it is the foundation on which students' writing voices are allowed to develop and on which self actualization is built (Hunter 2008, p. 60 and p. 94)

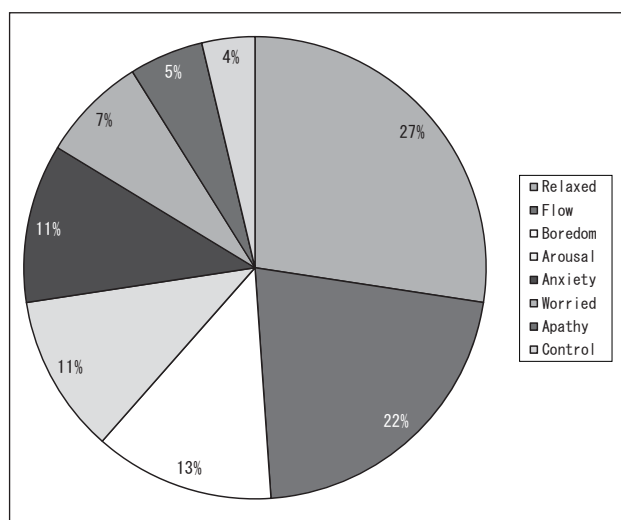


Fig. 3 : Percentage of Psychological States in Japanese Free Writing

Flow: evaluating the effectiveness of activities in and out of class

Students can read the flow graph of psychological states and see how the balance between challenges and skills is related to the psychological states of relaxation, boredom, apathy, worry, anxiety, arousal, flow, and control. This graph will help students to assess activities, inside and outside of class, in order to understand what the balance between their skills and the challenge is. This will enable them to make informed decisions about how to make improvements. For example, if a student reports feeling bored with an activity, they would be asked to look at the graph and find what the balance between their skills and the challenge are and then write feedback about the balance in relation to the activity, giving details about ways they could make improvements. Since it guides students in making judgments about their learning activities, the graph may help students to be autonomous learners.

The graph of psychological states also facilitates discussion of learning. In order to talk about the effectiveness of activities from an educational stand point with their peers or with their instructors, learners need to know the appropriate language. While self-assessment and peer assessment may not be accurate or entirely dependable for teachers' to use as grading criteria, they are essential in debriefing and bringing closure to activities. The assessments students make about their work and their peers' work is the most important thing that students will take away from the learning experience. Students will often do their self assessments and peer assessments for activities much more astutely than the activity itself. Therefore, assessments need to be easy enough for students to do, interesting enough that students will do them earnestly and meaningful so that students will find evaluations and reflection on their class language learning experiences beneficial.

For teachers the graph of psychological states is a way of gauging the challenge of the activity in relation to the students' skill. For example, in the lower skilled classes, more scaffolding and support to motivate students to do free writing is necessary. Teachers would find the 10 minute free writing activity an additional way of measuring the class's fluency and individual students' fluency. The graph of psychological states would offer additional insight into individual students' perceived balance between the challenge and their skills. The resulting learner profiles in each class were useful to consider when choosing other activities for each class. Also, the learner profiles made grouping or pairing students according to challenge-skill balances an option. This was particularly successful for speaking activities, because students with similar challenge-skill balances could be paired off and then the higher and lower challenge-skill balances could be paired together. Students were told ahead of time that they might be paired with the opposite sex or with a partner that they have never worked with before. The system was fast and students responded positively to the seemingly random pairing.

Results

Qualitative results revealed that while students were familiar with other psychological states such as boredom, anxiety and control, they were not familiar with flow as a term. However, when students were asked to report on their experience of flow in their daily life, they could identify and describe those flow experiences and they were similar to those reported in Czikszenmihalyi's study. Finally, students were asked to report on their psychological states in relation to English class activities. Results showed that the predominant psychological state described by students who did free writing in English was arousal (30%), and the second most reported psychological state was 26% who reported a flow state. Worry was reported by 13% of the students.

Qualitative data collected from students in the form of comments in English or Japanese were read and interpreted by two Japanese speaking adults. There were two sets of data collected from the same students. One set of data focussed on the psychological states of free writing. The other set of qualitative data focussed on final results and comments about free writing collected from students as self- and class activity assessment. Comments were sorted in order of clarity and the content of the answers was interpreted and translated into English. Results show that in every faculty, there were a greater number of vague answers in Japanese than in English. There were a greater number of clear and very clear answers written in English by students in all faculties in the study. This is another strong indication that students need to practice self expressive writing in Japanese.

Students' comments: Pushing OUTPUT

Most students can relate to the feeling of having a head full of English but when the need to speak arises, their mind goes blank. A student describes it in this way, "Free writing is difficult. I can't write what I think. However, I can find out my English ability." (100 Total; Japanese 12 times, increased and helpful.) Each student has their own individual repertoire of

English, but many are not sure exactly what they can do with it. Whether their repertoire is relatively small or large, fluency can be drastically improved when students begin to reuse and recycle what they know every time they do free writing. Another student wrote, "It is very interesting. I know about myself, my family, and my friends." (158 Total; Japanese Free Writing 20 times, same and helpful.) Increasing their English writing capacity and flexibility as much they can within a time limit, is creating the kind of aroused state that one would experience when faced with various real life speaking communication situations. One student writes on the Final Class Data comment, "I can't believe 283!! Surprise!! I'm happy. I try it well."

Motivation to write

Students who reported about their "flow" experiences in this study also reported about their motivation to Speak in English, Listen in English, Read in English and Write in English. Their responses reflect that students are highly motivated to speak in English but lacked motivation to write in English. Regarding the free writing activity, however, students report that they feel a high degree of "flow" when doing free writing in English. As mentioned before, during the 15 week semester, an autotelic experience begins to emerge for many students who do free writing in English. One student describes the autotelic experience in free writing in this way, "Though it was difficult, I enjoyed it." (205 Total on final class check) And "My free writing skill increased. I want to try it successively. It is good method." (324 Total on final class check) The autotelic experience is related to students' intrinsic motivation to continue with the activity, despite it being rather challenging or difficult. In other words, students want to try to increase their output for their own satisfaction, not only because it is a set goal in class. A different student comments, "It is difficult to write the word I think. I want to practice more." (At this stage, usually students are already paying more attention to accuracy while maintaining their maximum output. Another student enthuses, "Final test goal don't go. But I wrote

many things. I glad to write a bout many things. Free writing is very very funny.”

Final Comments

This pilot study reveals at least four reasons for incorporating free writing in English and/or free writing in Japanese into 1st and 2nd year university classes. First, the language of psychological states, including but not limited to flow, will give students a language to communicate with about learning to other students and to the instructor and to other learners outside the classroom. Furthermore, the FLOW graph increases student awareness of the psychological states of relaxation, boredom, apathy, worry, anxiety, arousal, Flow, and control. This graph will help students to assess activities, inside and outside of class, in order to understand what the balance between their skills and the challenge is. This will enable them to make informed decisions about how to make improvements in the activity at hand as well as the activities in other classes including club activities and future endeavors. It becomes a lifelong learning tool. Secondly, increasing awareness through assessment based on the psychological states in daily activities and learning experiences inside and outside of English classes might help students manage their learning, with the benefit of increasing autonomy. Thirdly, increasing written output promotes fluency and has been seen to impact positively on discussion skills, ability to ask questions and increased potential to remember information that was reviewed through free writing. The final reason

for incorporating free writing into 1st and 2nd year university classes is that flow experiences are the most challenging and the most satisfying. Flow activities have greater potential to be intrinsically motivating. English communication class students reported a flow experience when doing English free writing. Liberating Japanese students so that they experience flow experiences in Japanese free writing holds great potential for increased self expression. In English and in Japanese, the writing voice is most important in all writing. Most importantly, flow is the fountain of fluency, the source of the writing voice.

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