

Influences of Topic Selection Methods on L2 Learners' Writing Fluency: Replication Study

Wakako TAKINAMI

(Education Center, Tottori University)

1. Introduction

This is a partial replication study investigating how topic selection methods influence second language (L2) learners' fluency in writing. In the following section, summaries of the original study and other replication studies are provided, which give justification for conducting the present study and lead to research questions. The third section concerns research design, participants, and a data analysis method of this study, which are described and explained in comparison to the original study. Results and discussion follow in the fourth section, in which the findings of the original study are confirmed and possible explanations for the results are given. The last section provides an overview of the findings of this study and suggestions for future studies, referring to limitations of the present study.

2. Literature Review and Research Questions

2.1. Summary of the Original Research

The present study partially replicates Bonzo's (2008) study. In his study, Bonzo analyzed written texts produced by foreign language learners during timed writing activities in class and examined how topic selection methods (teacher-selected topics and student-selected topics) would influence students' fluency and grammatical complexity in their writing. The study reported that the topic selection control had a significant influence on writing fluency, but not on grammatical complexity. Students wrote more fluently when writing about self-selected topics. Although no significant influence on grammatical complexity was shown, there was positive correlation between writing fluency and grammatical complexity in students' writing.

In this study, the main focus is on writing fluency. The study examines the impact of topic

selection methods on students' fluency in their writing (i.e. the first research question of the original research). That is because, as indicated in Bonzo's study, topic control has no significant impact on grammatical complexity in students' written products. It is also reported that grammatical complexity increases as students gain writing fluency. Therefore, writing fluency appears to deserve priority in the present study because acquiring it helps to improve the grammatical complexity of students' writing.

2.2 Summary of Previous Research and Significance of the Present Research

Similar replication studies were previously conducted at Japanese universities (e.g. Grogan and Lucas, 2013; LaClare, 2013; Dickinson, 2014; Sponseller and Wilkins, 2015). All the researchers stated that the results of Bonzo's study were applicable to their teaching contexts and their students had written more fluently when given a chance to choose their own topics. Moreover, additional research questions were examined in those studies, including students' perceptions of different topic selection methods and their performance in writing in English (Grogan and Lucas, 2013); the impact of writing activities on students' confidence in their writing ability and their attitude toward second language writing (Dickinson, 2014); students' preferences in topic selection methods (Sponseller and Wilkins, 2015).

Each study respectively adds depth and insights to the original study. For example, Grogan and Lucas, Sponseller and Wilkins, both provide explanations of why students' fluency scores were higher when they had written about self-selected topics. Firstly, students chose a topic that they were familiar with (e.g. themselves) to make the writing task easier to complete. Secondly, they chose a topic about which they were able to write with vocabulary and grammatical knowledge at their disposal. However, it is also reported that some students struggled to choose a topic, and even those who had managed to decide on a topic found it difficult to express in English what they really wanted to say due to insufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge.

As reviewed, previous studies seem to focus more on student-selected topics. However, teacher-selected topics might deserve as much attention since students are required to write about assigned topics on various occasions, for instance, tests such as TOEFL or IELTS, or essays for courses they take at university. Therefore, the present study was conducted not only to confirm that the results of Bonzo's study are applicable to the researcher's teaching context but also to examine how teachers could help their students to write about assigned topics fluently.

2.3. Research Questions

The following are the research questions investigated in this study.

- (1) Does topic selection control (teacher-selected topics versus student-selected topics)

- influence students' fluency in writing? (Bonzo, 2008)
- (2) Does familiarity with topics help students to write about teacher-selected topics fluently?

3. Methodology and Procedure

3.1. Research Design

This study partially replicates Bonzo's study. Therefore, as advised in Porte and Richards' article (2012), it tried to follow as closely as possible the way the original study had been organized and carried out.

To answer the first research question, written texts were collected from in-class freewriting activities. The freewriting session was the very first activity of the lesson. For the freewriting on a teacher-selected topic, the topic was related to the theme of the previous week's class, and it was given to students at the beginning of the freewriting activity. Students freewrote for 10 minutes. No extra time was given for planning. For the freewriting on a student-selected topic, the teacher did not give students any instructions for topic selection. She told them that they could write about any topic. No additional time was allowed for students to choose a topic. They needed to select a topic and freewrite within the 10 minutes. The freewriting was the final activity for each unit, and the rest of the lesson was taken up with a new unit of work. The following instructions were provided to students on a freewriting worksheet and the teacher read aloud the instructions as a reminder every time they freewrote.

- (1) Write in English for 10 minutes.
- (2) Don't stop writing.
- (3) Don't worry if you cannot think of English words. Keep writing.
- (4) Write as much as possible.
- (5) Don't worry about grammar and spelling.
- (6) Try to write without a dictionary. You only have 10 minutes.
- (7) Don't worry about the order of ideas.
- (8) This writing will not be used for assessment purposes.

This study is different from the original study in the following two ways. Firstly, although there were no activities immediately before each freewriting session, a couple of activities did occur prior to the freewriting session. The original study only states 'no prewriting activities occurred before any writing session' (Bonzo, 2008: 726), and hence it is difficult to tell whether there was any in-class activities or homework that was relevant to the freewriting. In the present study, on the other hand, an assigned-topic was chosen by the teacher in relation to in-class activities. Students were given homework which prepared them for a speaking activity in class in the following week, and they spoke with three different classmates and exchanged their ideas and opinions, using part of the class time. One week

later, at the very beginning of the lesson, students produced a freewriting text on the topic which they had talked about previously. This was to answer the second research question. Secondly, Bonzo provided participants with written feedback on the content of their compositions, but no feedback was given to students in this study. That is because feedback might have affected students' performance in writing. (See Kurihara (2014) for an example of feedback influencing students' writing positively.)

Three different questionnaires were used in the present study. One questionnaire was given to students at the end of the semester to obtain general information about them (Appendix 1). The others were post-freewriting questionnaires to answer the second research question (Appendix 2). Although questionnaires cannot provide as in-depth and thorough information as interviews can (McDonough and McDough, 1997; Polio, 2003), the researcher used such a data collection method in her research due to its relatively large sample size. One of the questionnaires was used for the freewriting on teacher-selected topics, and the other was used for the freewriting on student-selected topics. The former asked about students' familiarity with and interest in an assigned topic and their thoughts on how easy it had been to write about the topic. The latter asked not only about students' familiarity with a topic of their choice but also how quickly they had come up with the topic and why they had chosen to write about it. Both were distributed immediately after each freewriting session, before students forgot about their thoughts and decisions.

Two pilot studies were carried out so that the teacher was able to make sure students understood the procedure of freewriting and students were able to practice writing about an assigned topic and a self-selected topic. Taking into consideration both the results of the pilot studies and topics from the course book, teacher-selected topics were decided. The first assigned topic was "Hometown," the second was "Interesting Class," and the third was "Future Career."

The original study divided participants into two groups according to the order of topic control appearing. One group wrote about a teacher-selected topic four times and then about a self-selected topic four more times, while the other started with self-selected topics, in order to investigate whether the order of treatment would have any impact on students' performance. As a result, no particular influence was seen on writing fluency. That is why the present study did not divide students into two groups, and freewriting on a teacher-selected topic and a student-selected topic appeared one after the other according to the progress of the course (see Table 1).

Table 1: Design of the Original Study and the Present Study

Teacher	Bonzo's study				This study
	A	C	B	C	the researcher
Topic Selection Methods					(Pilot) T
					(Pilot) S
	T		S		T
	T		S		S
	T		S		T
	T		S		S
	S		T		T
	S		T		S
	S		T		
	S		T		

(T: teacher-selected topic / S: student-selected topic)

3.2. Participants

Participants of the present study are students who take a first-semester compulsory English communication course. As can be seen in Table 2, the major differences between Bonzo's study and this study are the sample size and target languages. (Still, students in both studies learn the target language as a foreign language.)

Table 2: Participants of the Original Study and the Present Study

	Bonzo's study	This study
Sample size	81 (Male 48, Female 33)	56 (Male 50, Female 6)
Participants' age	18 years old or above	18 years old or above
Setting	University in the U.S.	University in Japan
First language	English	Japanese
Target language	German	English
Proficiency level	Intermediate	Lower intermediate or intermediate
Number of teachers	3	1 (the researcher)

Among the 56 students, three have stayed overseas to learn English for a short period of time (e.g. for two weeks). Regarding the participants' writing experience, 32 out of 56 students (57%) have previously written about assigned topics in English, while 14 out of 55 (25%)

have written about self-selected topics in English before. In addition, 35 out of 55 students (64%) enjoy writing in Japanese to a certain degree, and 30 out of 56 (54%) enjoy writing in English to some extent.

3.3. Data Analysis Method

It seems it is not straightforward to define fluency, and researchers have assessed it in different ways (Abdel, 2012). For example, they looked at the total number of words in the text (Sasaki, 2000; Storch, 2009; Johnson et al., 2012), the number of words written per minute (Sasaki, 2000; Hwang, 2010), the number and length of *t*-units (Storch, 2009), and the average sentence length (Johnson et al., 2012). However, many researchers used the total number of words in the text together with one or two more measures to assess writing fluency. Bonzo similarly used the total number of words written by participants and the total number of different words seen in the text, and so does the present study.

For each freewriting text collected in this study, students' fluency index was calculated, using Bonzo's formula: dividing the number of different words in the written text (*D*) by the square root of twice the total number of words in the text (*T*) (see Formula 1).

$$(1) F = \frac{D}{\sqrt{2 \times T}}$$

He used the formula because it allowed him to assess writing fluency more accurately than a simple percentage ratio of the total number of different words to the total number of words. (For example, the percentage ratios are the same between a 50-word text with 25 different words and a 20-word text with 10 different words. On the other hand, with Bonzo's formula, the former text receives a higher fluency score of 2.5 while the latter text receives 1.6.) The fluency index was then statistically analyzed using ANOVA within each group in the original study to examine the influence of topic selection methods on writing fluency. However, this study adopted a paired-samples *t*-test to analyze the fluency index because it compared two variables: the mean fluency index scores of written texts on teacher-selected topics and student-selected topics produced by a group of students.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Does topic selection control (teacher-selected topics versus student-selected topics) influence students' fluency in writing?

Using the fluency index scores of each freewriting text, mean fluency index scores of teacher-selected topic texts and student-selected topic texts were calculated for each of the 56 students. Those scores provided the group's mean fluency scores for teacher-selected topics ($M=3.65$, $SD=0.41$) and student-selected topics ($M=3.78$, $SD=0.45$). A paired-

samples t-test was then performed to analyze the mean fluency index scores. The results showed the score for student-selected topics was significantly higher than that for teacher-selected topics ($t(54)=-3.15, p<.05$). This indicates topic selection control significantly influenced students' fluency in writing and students wrote more fluently about topics of their choice, which corresponds to the results of the original study.

4.2. Discussion

Results of the end-of-semester questionnaires showed possible reasons for such an influence of topic selection control on students' writing fluency. Thirty-five out of 55 students (64%) stated self-selected topics had been easier to write about than teacher-selected topics. The main reason seems to be that they were able to choose a topic which made the writing task possible for them to deal with within the scope of their abilities. Among those 35 students, 15 students chose a topic which they knew well and had a lot to write about, for instance, something they remembered well (e.g. what had happened to them the weekend before), something they were interested in (e.g. taking photos of stars), something they wanted to tell the reader about (e.g. an upcoming dance live performance on campus). One student even chose a topic and prepared to write about it beforehand in case he was allowed to choose his own topic. Furthermore, three other students chose a topic which they could handle with the vocabulary they had. It seems students used these strategies to write fluently in a given situation, and this also agrees with the results of the earlier replication studies (Groban and Lucas, 2013; Sponseller and Wilkins, 2015).

However, students seem to have had similar difficulties to those reported in the previous replication studies. Fourteen out of 55 students struggled to choose a topic. Furthermore, five other students struggled to express themselves in English, of whom two found it easy to think of ideas and thoughts on a self-selected topic in Japanese but difficult to write about them in English. It is these findings that led to the assumption that students might be able to write fluently about an assigned topic if they are familiar with the topic and have the vocabulary necessary to write about it.

4.3. Does familiarity with topics help students to write about teacher-selected topics fluently?

Post-freewriting questionnaires were conducted to see how familiar students were with each assigned topic. All the 56 students answered the questionnaires, and Table 3 shows the number of responses to each item.

Table 3: Students' Familiarity with Each Assigned Topic

	I am very familiar with the topic.	I am familiar with the topic.	I am not very familiar with the topic.	I am not familiar with the topic at all.
T1	28	23	5	0
T2	18	31	6	1
T3	14	22	19	1

(T1: first teacher-selected topic)

Scores ranging from one to four were given to each response depending on the familiarity level. A score of four was given to a response to the item, "I am very familiar with the topic," three to "I am familiar with the topic," two to "I am not very familiar with the topic," and one to "I am not familiar with the topic at all." Those scores were then added up as seen in Table 4. A higher total score indicates students' greater familiarity with a particular assigned topic. Judging from the total familiarity scores for teacher-selected topics, students were most familiar with the first assigned topic and familiarity levels decreased as they wrote about the second and third topics.

Table 4: Total Familiarity Scores for Assigned Topics

	T1	T2	T3
Total Familiarity Score	191	178	161

Using fluency index scores of each freewriting text for teacher-selected topics, mean fluency scores were calculated for each of the assigned topics. As seen in Table 5, the mean fluency scores decreased as students wrote about the first, second, and third teacher-selected topics.

Table 5: Mean Fluency Scores for Assigned Topics

	T1	T2	T3
Mean Fluency Score	3.752	3.673	3.528

The results seen in Tables 4 and 5 above showed that students' familiarity with assigned topics was positively relevant to their writing fluency ($r=.995801$). This indicates that the more familiar students were with an assigned topic, the more fluently they wrote about the topic.

4.4. Discussion

The teacher used the same homework and in-class activities to help students develop familiarity with assigned topics. However, as shown in Table 4, the total familiarity scores for the teacher-selected topics ($M=176.67$, $SD=15.04$) were different from each other. When compared with the total familiarity scores for student-selected topics ($M=194.67$, $SD=4.73$) (see Table 6), which were obtained from 56 responses to post-freewriting questionnaires, it seems that the total familiarity scores for the assigned topics varied greatly depending on the topics.

Table 6: Total Familiarity Scores for Student-selected Topics

	S1	S2	S3
Total Familiarity Score	193	200	191

(S1: first student-selected topic)

Results of the post freewriting questionnaires show possible accounts for these differences in the scores among the teacher-selected topics. Tables 7 and 8 respectively show how interested students were in assigned topics and how easy the topics were for students to write about. It appears that students' interest in the topics dropped and more students found the topics difficult to write about as they wrote about the first, second, and third assigned topics.

Table 7: Students' Interest in Each Assigned Topic

	I found the topic very interesting. (No. students)	I found the topic interesting.	I did not find the topic very interesting.	I did not find the topic interesting at all.
T1	13	32	10	0
T2	10	31	14	0
T3	13	22	19	2

(One student did not indicate how interested he was in the given topic in the teacher-selected topics 1 and 2 questionnaires respectively.)

Table 8: How Easy Each Assigned Topic was to Students

	The topic was very easy to write about. (No. students)	The topic was easy to write about.	The topic was difficult to write about.	The topic was very difficult to write about.
T1	14	27	13	1
T2	7	24	25	0
T3	6	15	23	12

(One student did not indicate how easy he found the assigned topic to write about in the teacher-selected topic 1 questionnaire.)

A closer look at students' written responses to the questionnaires suggests there might be mainly two reasons for the lower interest and the greater difficulty. Firstly, the lower interest might have come from students' perception: whether they could share in their written texts many ideas or examples that they thought were important or interesting enough; or how relevant they thought a topic was to them. For example, for the first teacher-selected topic (i.e. Hometown), eight students stated their hometown was a small town with no particular well-known products or famous sightseeing destinations. Through homework and in-class activities, they were required to look for information and talk about different things about their hometown such as its population, history, well-known products, sightseeing destinations, and their opinions of their hometown. However, it seems those ideas or examples were not worth sharing in the freewriting to the students. In addition, for the third teacher-selected topic (i.e. Future Career), 19 students stated they had not thought deeply about their future career before or they still did not know exactly what they would like to do in the future. Of those, two students responded that they would not have been able to write about it even in their mother tongue. The same as the first assigned topic, through homework and in-class activities, they were required to look for information and talk about a job they wished to do in the future. However, the topic might not have been very relevant to the first-year university students.

Secondly, the greater difficulty seems to have come from students' inadequate proficiency in English. For example, for the second teacher-selected topic (i.e. Interesting Class), four students struggled to write about what they were learning about and why they were interested in the subject. Four others referred to insufficient vocabulary to describe some particular fields or specific materials used in the classes or to write about something abstract. For the third teacher-selected topic, five students had clear ideas about their future career, but were not able to write about them because they did not know which words or phrases they should use. It was assumed that, through homework and in-class activities, students should gain the

adequate vocabulary to write about assigned topics. However, it seems students needed more vocabulary when freewriting than when doing homework and classwork, because they tried to write in more detail about the topics in freewriting, and ideas and examples expanded in the freewriting texts were different depending on the individuals.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Overview of Findings

The present study was a partial replication of Bonzo's study, and the principal focus was on writing fluency. The study tried to confirm that the results of the original study could be applied to the researcher's teaching context. It also aimed to investigate whether students' fluency in writing on assigned topics would increase as their familiarity with the topics developed. Through analyzing their freewriting texts and responses to three questionnaires, the following findings were reported and discussed.

Firstly, students wrote more fluently when they were allowed to choose their own topics. That seems to be because they chose topics which they could write about with the content knowledge and vocabulary they had. These confirmed that the results of the original study were applicable to the researcher's teaching context.

Secondly, students' writing fluency increased as their familiarity with assigned topics developed. However, even with the same homework and in-class activities, it seems that students' familiarity developed differently. They were more familiar with one assigned topic than another. That might have been due to students' low interest in a topic and the great difficulty in producing a written text. The low interest presumably resulted from students' perception of the topics themselves or the number of ideas and examples they could offer in their writing. The great difficulty in producing written texts seems to have resulted from students' inadequate proficiency in English, in particular, their limited vocabulary.

5.2. Limitation of the Present Study and Suggestion for Further Study

The findings of the present study have generated further areas of inquiry: for example, whether homework and in-class activities help increase students' writing fluency; what ideas and examples could be covered in homework and prior in-class activities to help students expand their written texts; whether it is possible for teachers to make vocabulary-related activities for individual students that have a positive effect on their writing fluency. Further studies should try to investigate these areas of inquiry.

In order to assess writing fluency, those further studies should look at not only the total number of words in students' written products (i.e. text quantity) but also the number of words written per minute (i.e. speed), as Sasaki and Hwang did in their research. Writing

involves various factors such as planning and revising, and it is said writers spend more time thinking than writing. Therefore, we need to have a closer look at the actual writing, for which students' behaviors need to be videotaped while they are producing written texts, as Sasaki did in her research.

Moreover, in order to examine whether a teacher's attempt to help increase students' writing fluency is successful, future studies need to have a control group of students, with similar proficiency in English, who take the same course but do not do the preparatory activities. If it is not feasible to have another group, it should be satisfactory to provide a teacher-selected topic that students have never studied in class.

In addition to the areas of inquiry above, other factors that influence students' writing performance also need to be investigated, for instance, different task types, instructions, planning, and feedback, in order to see how they influence students' fluency in writing. Furthermore, future studies are also encouraged to look at accuracy and complexity because they are two other major aspects of writing and it is believed that actual fluency should involve those aspects as well.

Note

When counting the number of words in the texts written by students, Japanese words written using Roman alphabets were excluded if the researcher believed someone who was unfamiliar with Japanese could not understand the words. (For example, the word, "takoyaki," would be excluded if it is used as follows: "Takoyaki is one of my favorite foods." On the other hand, it would be counted as one word if it is used as follows: "Takoyaki octopus balls are one of my favorite foods.") Numbers (e.g. 5, 3rd) were also counted as one word. In addition, misspelt words in general were counted as one word if the researcher believed it would be reasonably easy to guess what the correct words were (e.g. poplation, couldn't). Misspelt words in proper nouns were also counted as one word as long as it was clear to the researcher what the words referred to (e.g. I love British bands. The Beetles is the best to me.). Lastly, almost all the students wrote a title at the beginning of their written texts when they were allowed to choose their own topic. Their titles were included in the counting of words.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: End-of-semester Questionnaire

1. コミュニケーション英語 A 受講以前に、教員が選んだトピックについて、英語で作文したことはありますか。(ある ・ ない)

2. コミュニケーション英語 A 受講以前に、自分が選んだトピックについて、英語で作文したことはありますか。(ある ・ ない)

3. 質問2で「ある」と答えた人は、いつ、どこで、どれくらい（大まかな頻度または回数）、自分が選んだトピックについて英語で作文したか、できるだけ具体的に教えてください。

4. 教員が選んだトピックと、自分が選んだトピックでは、どちらが英語で作文しやすかったですか。

（ 教員が選んだトピック ・ 自分が選んだトピック ）

5. それはなぜですか。できるだけ具体的に教えてください。

6. 日本語で書くのは楽しいですか（作文、日記、ブログ、小説など）。

（とても楽しい・楽しい・少し楽しい・あまり楽しくない・楽しくない・全然楽しくない）

7. 英語で書くのは楽しいですか。

（とても楽しい・楽しい・少し楽しい・あまり楽しくない・楽しくない・全然楽しくない）

8. 海外に住んだ、または、留学をした経験はありますか。（ ある ・ ない ）

9. 質問8で「ある」と答えた人は、いつ、どこに、どれくらい（大まかな期間）住んだ、または、留学をしたのか、できるだけ具体的に教えてください。

Appendix 2 (1): Post Freewriting Questionnaire for Teacher-selected Topics

最もあてはまるものに×印をつけてください

1.

私はこの Freewriting のテーマについてよく知っていた

私はこの Freewriting のテーマについて知っていた

私はこの Freewriting のテーマについてあまり知らなかった

私はこの Freewriting のテーマについて全然知らなかった

2.

とても興味をそそられるテーマだと思った

興味をそそられるテーマだと思った

あまり興味をそそられないテーマだと思った

全然興味をそそられないテーマだと思った

3.

とても書きやすいテーマだった

書きやすいテーマだった

書きにくいテーマだった

とても書きにくいテーマだった

【理由】

Appendix 2 (2): Post Freewriting Questionnaire for Student-selected Topics

最もあてはまるものに×印をつけてください

1.

私はこの Freewriting のテーマをすぐに思いついた

私は少し考えて、この Freewriting のテーマを思いついた

私はしばらく考えて、この Freewriting のテーマを思いついた

私はなかなか Freewriting のテーマを思いつかなかった

2.

私はこのテーマについてよく知っていた

私はこのテーマについて知っていた

私はこのテーマについてあまり知らなかった

私はこのテーマについて全然知らなかった

3.

このテーマを選んだのはなぜですか？