

Increasing EFL student writing speeds through the usage of Milton model language patterns

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Abstract

In order to develop greater writing fluency, a 13-week timed-writing activity was introduced into an EFL program. The participants included 36 freshman university students who were randomly divided into an experimental group and a control group. A baseline pre-test was given to determine initial writing speeds for both groups before the experiment was conducted. This pilot study examined the impact of language pattern suggestions taken from the Milton Model (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Bandler & Grinder, 1975, 1976; Grinder et al., 1977) to increase the writing speeds of the experimental group. Results showed that the experimental group improved by 63.37 average words compared to 18.70 average words for the control group over the study period.

Introduction

Writing fluently in a foreign language is not an easy endeavor, especially for Japanese students who have mostly focused on receptive skills while learning English in order to pass university entrance exams (e.g., Antonio & O'Donnell, 2004; Murphey, 2000; Takagi, 2001; Yoshihara, 2008). In addition, most Japanese students have very few chances to practice writing in English prior to entering university (Kobayakawa, 2011). The imbalance in students' accuracy and fluency becomes especially evident when they join their freshman university English classes where there is a greater emphasis on productive skills. Nation (2007) has suggested that language courses are most effective when they include what he calls the four strands: meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output, and

fluency. These strands include accuracy and fluency components and Nation recommends that teachers focus on allotting equal time within the strands in the activities offered to students in order to achieve balance between input and output. Unfortunately, university teachers in Japan are faced with students who have a serious imbalance in their English skills due to an earlier over-focus on meaning-focused input and language-focused learning, and in several cases a nearly complete lack of exposure to meaning-focused output and fluency during their high school years (Asaoka & Usui, 2003). Consequently, one challenge for university teachers is to make use of what students have learned to date while attempting to somehow rectify the imbalance in their English language skills development.

This paper examines the effectiveness of the Milton Model which is a way of communicating with people through using language patterns to offer people more choices to achieve success. These language patterns can be used to suggest more facilitative internal visual, auditory, and kinesthetic representations in others in order to increase motivation and improve results. The language patterns, which include carefully structured sentences, were used as a method for stimulating the writing speeds of university freshman students, in particular, on timed writing over a longitudinal time frame of 13 weeks. For the purpose of the study, an experimental group and a control group were determined prior to the experiment. The following research questions were explored:

RQ1) Did the timed-writing intervention have an impact on the experimental group's ability to increase their writing speed?

RQ2) What were the differences, if any, in the number of words written between the experimental and control group?

This article will first review literature on timed writing and then Milton Model language patterns. Next, the methodology and results that include quantitative data on the writing speed differences between the experimental and control groups will be presented. Finally, a discussion and conclusions will be addressed.

Background

Timed writing

According to Goldberg (1986, p.8), the goals of a timed-writing exercise are: 1) keep writing; 2) don't cross out (mistakes); 3) don't worry about spelling, punctuation, and grammar; 4) lose control; 5) don't think, don't get logical; and 6) go for the jugular (write freely). These goals are geared towards

getting the writer's initial thoughts on paper, rather than allowing writers to get trapped in writer's block.

Timed writing (Elbow, 1981; Goldberg, 1986) helps students to develop their fluency strand (Nation, 2007) to a greater degree and is a form of low-stakes writing (Elbow, 2002). Timed writing not only helps Japanese university students to focus on their writing fluency, but also gives them valuable experience in finally producing language rather than simply acquiring it. Chastain (1988) adds that students need to focus on the creative process that allows for uninterrupted thought flow while avoiding the criticism that hinders writing flow and results in hesitation and idea blockage. This writer's block can lead to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity which can be overcome with in-class, non-graded, non-stop timed writing (Mathers, 1988).

Language patterns

There is a lack of empirical research investigating the effect of language patterns on students' ability to develop their writing ability. Thus, this study aims to fill the research gap. Specifically, the language patterns in this study are drawn from the Milton Model (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Bandler & Grinder, 1975, 1976; Grinder et al., 1977) named after the famous hypnotherapist Milton H. Erickson, M.D. The Milton Model is a way of communicating with others in deliberately vague and general ways to facilitate states such as relaxation and as a way to help people to achieve desired results. It is a linguistic model based on Milton Erickson's communication style that includes specific language patterns that have come to be used in various areas including education (e.g., Dilts, 1983) in order to create more facilitative states in ourselves and others. This is made possible through suggesting useful internal visual, auditory, and kinesthetic representations, for example, that allow people to access more empowering states of being and to achieve desired results more easily. Revell & Norman (1997) have shown that the power of these language patterns can impact student's learning states and positively affect their learning outcomes. The language patterns from the Milton Model may be used to create powerful learning states in our students. Murphey & Bolstad (1997), who have explored hypnosis in education, put forth as follows:

All comprehended language suggests certain internal representations in the minds of those present. The principle idea behind educational hypnosis is the desire to consistently suggest internal representations that lead someone to facilitative learning states (p.7).

Method

Participants

The study was conducted within the framework of an English language program at a four-year private Japanese university. The 36 participants were 18-19 year-old students who were attending required first-year writing classes for non-English majors. They attended one 90-minute class every week for two, 15-week semesters. Although they had been streamed to the advanced level within the program, their general level of English proficiency actually ranged from low-intermediate to advanced. The students were equally distributed into two advanced groups based on their scores according to a placement test prior to the course.

Timed-writing activity guidelines

Before initiating the 13-week study, I modified the timed-writing guidelines mentioned earlier in Goldberg (1986) to the following five goals for the students: 1) write as much as possible, 2) use a pen not a pencil (as erasers can greatly limit writing speed), 3) cross out mistakes and write above them, 4) don't use a dictionary, instead write a word in Japanese if necessary but remember to shift back into English immediately (again to encourage students to pause less and write more), and 5) focus on fluency, rather than grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Students were reminded of these goals before each timed writing.

To help students to gain greater confidence and likely increase the amount of words written, I asked them to write about simple topics within their schematic background that mostly centered on areas pertaining to their daily lives such as: weekend plans, hobbies, daily life, and school life. A 10-minute time limit was given as I felt this was neither too short (potentially limiting their chances to develop more fluency), nor too long to allow them to run out of writing steam.

Procedures

The students were divided into two groups: Group 1 (the experimental group, n=16) and Group 2 (the control group, n=20), respectively. (Note: Some students withdrew from the university before the course began resulting in uneven numbers). A baseline (pre-test) was set up in the first lesson by measuring the initial writing speed of all students by simply asking them to write as much as possible within the 10-minute fixed time frame in accordance with the guidelines mentioned above. Each of the groups performed the activity according to the same prescribed weekly topic. Over the 13-week period, the control group was only told to write as many words as possible within the fixed time limit.

The experimental group, on the other hand, was given numerous suggestions in the form of the Milton Model language patterns (see below) prior to writing and thus had two or three minutes of potential pre-imagining time before each essay with Milton Model patterns. These language patterns were delivered in each session with slight modifications for each topic.

Language patterns

The following language patterns were adopted from the Milton Model for the purpose of this study and include: Yes-Sets, Complex Equivalence, Modal Operators, and Embedded Suggestions. A brief explanation of each pattern is provided below to help readers to become more familiar with each pattern. Next, an example transcript is provided which situates these patterns in the ways that they were delivered each week to the experimental group.

Yes-Sets

In a Yes-Set we pace people with a series of statements with which they are likely to agree. These are also known as “truisms.” Truisms are effective for pacing because they create a momentum towards ‘Yes’ which then makes it easier to lead people in a desired direction. A good rule of thumb is to use about four or five of these truisms before then leading students to the desired goal.

Yes-Set example:

“So, we are all here together again in class this Friday. And it’s another beautiful sunny day outside this morning. I can see that you have put your bags in the back of the room and that you...”

Complex Equivalence

Complex Equivalence patterns involve connecting a previous statement to mean something else that follows. In other words, two things are said to be equivalent in the form of “x means y.” This is a particularly effective leading pattern with which to follow-up after pacing through a Yes-Set.

Complex Equivalence (underlined) example:

“...and that means you can relax and begin thinking about all the things you would like to write about during today’s timed writing now.”

Modal Operators

When we use words that describe necessity or possibility such as “can”, “may”, “could”, or “have

to”, for example, we are using Modal Operators. This pattern is a powerful way to suggest internal possibilities for listeners that they may act upon in the future. This pattern can be even more effective when combined with sensory-specific suggestions that include visual, auditory, and kinesthetic representations. Modal Operators (italics) example:

“And before you write as many words as possible you can start to think of all the things that you have done this week. You might remember some of the things that you saw perhaps at school, at home, or somewhere else. You may even remember some of the things that you heard such as what people said, a TV show you watched, or maybe even some music that you listened to. Or you could even just write about the way you have been feeling this week.”

Embedded Suggestions

These are suggestions that occur within a larger sentence structure such as those in the preceding patterns. Embedded suggestions are made more powerful by using analogue marking techniques such as lowering or raising the voice, pausing, or using a specific gesture when delivering key points. Complex Equivalence Embedded suggestion: (underlined) example:

“So, now that you remember the things that you have experienced this week through what you have seen, heard, and felt that means you can focus on writing as much as possible now. Begin!”

Data analysis

The words written during each timed writing by the students in the experimental and control groups were tracked longitudinally across the 13-week study period and then divided into five blocks: the baseline week, weeks 2-4, weeks 5-7, weeks 8-10, and weeks 11-13. The total averages for the baseline and each three-week block were tallied for each group, respectively. Three-week blocks were chosen instead of tracking weekly results in order to take into account fluctuations in student motivation, learning states, and among others, topical differences. This approach to analyzing the data aimed to provide a more accurate snapshot of students’ abilities at several points over time and to level out the differences for each group that might otherwise have emerged based on the potential

fluctuations mentioned above. A weekly average was taken and inserted into the data for times when students were absent. The blocks for each group were then analyzed for their total average of written words per block across the study period. The two groups were also compared in terms of their average gains between each block. Over the course of a semester, it was hypothesized that the experimental group would show greater gains in writing speed. Furthermore, the baseline (pre-test) scores were compared with the final timed writing (post-test).

Results

Once again, the research questions for this study are as follows:

RQ1) Did the timed writing intervention have an impact on the experimental group's ability to increase their writing speed?

RQ2) What were the differences, if any, in the number of words written between the experimental and control group?

Table 1 includes the means and standard deviations for student's timed-writing results. As can be seen, the experimental group were ahead of the control group by 26.68 average words at the baseline pre-test point. However, over the course of the four blocked periods they increased their average words compared to the control group by 42.79, 59.09, 61.26, and 66.05 average words, respectively. In answer to the research questions above, it is seems clear from these results that the experimental group did benefit from the intervention. In fact, they made incremental gains across each of the four blocked periods, whereas the control group remained relatively flat across the same time period.

Group		Baseline	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Experimental	Mean	141.47	177.56	191.33	193.50	196.00
	n = 16 SD	50.53	52.38	63.73	53.47	48.42
Control	Mean	114.79	134.77	132.24	132.42	129.95
	n = 20 SD	35.02	47.77	44.99	42.97	42.17
Differences		+26.68	+42.79	+59.09	+61.26	+66.05

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of student's timed-writing speed measured by words for baseline and blocks 1 ~ 4, and group mean differences

To further understand the differences in results between the two groups, their average gains in words written were tracked between the baseline and block one, and then between each respective block. Table 2 provides these results which again shows that the experimental group consistently made gains across each measured time block. In addition, these gains were greater when compared to the control group for each time period measured.

Group	Baseline to Block 1	Block 1 to Block 2	Block 2 to Block 3	Block 3 to Block 4
Experimental	36.09	13.77	2.17	2.50
n = 16				
Control	13.24	4.21	0.18	-2.47
n = 20				
Differences	+22.85	+9.56	+1.99	+4.97

Table 2. Range of timed-writing speed changes measured by words across the baseline and blocks per group, and group differences

Table 3 provides the results taken from the pre-test and post-test and shows that the experimental group, while ahead on the baseline test by an average of 26.68 words initially, shot up by an average difference of 78.51 average words on the post-test. Clearly, the answer to the research questions above is that the experimental group benefited from the intervention by the numbers reported here within.

Group	Baseline (pre-test)	Final times writing (post-test)
Experimental	141.47	208.56
n = 16		
Control	114.79	130.05
n = 20		
Differences	+26.68	+78.51

Table 3. Difference between baseline (pre-test) and final timed-writing (post-test) writing speed changes measures by words, and group differences

Limitations

There are four main areas that include limitations and possibilities for more research from this study. First, admittedly the sample size is small and this pilot study would benefit from a wider response base in order to provide more conclusive results. Second, part of the positive results of the

experimental group could be attributed simply to the two or three minutes of time given to prepare mentally for what students would write, irregardless of the patterns. Perhaps in a future study some reflective time can be given to the control group to prepare them mentally before writing without the patterns and get a better view of the effect of just the patterns.

Third, it can also be noticed that a great part of the improvements came in the first two blocks, with little change in the last two. It is necessary to more fully determine if the increase in the first two blocks are the effect of the newness of the activity and patterns, and if in the last two blocks the intervention had somehow hit the ceiling with the power of the patterns effect. Fourth, it is likely that some topics are simply more attractive to people at certain times in their lives and this is hard to control for. However, despite these limitations, we can still see a positive pattern effect from the students, not only in their writing, but in their undocumented faces showing enthusiasm in class when they hear a pattern. Obviously more research is needed and this study has opened up further avenues for such research.

Discussion and conclusions

There are two main tentative conclusions from this pilot study: 1) Teachers can have an impact on a students' success through the language they use to structure classroom activities. In other words, the Milton Model language patterns appear to help students get into more settled writing states and focus more specifically on the goal to write more. 2) Students can potentially achieve more when they are guided to first imagine what it is that we want them to do via the stimulus provided by language patterns. Thus, it is not only crucial that we become more aware of the language patterns that we are actually using with our students now, but so that we can also structure our language to facilitate successful learning experiences. In doing so, we can create more empowering messages for our students which, in turn, will support their learning potential. One easy way to do this is by videoing our classes and analysing our teacher talk to students.

I would like to end the article with a bit of patterning for my readers: As readers get closer and closer to the end of this article, I hope they can realize with enjoyment the many possibilities of structuring their own classroom language patterns to better engage students in learning processes. Effective teachers usually start with just one or two patterns to offer to their students each day, and then it starts becoming more and more natural to use them naturally and appropriately all the time.

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Bio:

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Responding to extended writing electronically: Tricks, traps and tips

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Introduction

Technology-enhanced marking not only saves time but also saves paper. This article aims to share a system for responding electronically to extended writing. Although many teachers use correction codes and concise comments, research (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2006) shows that students who are working alone frequently ignore or misuse such pithy comments.

“Correction” policy

The first step is to select a policy for responding to writing. This may be affected by institutional or departmental requirements. One such policy could be based on the perceived cause of the mistake. Mistakes can be categorized as slips, errors and attempts (Edge, 1990). Slips are simply identified for writers to correct themselves. More detailed guidance is provided for errors via the insert comment function while the track change function is used to provide the correct form for attempts. Rather than only focusing on areas for improvement, praise can provide a motivational boost for some writers and when used in the form of a compliment sandwich, helps sugar the pill.

Five useful features in Microsoft Word

This integrated system drawing eclectically on two core features in Microsoft Word 2010, namely: track changes and insert comment and three