



Timed Writings to Improve EFL Writing Skills and Proficiency Test Scores

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Abstract: Developing writing skills in the EFL context requires practice. In most classrooms, this entails in-class activities to develop specific skills and subskills in writing or various formats like opinion or cause-effect paragraphs or essays. And it usually involves homework where learners produce writing to produce the formats and skills they have practiced in class. These have all been shown to be beneficial to learning and should form the basis of EFL writing programs. But one type of in-class activity that is underutilized in EFL classrooms around the world is timed writings where students must complete a passage in a set time limit. The main benefit of timed writings, just as in timed speaking activities, is to improve fluency. Writers who are pushed to write more quickly than they naturally would develop writing fluency. Content produced in timed writings can also be integrated into a course following the communicative approach to teaching and learning a foreign language. It also fits with Task-based Learning and Teaching and Content-based instruction. A concomitant benefit is enhanced performance on the writing sections of international language proficiency tests like TOEFL.

Keywords: Timed Writings; EFL Writing; Writing Skills; Writing Fluency; Standardized Tests; Foreign Language Acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the major skills foreign language learners who wish to enter educational or professional settings must achieve proficiency in. Being able to write clearly and effectively is crucial to success in both business and academia. Typical is the organization advocated by Sokolik (2014) of “pre-writing and planning; writing topics and strategies; and editing and revising.” With a basic course organization such as this learners then, according to their level and the goals and objectives of the course, usually practice certain types of writing. Often practiced are crafting successful topic sentences and thesis statements and then building upon that to progress to practicing writing forms such as opinion, summary, reasons-examples, letter to the editor, problem-solution, cause-effect, and opinion with counterargument either in paragraph or essay form (Gramer & Ward 2014). Students then receive feedback either from their instructors or peers after which they usually revise and resubmit their writings. EFL writing classes around the world that adhere to something similar to this organization are generally successful in preparing students for the writing they organize writing classes. And this article will not challenge that basic course organization.

What this paper aims to do is to add the tool of timed writings to writing classes and show the benefits of this element of written expression, which are not just to improving writing but overall proficiency in the target language. It will briefly review the research on the efficacy of feedback on student writing and will then focus on how timed writings can be integrated into and enhance EFL classrooms following the communicative approach to language teaching. This includes how timed writings fit into a focus on Paul Nation’s “four strands” of classroom instruction and practice and how his elements of fluency apply to timed writings as well as additional benefits like increasing accuracy and improving student motivation. It will suggest ways in which timed writings can be integrated into practice in the other major skills that constitute language proficiency—listening, reading, and speaking in approaches like Task-based Learning and Teaching. Finally, it will discuss how timed

writings can be used as direct practice for similar requirements on international standardized tests like TOEFL and IELTS.

2. FEEDBACK ON WRITING

This paper will not speak at length about the efficacy of the different types of feedback on learner writing, but research has shown various outcomes for various types of feedback. Improvement to student writing from traditional teacher feedback in the form of written and verbal comments was found by Bitchener & Knoch (2009) and Bitchener & Ferris (2012). Bredo (2012) agrees but advises caution in utilizing this traditional feedback, stating that teachers need to take extra care to ensure that student needs are always at the forefront so that teacher feedback does not take the form of instructors simply repeating the general advice on form and content contained in the instructional materials already at students' disposal rather than focusing on what each individual learner needs to succeed.

Peer feedback from in-class interactions (Nunan 1993) or received through written feedback from peers either handwritten on the page (Carson and Nelson 1996) or computer delivered (Chen 2016) was also found to be beneficial. Albelihi and Al-Ahdal (2021) found that students who received peer feedback "improved their writing skills."

Cao et al (2022), found benefits of *online* peer feedback that they assert can outperform traditional face-to-face feedback. As a result, they conclude that "OPF (online peer feedback) is superior to FFPF (face-to-face peer feedback) in ESL/EFL writing practice." The strong evidence they present applies to the area of writing feedback, but when it comes to what actually transpires in the classroom, a study by Tang (2019) suggests that traditional face-to-face interaction outperforms computer mediated communication. This is a cautionary tale for those who might be overly enthusiastic about adopting computer assisted language learning (CALL) for all or much of their teaching.

Whichever methods of feedback and instruction are desirable according to the goals and objectives for a class as well as possible in specific learning and teaching circumstances, giving feedback is always encouraged.

3. WRITING PRACTICE INTEGRATED INTO THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

The communicative approach to language teaching has come to dominate the field as it has many benefits for learners. The British Council defines the communicative approach as being "based on the idea that learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning." Therefore, "when learners are involved in real communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, and this will allow them to learn to use the language." (British Council 2017) Rod Ellis (2005) addresses how to practically implement the communicative approach in the classroom by laying out principles which inform the communicative approach. For example, "instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning" and "successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input." The implications of the British Council's definition and Ellis's implementation is that the target language needs to be used in the classroom for actual communication. This is far more effective than common classroom activities like drills, reciting dialogs, and reading passages of text, none of which involve any real, meaning-focused communication.

The writings advocated for in this article all require learners to use their own resources to organize ideas in writing that communicate specific meaning to an audience or interlocutor. They are also combined with other skills and integrated into multi-skill lessons. In the sample lesson outlined in this article, after the timed writings are completed, learners practice speaking by relating their ideas to other learners. They also listen to and are required to understand others' ideas to develop listening proficiency. Students are also required to take notes on their interlocutor's ideas giving further writing practice. Requiring authentic communication across skills is the essence of the communicative approach.

4. THE "FOUR STRANDS"

Paul Nation advocates four "strands" of effective language learning and teaching: 1) meaning-focused input; 2) meaning-focused output; 3) language-focused learning; and 4) fluency development. (Nation 2013a).

Having meaning-focused input and output accords with the communicative approach. Students are actually communicating, processing input and responding with the appropriate output, rather than reciting or drilling. The writings advocated for in this article are all based on meaning-focused input contained in readings about issues such as renewable energy, cultural diversity, and media literacy. All require students to produce meaning-focused output in the form of timed writings about the topics students have read about and engaged with in class. And all their ideas must come from their own resources. They are not copying texts or reciting memorized passages.

Fluency in writing is increased by having to write under time pressure. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

After learners have completed their timed writings, they increase spoken fluency by discussing their ideas with others through producing meaning focused output and processing the meaning-focused input of their interlocutors. They interact with multiple interlocutors and in so doing present their ideas multiple times, which is one method of increasing fluency.

5. TIMED WRITINGS AS A WAY TO IMPROVE WRITING FLUENCY

One of the primary benefits of timed writings is to increase writing fluency. Nation (2013) posits four features that classroom endeavors promoting fluency generally must include:

- 1) They use material that is relatively familiar to learners rather than material that has not been mastered yet.
- 2) They are meaning-focused.
- 3) Students are required at some point to perform at a faster pace than they normally would.
- 4) They involve a relatively large amount of language to be negotiated (i.e. learners are writing relatively longer passages or speaking or listening for more than a few seconds). Somewhere in the area of 250 words spoken or written is a good amount.

The writing task given in the sample lesson in this article is done after students have mastered the material to a relatively high level. They have to write about a topic covered in class using their own ideas and in a format that communicates actual meaning. They must complete the writing task a fair amount faster than if they were crafting a polished piece of writing. They write 150 to 250 words in the allotted time.

This type of timed writing task fulfills all of Nation's requirements for a fluency-building activity. Students have read material on the topic and then engaged with it in various ways such as answering comprehension questions about it. So the material is relatively familiar once they reach the timed writing stage of the lesson. They have to substantively write about an issue such as cultural diversity. The writing has a time limit, so they have to perform at a pace faster than they would normally. And they have to write 150 to 250 words, which is a relatively large amount of text.

6. TIMED WRITINGS AND TASK-BASED LEARNING AND TEACHING

Timed writings also fit well within task-based language teaching (TBLT). The figure most associated with TBLT, Rod Ellis differentiates between a task and things like "an activity or an exercise or a drill" (Ellis 2003) and later states that "for a language-teaching activity to be a 'task' it must satisfy the following criteria:

1. The primary focus should be on 'meaning' (by which is meant that learners should be mainly concerned with processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterances).
2. There should be some kind of 'gap' (i.e. a need to convey information, to express an opinion or to infer meaning).
3. Learners should largely have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity.
4. There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language (i.e. the language serves as the means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right). (Ellis 2009)

Lee (2000) has a similar definition:

A *task* (emphasis in original) is (1) a classroom activity or exercise that has (a) an objective attainable only by the interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange: (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of work plans.

Harmer (2001), who emphasizes the need of deft design of tasks in a vein similar to that outlined by Lee and Ellis and implementation of TBLT by skilled educators, concurs with both that the pedagogical benefits of TBLT are achieved only when learners but fully engage with and negotiate authentic communication.

Research suggests various benefits of TBLT. Albelihi (2022) found that after fifteen weeks of TBLT “learners’ grammatical and vocabulary skills are enhanced.” Tan (2016) who directly compared TBLT to grammar-translation methodology and found TBLT to be significantly superior.

When students in the sample lesson discussed in this article relate in spoken discourse the ideas they have expounded in their writings, they are engaging in meaning-focused and meaningful conversation (as opposed to drills like rote reading of a written passage or reciting a memorized dialog). Speakers in the interaction need to convey information and listeners, need showed that they have grasped its meaning in the notes they take on what their interlocutor has said. In both the composition of the timed writings and in understanding what their interlocutors are saying, learners must rely on their own resources to complete the task. And, as previously mentioned, there is the defined outcome of understanding ideas that have been related and being able to demonstrate that in written form.

7. OTHER BENEFITS OF TIMED WRITING

The time pressure in timed writings associates them with free writing, where learners write for a certain amount of time, usually without stopping, and for a set amount of time. Some research shows that free-writing benefits EFL students’ proficiency in grammar in that students who did free-writing showed “better grammar acquisition than the control group.” (Alharthi 2021)

Giving written feedback on any writing, including timed writings, can have beneficial effects on acquisition of L2 grammar as well. (Bitchener & Knoch 2010) and general acquisition of the target language (Bitchener & Storch 2016). And unlike error correction in spoken language, any positive effects for which evidence is lacking, explicit error correction through written feedback on student written output seems to have real benefits to learners’ writing proficiency. (Chandler2003).

Timed writings done in a low-pressure classroom atmosphere and revolving around topics students are interested in can increase student motivation and address the problem of learners having “come to see texts they are asked to produce, not as forms of meaningful communication, but as “tests” of whether they have learned the grammar and vocabulary they have been taught.” (Dickinson 2014)

8. USING TIMED WRITINGS TO PRACTICE FOR INTERNATIONAL STANDARDIZED TESTS

Finally, timed writings have a strong resemblance to the writing sections of international standardized tests like TOEFL and IELTS, especially TOEFL’s independent writing task) where test takers “write an essay based on personal experience or opinion in response to a writing topic” (TOEFL iBT® Test 2022) and writing task 2 on the IELTS exam where candidates are “asked to write an essay in response to a point of view, argument or problem.”(IELTS Test Format 2022)

Timed writings like that in the sample lesson plan presented in this article mirror the types of writing TOEFL and IELTS test takers must complete on those tests, which gives concrete practice in the writing skills required when taking those exams. Further, students having to complete timed writings in class under time pressure not only mirrors the time constraints of the TOEFL and IELTS but also increases students writing fluency so that they will be able to perform at a higher level when the actual test day comes.

9. CONCLUSION

Timed writings contribute to EFL proficiency by increasing writing fluency as well as contributing to acquisition of vocabulary and grammar, especially when constructive feedback is given. The sample lesson included here encompasses all of Nation’s four strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, explicit instruction, and fluency practice. When integrated into a multi-skill lesson,

they additionally contribute to learners' reading, listening, and speaking skills when students must engage in meaningful communication with interlocutors about original ideas they have written about, which accords with the communicative approach. Classroom interactions in the lesson also fit into a TBLT curriculum as students complete communicative tasks according to the criteria of Ellis, Lee, and others in the course of the lesson. Finally, the writing practice in lessons like that presented above not only gives students practice in some of the most common types of writing that are required in academic contexts, but also gives them direct preparation for international standardized tests.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE LESSON PLAN FOR TIMED WRITING PRACTICE WITH A PROBLEM-SOLUTION PARAGRAPH

The following is a sample lesson plan begins by introducing material relating to an academic topic and a genre of writing (a problem-solution paragraph in this case, but it could be any type of writing used in academic contexts) and then leading students through mastery of the material and the writing style presented and practiced. After students have demonstrated facility with the topic and writing style, they do a timed writing which builds fluency for and mirrors writing tasks on international standardized tests. Finally, they present their ideas to interlocutors in class in a manner consistent with both the communicative approach and TBLT discussed above.

Class: General English

Instructional objectives: Review the elements of a successful problem/solution paragraph; Increase student proficiency and writing fluency through a timed writing

Text and materials: *Q: Skills for Success 3, Reading and Writing, Unit. 8, 171-172;* classroom worksheet, “Writing a problem/solution essay”; document, “Public relations firms and the major corporate media”; video clip of testimony coached by a public relations firm

Vocabulary: Public Relations Firm (PR firm)

Procedure

1. Board with blanks: Problem/solution paragraph and elicit from students
2. Board with blanks: People who work in
j _ _ rnalis _ are journalis _ _ .
3. Create context for timed writing about journalism and journalists by having learners agree/disagree with some opinions of journalists in the worksheet, “Unit 8 writing, Writing a problem/solution essay.”
4. Deepen student engagement with the topic by having them choose one opinion they think is important and discussing it with partners.
5. Check answers to Part B of the worksheet to review criteria for successful problem/solution paragraphs.
8. Board with blanks: Public relations firms (PR firms). Elicit. Introduce relationship between PR firms and the major commercial media.
8. Ss watch a video clip in which an individual coached by a public relations firm provides false testimony.
8. Analyze how the major corporate media treated the testimony.

9. Discuss how the problem with the corporate media journalists who reported the video without vetting it is that the journalists did not check the facts first. Elicit possible solutions to this problem such as journalists being required to present corroborating evidence for their reporting and editors not publishing stories without this evidence.

10. Ss address question in a timed writing of what one problem with journalists in their country is and a possible solution to the problem. Pushing the students to write quickly through giving a time limit improves their writing fluency.

11. Add speaking practice to the writing practice by having students discuss their ideas with classmates through pair and group work.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE CLASSROOM WORKSHEET FOR THE TIMED WRITINGS AND DISCUSSION

Q: Skills for success 3, reading and writing, Unit. 8, “Writing a problem/solution paragraph”

A. Here are some opinions of different journalists. Write “A” if you agree, “MA” if you mostly agree, “PA” if you partly agree, “PD” if you partly disagree, “MD” if you mostly disagree or “D” if you disagree.

_____ 1. I don’t report rumors. I carefully check all my stories to make sure they are factual.

_____ 2. My stories are balanced—not one-sided.

_____ 3. I need to deliver the news honestly, even if it makes people uncomfortable.

_____ 4. I want to be a “comfortable” announcer and deliver the news in a comfortable manner.

_____ 5. “The government is the most important power, so I want to interview government sources,” says Ted Koppel of ABC news in the U.S.A.

_____ 6. If I only interview governments and corporations, I don’t get the full story. I check with many sources.

_____ 7. If the government tells me not to publish secret information, I obey.

_____ 8. If the government tells me not to publish secret information, I check the government’s case. Sometimes the government keeps secret information to hide bad things the government is doing. For example, a government in the US was hiding information about a dangerous nuclear power plant. A journalist disobeyed the government and published the secret information. It prevented a nuclear disaster. If the journalist had obeyed, there would have been a nuclear disaster.

_____ 9. I don’t have any personal relationships with government officials or corporate executives. I go to their offices, ask tough questions, and demand answers.

_____ 10. If I have a good relationship with government officials and corporate executives, I can get information from them. If I don't have a good relationship with them, I can't get information from them and can't report the news well.

_____ 11. I follow important stories and demand that my editor publish them, even if that makes the office uncomfortable.

_____ 12. If I report stories that my editors like, I can create harmony and a comfortable atmosphere at my workplace.

_____ 13. I never reveal the identity of my secret sources—even if the government threatens me-- so sources will trust me.

B. Read p. 170 of the textbook and answer the following about a *problem/solution essay*:

1. What are three things a **thesis statement** does?

1) It _____ the _____ and states what the _____ is.

2) It gives the _____ of the whole essay.

3) It _____ the _____ that has _____ a problem and states

_____ what the problem is.

2. What is described in the **body paragraphs**?

3. What does the **concluding paragraph** do?

1) It re _____ the pr _____ and 2) su _____ the so _____ .

C. What is one *problem with journalists* in your country and what are some possible solutions? Write a problem/solution paragraph about it.

Thesis statement (Introduce the topic and problem; give the main idea; describe the situation that caused the problem):

Body sentences (your solutions to the problem):

Conclusion (restating the problem and summarizing the solutions):

D. Listen to your partner's ideas. Take notes and then discuss their ideas.

Partner's name: _____

Thesis:

Solutions:

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