

# Do Participant-selected Topics Influence L2 Writing Fluency? A Replication Study

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This paper uses Bonzo's 2008 measure of fluency in writing to investigate the role topic selection plays in EFL classes at a university in Japan. Second language (L2) output is often used as a measure of a learner's current level of linguistic development (e.g. Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972). One important—though hard to define—factor within such development is that of fluency. Some commentators have noted that fluency is more commonly defined in terms of speaking rather than writing (e.g. Brown, 2003). The term now forms a key point in some pedagogical approaches, such as Task-Based Learning (Willis and Willis, 1996), and Nation's *four-strand approach* (2009). Although writers such as Nation use the term *fluency* in each of the four skills taught in EFL classes (i.e. reading, listening, speaking, and writing), among the writing research that has been conducted, there seems to have been a tendency to focus on accuracy at the expense of fluency (Chandler, 2003). It would therefore seem that, although writing fluency is often overlooked, it nevertheless has a legitimate place in the classroom and is a worthy candidate of research.

The current study took place within the broader context of the Writ-

ing Fluency Project, an online group for assisting teachers in becoming more familiar with quantitative research. This provided the opportunity for full and part-time teachers to work together and create a dialogue on how fluency might affect learners in our setting, as well as to improve pedagogical approaches available to teachers.

### *Issues in writing fluency*

Perhaps one of the reasons that writing fluency has been neglected is because of its notoriously problematic nature to research. Firstly, writing fluency is seemingly difficult to define (Fellner & Apple, 2004). Some researchers, such as Schmidt (1992, p. 358), emphasize cognition, defining it as “the processing of language in real time”; others prefer to pay more attention to how well output can be “automatized” as chunks of language (Ellis, 1996). In an attempt to be more specific, others still have recently subcategorized aspects of writing fluency into skills such as *syntactic fluency*, defined as “the ability to manipulate a variety of sentence structures effectively” (Lynn, 2010). Other examples of subcategories have come from distinct classifications such as word choice, technical quality, content, purpose, organization, and style (Ransdall *et al.*, 2001).

Writing fluency also has problems associated with research design. Bonzo (2008, p. 723) cites numerous findings to suggest that learners do not write freely when they know their production will be assessed (e.g. Perl, 1979; Rorschach, 1986; Sandler, 1987). It is also possible that learners might try to produce as little as possible in order to avoid making mistakes (Homstad & Thorson, 2000). Furthermore, fluency is difficult to isolate from other factors such as error, lexical range, syntactic complexity, and productivity (Lennon, 1990, p. 396). While Lennon’s research related to oral flu-

ency, the same issues might also be applicable to writing. Similarly, other factors may play a role such as writing strategy and level of language development (Myles, 2002).

Perhaps more important, however, is the fact that writing fluency appears to be difficult to operationalize. Some researchers have used production time as a measure (e.g. Chandler, 2003), averaging time per hundred words. Although time is likely to be a strong factor in fluency, this approach usually seems to appear where fluency is an additional focus rather than a central one. Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, and Kim (1998) review simple measures such as words, verbs, or sentences produced, through to more complex ratio measures, such as words in error-free T-units saying that “Most of the measures that have been used in developmental index studies consist of intuitive rather than theoretical operationalizations...” (p. 4). Wolfe-Quintero *et al* also suggest that fluency ratios are better than simple counts (such as T-units) at capturing global proficiency.

#### *Fluency in relation to writing topics*

Bonzo’s study (2008) found participant-selected topics produced a greater degree of fluency than teacher-selected topics across a range of measures. It is not only Bonzo who identified this trend; Paris and Turner (1994), for example, discovered that there was a diminished perceived threat of correction when self-significant writing topics were employed.

Self-significant topics may also influence the degree to which learners take ownership of their writing. Heilenmann (1991) claimed that learners are often given no choice of topic in the writing classroom. Owing to this, others such as Reichelt (2001) claim that learners are left without a unified

sense of purpose when it comes to L2 writing. Indeed, as Semke (1984) pointed out, production is an integral part of acquisition, which itself stresses the importance of a message in communication and of learners being motivated by taking ownership of the topics they write about. Many tasks related to fluency assessment relate to activities where no topic is assigned, such as blogs (e.g. Fellner & Apple, 2004). The goal of such activities is to promote an authenticity in communication, creating a range of possible purposes for the writing. Hamps-Lyon (1990) reminds us that all writing is personal. In trying to match the expectations of an assessor, a writer must “follow the steps of attending to, understanding, and valuing the task” (p.77). Where a participant has control over the choice of topic, it may be that the attendant “value”, hence ownership, may help to increase fluency.

Cognitive demand is another factor to take into consideration in the writing process. It is likely that a topic will influence the way a writing task is approached, which may, in turn, affect the degree to how cognitively demanding it is. Likewise, many commentators have also indicated that the orthographic challenges of a writing task may increase cognitive demand. Koda (1993), for example, notes that using a different orthographic system may affect students’ processing ability, detracting from higher processes such as discourse style or structure. In a review-writing task, Way, Joiner, and Seaman (2000) looked at the way questions were presented with models. Their results showed that the scaffolding of a writing prompt changed the degree of output, as did the nature of the task. They challenged the ACTFL guidelines describing narrative tasks as beginner and descriptive tasks as intermediate level, showing that with proper scaffolding, beginner level students were capable of some descriptive tasks.

This was especially the case where L1 and L2 share the same orthographic system, and so may not apply to the current context.

Although the literature would appear to favour participant-selected over teacher-selected topics as a better means of producing writing fluency, there is, nevertheless, a need to be more critically aware. For example, Raimes (1983, p. 266) stated that topic selection is the teacher's "most responsible activity", while Kroll (1990) claimed that as long as a topic is stimulating and pitched at a suitable level, the issue of who selects the topic almost falls into redundancy. This is something that will be returned to later in the Discussion section.

### **The present study**

This study replicates a component of a fluency study conducted by Bonzo (2008). The focus of the research is to determine how variation in a writing fluency activity can affect student output in terms of a measure of writing fluency. The present study replicates the fluency index listed in Bonzo's study to measure any effect on participant choice of topics in free-writing assignments. One of Bonzo's research questions was:

"Does topic-selection control (teacher-selected topics versus participant-selected topics) influence a participant's fluency in writing (as measured with a general fluency index)?" (Bonzo 2008, p. 724)

This led us to pose an open-ended research question, which was framed as follows:

*What are the effects of participant-selected versus teacher-selected topics in terms of writing fluency in L1 Japanese learners of L2 English?*

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were all second year students in the faculties of Business, Social Studies, or International Studies at Momoyama Gakuin University. Data was taken from learners in five English classes (three general English classes and two communication classes). All participants were all of a similar age (19-20 years old). Following attrition from attendance, as well as those who did not wish to participate, 84 remained. Of these, 55 were female, and 29 were male. One researcher worked exclusively with three classes of non-English majors (50 students actively participating), while some English majors may have been present in the other researcher's groups (two classes).

### *Pilot study*

In order to check the administrative implications of the processes, a pilot study was conducted by one researcher with a group of classes. The study resulted in changes to the consent forms to include active participation or refusal, instead of simply submitting forms if students were willing to participate. Names of group members were made easily accessible to help students remember their groupings from week to week. It was found that when students wrote with pencils, they expended considerable time erasing writing. As a result, students were asked to either write in pen or to refrain from using erasers. Finally, the researchers decided to use a log-book to ensure greater consistency between and within samples.

*Process*

Participants in each class were divided into two groups, with the groupings displayed in the classroom at the beginning of each writing task. Participants were then given a 10-minute free-writing assignment using a specifically prepared sheet for the activity. Groups alternated between a teacher-selected task and a participant-selected assignment, with a total of four assignments. The activity was controlled for time, as this was felt to be a factor in fluency. At the end of the allotted time, participants were asked to count the total number of words produced. Tasks were given at the beginning of class, ostensibly over four weeks, although some participants who had missed classes were allowed to do their assignment in class in the fifth week.

Prior to the first activity, participants were asked to give consent for their data to be used in a research study. Participants who declined to have their data used were removed from the sample, but were still required to complete the tasks. Although this assignment did not directly affect grades, participants were encouraged to save data and use this as evidence of progress and strategizing if learners felt this was appropriate.

Particularly at the beginning of the project, comprehension of the target of the assigned topic was checked, and participants were given 10 minutes to write as much as they could. The assigned topics were *Your life after graduation* and *Your favourite class or subject to study*. Although these topics were not directly addressed in the curriculum before the assignment, the researchers felt that the topics were within the ability of the learners.

The researchers then manually counted the total number of words and the total number of unique words produced by each student. Following guidance from the research group, a system of counting was developed for relative consistency. The researchers regularly checked samples of each other's work to make sure that results were congruent. In general, the counts were the same, and discrepancies were minimal. Where discrepancies did occur, they were discussed to make sure that any systematic problems were removed as much as possible. A logbook also was kept to provide a reference to ensure consistency. For example, where some participants wrote *bookstore*, others wrote *book store*, and it was decided that this would count as two words. For reasons such as this, manual counts were felt to lead to a better understanding of what was to be included as a word, whereas machine counting may not be as flexible.

Once the numbers were collected, we applied the fluency formula used by Bonzo (taken from Carroll, 1967). This compensates for differences in the length of a composition produced by a student. The index is "the total number of different words divided by the square root of twice the total number of all words" (Bonzo, 2008, p. 728). The data was then subject to a two-tailed *t*-test ( $p=0.05$ ).

Following the last assignment, students were asked to answer a simple questionnaire on their experience. This was administered online using commercial questionnaire software. Participants were made aware that this data would also be used for this research, and given the option not to complete it. Participants who missed the last class but made up the assignment were asked to fill in the questionnaire by themselves. 82 responses were obtained.

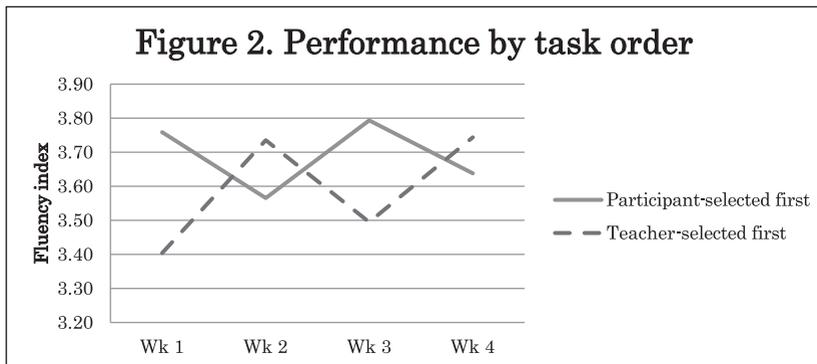
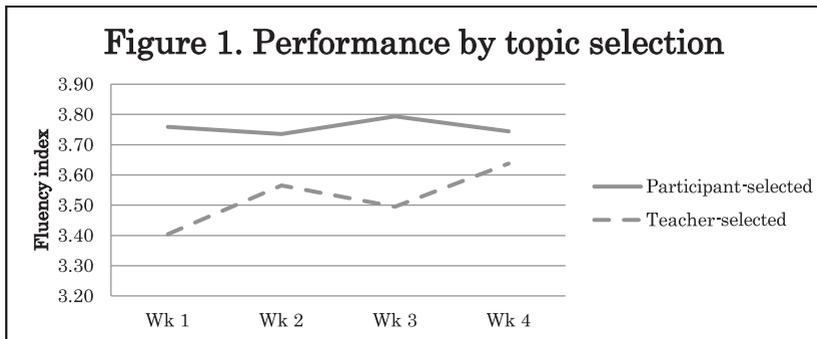
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In addition to the questionnaire, volunteers from two classes were asked to take part in focus group interviews. These took place once before and once after the data was collected. These were 10 minutes long and conducted in simple Japanese by one of the researchers. These responses were used to provide depth to the quantitative data.

### Results

#### *Fluency index*

Taken as a group, the fluency index scores were higher when participants



were given a free choice of assignment in any given week. Figure 1 shows overall performance by topic selection (participant or teacher) using the fluency index. Rearranging the data so that the performance is compared by the order in which they perform the task (see Figure 2) shows that participants scored higher on the fluency index when performing on the participant-selected assignment regardless of the order in which the assignments were given.

In Figure 1, performance is consistently between 3.7 and 3.8 among the participant-selected writings, regardless of group. The teacher-selected topic shows more of an improvement across the four weeks. The group that did the teacher-selected topic first seems to have the same result on both of the participant-selected tasks (3.74), the only subsection in which no improvement was shown. The score of these participants was lower across the board.

Using the fluency index from Bonzo's original paper, results indicate that participants scored significantly higher on the fluency index when choosing their own topic ( $M=3.76$ ,  $SD=0.55$ ) than when the teacher assigned the topic ( $M=3.52$ ,  $SD=0.52$ );  $t(82)=-2.85$ ,  $p=0.005$ . This suggests that participant choice with respect to writing topic resulted in significantly more fluent writing as defined using the formula in Bonzo.

**Table 1: Summary statistics for *t*-test**

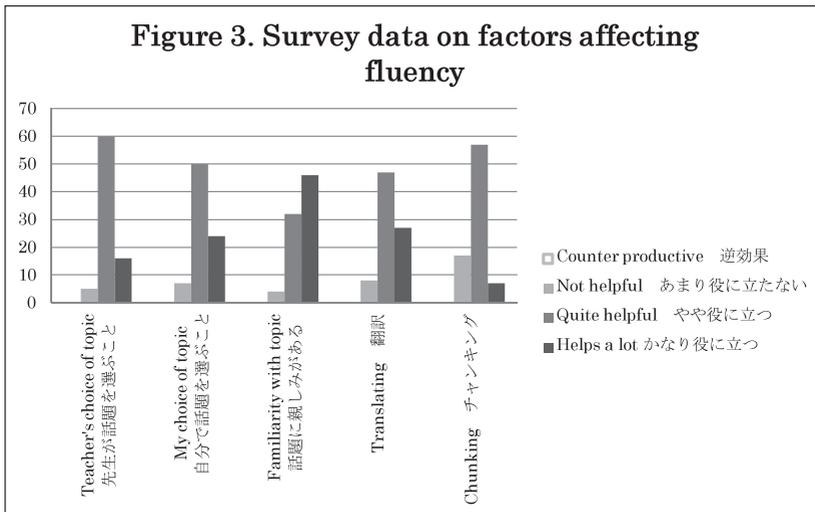
	Teacher	Participant
Mean Fluency Index score (n=84)	3.52	3.76
Variance	0.27	0.30

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*Survey results*

Contrary to the statistical pattern of findings from the free-writing activity, the survey results indicated that teacher-selected topics were in fact more helpful in producing a greater degree of fluency than participant-selected topics (74% versus 61%). In addition, the survey responses showed that “My choice of topic” was chosen by one or two more participants as “Not helpful at all” when compared to “Teacher’s choice of topic”. No students chose “counter-productive” for any of the factors we listed in the questionnaire. In the comments section to this question item, one student indicated they had found “Shadowing” helpful to their overall fluency.

A summary of those factors affecting student fluency listed on the questionnaire is shown in Figure 3. The full response to all questions is presented in Appendix A.



## Discussion

The two groups performed differently on the writing task, so an order effect cannot be entirely discounted. Interestingly, the score of those who did the participant-selected essays first showed no increase in their fluency index score the second time the participant-selected activity was performed. This may indicate that participants showed little improvement in their writing over time when they chose the topic.

The purpose of the exit survey was to add depth to the performance data that we collected from the writing tasks. In the exit survey, over 90% of the survey respondents stated they agreed or strongly agreed that they wanted to learn English, yet 68% stated they didn't enjoy writing in English. Despite this, 55% of students agreed that writing English was easier than speaking English, indicating a moderate preference for writing activities where English was concerned. Although 61% of students said they enjoyed writing in Japanese, only 31.7% said they enjoyed writing in English. This latter figure is coincidentally close to the number of participants who claimed to use English outside the classroom (at 29.7%).

These findings may indicate a dissonance between the desire to learn English and the amount of investment needed to make progress. While participants seemingly value English, comparatively few of them seem to use it. This may result in a discrepancy between the desire to use English and the investment required to gain a degree of mastery of it. In addition, a lack of practice outside the classroom may result in a narrow range of strategies available for its use.

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The subsequent question of why this result might have come about can be addressed by looking at the interview data, which yielded mixed responses. This is illustrated in the following conversational extract:

Participant 9: *For me, I thought having a fixed topic was actually easier. It's better to have more variety, otherwise I just end up writing about the same thing all the time. It made me realize that there's so much more to write about rather than just what I've been used to.*

Participant 4: *It was different for me again. I thought having a free choice was better because you're not limited to what you can't do.*

Participant 8: *Either was fine for me! If it's free choice, you can do it on whatever you like; but if it's given to you, you can also make a few new discoveries about things that could allow you to find new ways of writing.*

These responses appear to suggest that a more complex interplay of factors might be involved. In the survey, participants identified a variety of additional factors as being helpful to some degree, such translating (58%) or chunking language items (71%). In particular, the notion of familiarity, chosen as helpful by 56% of respondents, was mirrored in the interviews:

Participant 1: *It depends on the topic. If I don't know it very well, it's difficult. But if I know it, it's easy.*

A recurring theme in the interviews was that of strategizing, particularly in terms of decision-making ability. When given a degree of autonomy through the selection of writing topic, some participants were unprepared for the load this placed upon them:

Participant 2: *I always get flustered as to what I should choose and it ends up taking time. When it's decided, I can get going straight away.*

Participant 9: *If I couldn't think of anything to write about, I think having a free choice is harder.*

Others responded with a thought process centering on their current level of L2 linguistic development. This was usually associated with working within what they felt to be their own limitations:

Participant 4: *I think free choice is easier, as long as you choose something you feel you can do. Otherwise I just don't have enough grammatical knowledge or vocabulary to express myself well enough with a fixed topic. So it's a matter of just having to choose something within your own scope.*

Participant 5: *If it's decided, the scope of what you can write about is more limited, so I think being able to choose whatever I like is easier.*

Participant 3: *I don't think having either a decided or undecided topic is particularly easy. If a decided topic seems easy, it might be easy in theory; but it might also be difficult because I can't write what I really want to express.*

Despite performing better in terms of fluency according to Bonzo's fluency index, there is some incongruence between how learners performed and either how they feel they performed, or the value associated with the performance. Given the interview and questionnaire data, it seems participants feel less sure about what they produce or how they produce it when given a choice to select their own topics.

Finally, 85.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed the activity, and 73% reported they found this activity helpful, with only a single respondent claiming they did not find the activity helpful.

### *Pedagogical implications*

Perhaps an overarching theme for all of the factors mentioned in this discussion is the difference between fluency and *perceived* fluency. While the participant-selected topics yielded higher fluency index scores, the teacher-selected condition did at least appear to indicate an increase in written fluency across the four weeks (refer once again to Figure 1). Perhaps a balance needs to be struck between current ability (as reflected in the participant-selected topics) and progress within the target language (as reflected in the teacher-selected topics). While some participants produced low fluency index scores, some of them were, nevertheless, able to produce quite long pieces of texts, particularly as time progressed.

Participants seemed to be aware of their ability to develop more skill with time, and the need for more work with fluency. This is perhaps best illustrated by the following response:

Participant 8: *My problem is that even if I understand it, I can't produce it. I just can't seem to get the kind of output I'm after. It's probably due to not having enough practice. I probably need to speak more with foreign people, or at least try to express myself more on paper.*

Nation (2009) makes fluency practice a part of his four-strand approach with each of the skill areas in language teaching. The four-strand approach recognizes that language input and output are necessary, but that robust

fluency activities are also required for learners to make progress. This seems to have been recognized by the positive response to the activity, and the fact that most participants found it helpful. This is echoed in the following interview excerpt:

Participant 3: *I think I've probably got faster at putting what I want to say from Japanese into English. I think the reason is mainly due to the regular practice that we had.*

Another factor which seems to have been overlooked by much previous research is the effect of translation. Although “translation in language teaching has been treated as a pariah” (Cook, 2010, p. xv), it remains a constant theme in the language classroom. For example, Chenoweth & Hayes (2001) claimed that written fluency is “mediated primarily by two internal processes called ‘the translator’ and ‘the reviser’” (p. 80). This suggests that besides regular practice, it also might be worthwhile to raise learner awareness of the interaction between the mother tongue and L2 in a further attempt to increase written fluency. The ability to work with learners’ interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) would seem to be a key pedagogic need, given that the learners here were found to be translating. It would also seem to suggest that a teacher needs to have some skills in an L2 themselves. Such an understanding may help teachers in employing cross-linguistic awareness-raising techniques, such as those proposed by Lucas (2012).

Finally, the issue of whether corrective feedback is necessary for improving written fluency is perhaps also noteworthy. The usefulness of corrective feedback on learners’ writing has, thus far, been intensely debated

(Truscott, 1999; Ferris, 2004). Brown (2003) calls for a focus on fluency that encourages constructive use of errors as well as giving many opportunities for practice. He advocates activities that focus on learners conveying their meaning effectively, as well as assessing students' fluency, as opposed to their accuracy. Given that students in our situation only meet with a teacher once a week, this focus would seem to make sense. On a practical level, it would therefore perhaps be more useful to emphasize the effects of topic selection rather than teacher feedback at this stage.

## **Conclusion**

In answer to our research question, the quantitative data indicated that participant-selected topics may be more efficacious than teacher-selected topics in producing a greater degree of written L2 fluency. This supports the prior work of Bonzo. However, it is also important not to overlook other learner factors that might have the potential to exert an influence on the writing process. Other such factors may include, among others, familiarity with the topic, decision-making ability, current level of linguistic ability, and motivation. It could subsequently prove useful for future research to investigate these factors in more detail.

Perhaps more importantly, however, a distinction needs to be drawn between the notions of fluency and perceived fluency. The ultimate concern of the teacher, therefore, might be to ask which of these needs to be emphasized. Since it is important for students to perceive themselves as fluent writers, some free choice and ownership of topics by the writers is important. However, as teachers, we are also concerned with the development of learners' abilities. We have an obligation to take learners into unfa-

miliar terrain, but must do so in an informed way. This, in turn, will allow pedagogical decisions to be made and tailored in accordance to the requirements of a given set of learners. The main implication, however, is that regular fluency practice seems to be positively regarded by learners and should be a regular feature of classroom practice.

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**Appendix A. Survey results (n=82).**

1. Class Name: クラス名 (Withheld)

2. I want to learn English

英語を習いたい。

32.9%	Strongly agree	非常に賛成
58.5%	Agree	賛成
7.3%	Disagree	不賛成
1.2%	Strongly disagree	まったく不賛成

3. Have you ever studied English at cram school?

塾で英語を勉強したことがありますか？

81.7%	Yes	はい	18.3%	No	いいえ
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4. Have you ever attended a conversation school?

英会話学校に行ったことがありますか？

24.7%	Yes	はい	75.3%	No	いいえ
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5. I have visited another country.

外国に行ったことがあります。

43.9%      Yes はい                      56.1%      No いいえ

6. Do you ever use English outside the classroom?

教室以外で、英語を使いますか？

29.3%      Yes はい                      70.7%      No いいえ

7. Do you enjoy writing in Japanese?

日本語で文章などを書くことは好きですか？

61%          Yes はい                      39%          No いいえ

8. Do you enjoy writing in English?

英語で文章などを書くことは好きですか？

31.7%      Yes はい                      68.3%      No いいえ

9. Writing for 10 minutes is:

十分間書くのは：

19.5%      Too short 短すぎ

53.7% Just right ちょうどいい

26.8% Too long 長すぎ

10. Writing in English is easier than speaking in English

英語を話すことよりも、書くほうが楽。

17.3% Strongly agree 非常に賛成

35.8% Agree 賛成

43.2% Disagree 不賛成

3.7% Strongly disagree まったく不賛成

(1 student skipped)

11. When I am writing in English, I prefer a computer to a paper and pen.

英語を書くとき、紙とペンを使うよりも、コンピュータを使うほうが好き。

22.2% Yes はい

43.2% No いいえ

34.6% Neither どちらでもない

12. What do you think influences your ability to write fluently?

あなたにとって、流暢に英語を書く能力は、下記の選択肢のうち、どれが影響していると思いますか。

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	Helps a lot かなり役に立つ	Quite helpful やや役に立つ	Not helpful あまり役に立たない	Counter productive 逆効果	Response count
Teacher's choice of topic 先生が話題を選ぶこと	19.8% (16)	74.1% (60)	6.2% (5)	0.0% (0)	81
My choice of topic 自分で話題を選ぶこと	29.6% (24)	61.7% (50)	8.6% (7)	0.0% (0)	81
Familiarity with topic 話題に親しみがある	56.1% (46)	39.0% (32)	4.9% (4)	0.0%(0)	8
Translating 翻訳	33.3% (27)	58.0% (47)	9.9% (8)	0.0% (0)	81
Chunking チャンキング	8.8% (7)	71.3% (57)	21.3% (17)	0.0% (0)	80

(One student also said shadowing had been useful)

13. Was this activity helpful to you?

この活動は役に立ちましたか？

73.2% Yes はい

1% No いいえ

25.6% Neither どちらでもない

14. I enjoyed writing for this research activity.

この研究活動について書くのは楽しかった。

12.2% Strongly agree 非常に賛成

73.2% Agree 賛成

14.6% Disagree 不賛成

0.0% Strongly disagree まったく不賛成

# Do Participant-selected Topics Influence L2 Writing Fluency? A Replication Study

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The concept of fluency now forms a key point in some pedagogical approaches (Willis & Willis, 1996; Nation, 2009). Some commentators have suggested that fluency is more often defined in terms of speaking than writing (e.g. Brown, 2003), thus implying a need for further research in written fluency. Specifically, topic selection and how it might relate to written fluency is an area of developing research and provided the basis for this study. We replicate the procedure used by Bonzo (2008) to investigate whether participant or teacher-generated topics affect fluency performance on free-writing tasks, utilizing 84 learners in general English classes at a Japanese university. Statistical analyses (as operationalized using a fluency index from Bonzo) indicated that participant-selected topics produced a significantly greater degree of written fluency than teacher-selected topics. Other data, drawn from focus group interviews and a post-procedure survey, added an extra dimension to the findings in that a distinction may lie between measurable fluency and the fluency perceived on the part of the learner. Participants selected a number of factors they believed affected their fluency, some of which may be at odds with the findings of the statistical analyses. In light of this, pedagogical implications are discussed so that practical classroom applications can be made.