

Writing in English with Help

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Abstract

Writing is one of the most difficult skills for Japanese people to master in English learning. The Ministry of Education held a nationwide English proficiency test for the 3rd year students of senior high school in 2017. In the report, the Ministry pointed out the link between low writing scores and low frequency of employment of integrated writing activities in classrooms. Then, how can we provide more opportunities to write in English to our students? One of the obstacles in increasing writing activities is giving feedback. Introducing writing software and applications in classrooms is one way to reduce the workload of teachers to give feedback and provide more activities to write. In this study, the changes of the perceptions of the writers towards writing in English before and after the writing activities were investigated. One on-line writing tool, Criterion®, was utilized in writing instructions, and the writers' perceptions towards writing and the instrument were examined. The participants were the students of four writing classes in a college in Japan. The participants were two freshman and two sophomore classes. The questionnaires were distributed to the participants before and after using Criterion® between June and July in 2018. After using the writing tool, understanding of the tool's features was deepened and the perception towards writing in English were changed. Writing more might lead students to have more practical view of writing.

Keywords: writing, foreign language learning, perception

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Introduction

Writing in a language which is not your mother tongue is difficult. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan conducted a nation-wide English test in 2017 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2018). The target level of proficiency for the third year students of senior high school is CEFR A2. The percentage of the students who archived this target level was 19.7% in writing. There were students, 15.1%, who could not gain any scores on the writing test. How about other skills? Reading and listening were not very bad. One third of the students, 33.5% and 33.6% respectively, archived the target level. Speaking was the other area that Japanese students did not perform well on the test. The rate of achievement was 12.9%.

To improve these skills, the Ministry of Education recommended introducing more opportunities to write and speak in English in class. One of the ways to increase the opportunities to write in English is utilizing computer and the internet in learning.

In this study, Criterion® was chosen to help the instructor in class. Criterion® is an on-line writing tool. It judges the submitted text with e-rater® (Attale & Burstein, 2006). It gives scores on the written text from 1 to 6, and 6 is the highest. This tool can check not only grammar errors, usage errors, and mechanics errors, but also organization and lexical complexity. Instructors can add their own feedbacks to the submitted text. There are functions of planning and revision too. The problem here is to find if this tool is suitable in the writing instruction. Therefore, the research question of this study is: Will the perceptions towards writing be changed before and after using Criterion®?

Method

The present study was conducted between June and July in 2018. The participants of this study were the first and second year students of Japanese women's college. Two freshman writing classes and two sophomore writing classes met once a week. The freshman classes had 5 English classes a week, two reading classes, one listening, one communication, and one writing classes. The classes were fixed and had almost the same members. The sophomore classes had 3 classes in one week, one reading, one writing, and one communication classes. These four writing classes were taught by the same teacher. Therefore, the differences in instructions must be minimum. All the students read and signed the informed consent.

The questionnaires were distributed and answered before the participants used Criterion® in June, and after they used it in July in 2018. This schedule corresponded to the second Quarter of the school year.

The questionnaires were consist of five groups of questions in the pre-questionnaire, and 6 in the post-questionnaire. The first group of questions was about the previous experience of using Criterion®. The second group of questions were asking their perceptions of writing in English. There were 23 choices and "other" box, and the participants were asked to choose all of the feelings and opinions they though suitable to express their own thoughts. The third group was on which area they would like to improve in writing. There were five choices and "other" box. The fourth group

prepared to probe their perceptions of on-line materials to learn English. The last group was regarding the features of Criterion®. Fifteen choices were shown. In the post-questionnaire, there was one more group added. This section had a different format from other sections. The participants were asked to fill in the gap in “I wish Criterion® were more ().”

Findings

The numbers of the participants and the dates of the data collection were as in the tables below.

Table 1: Date and Number of Collected Surveys

		Pre-survey		Post-survey	
		Date	n	Date	n
Sophomore	Class 1	June 18	16	July 25	16
	Class 2	June 19	15	July 31	15
Freshman	Class 3	July 10	15	July 28	12
	Class 4	July 10	15	July 28	14

Table 2: Total Number of Submission

	n
Class 1	46
Class 2	45
Class 3	42
Class 4	45

The length of the use of this system, Criterion®, was about one month, and the average of submissions per person was 3. The students did not use the writing tool very often. The instructor explained how to use three times before the students started to use Criterion®. The students were fairly well prepared to use the tool.

The data analysis was done in two steps. First, T-test was used to examine if each data set was different from others. Then, the comparison of averages was conducted to see the detailed picture.

Using T-test to check the differences, all the results showed that the groups stayed the same before using the tool and after using it (Table 3).

Table 3: Results of t-test

	t
Class 1	0.55
Class 2	0.63
Class 3	0.55
Class 4	0.63

There were no significant differences before and after using the tool. Between the classes, also, there were not differences. Therefore each class’s quality stayed the same, and as a class, they were not different from each other.

To see the detailed picture, comparison of averages was done. The differences

between the pre-survey and the post-survey were gained. The ten largest differences were mainly in Q2 and Q5 sections. The questions were “How are you feeling towards writing in English? Circle all choices you think appropriate (Q2 Section).” and “How do (did) you feel about using Criterion®? Tell us your feeling towards Criterion® (Q5 Section).”

Table 4: Largest Differences in Average

Difference	Q Section	Class	Choice
-60.0%	Q5	Class 2	Using Criterion ® is troublesome
-53.3%	Q5	Class 4	I think quality of my writing was improved
46.7%	Q5	Class 2	I used it when I worked on my writing assignment
-43.8%	Q2	Class 4	I want to be a better writer
-40.0%	Q2	Class 2	I cannot write fast enough
38.3%	Q5	Class 3	I used it when I worked on my writing assignment
37.5%	Q5	Class 2	I used it when I worked on my writing assignment
-37.5%	Q2	Class 1	I want to be a better writer
-33.3%	Q2	Class 2	Writing is troublesome
-33.3%	Q2	Class 2	I feel uneasy about making grammatical errors
-33.3%	Q4	Class 2	I have no interests in using on-line learning materials

Negative percentage is not directly connected to affirmative support of the sentence. It shows the fact that the responders did not choose the sentence. Therefore, the analysis below might not be reflecting the reality. According to the results in Table X, more than half of the students in Class 2 changed their perception of using Criterion®. More than one third of the students in Class 2 understood when to use this writing tool. About one third of Class 2 felt more relaxed to write in English, and showed more interests to use on-line learning materials than before they used Criterion®. About one third of the students of Class 1 and Class 4 expressed less desire towards being better writers. More than half of the students in Class 4 responded that Criterion® did not improve their writing quality. One third of the students in Class 3 also expressed that they understood when to use this tool. As a whole, the students expressed their understanding of when to use the tool, but they also showed that the tool itself cannot improve the quality of their writing.

The first section, Q1 Section, asked about the students’ previous experience with Criterion®, “Have you ever used Criterion® before?” and most of them answered that they had not used the writing tool before in pre-survey.

Table 5: Result of Section 1

	Yes (%)	No (%)
Class 1	12.5	87.5
Class 2	20.0	80.0
Class 3	0.0	100.0
Class 4	0.0	100.0

The second section asked about the participants’ perception of writing in English. The

prompt said, “How are you feeling about writing in English? Circle all choices you think appropriate.” There are 23 sentences to choose from. Top ten differences of this section are seen in the following table.

Table 6: Main Result of Section 2

	Writing is troublesome	I cannot translate Japanese to English	(Writing in English is) time consuming	I feel uneasy about making grammatical errors	I do not have large enough vocabulary	I cannot write fast enough	I admire (a person who can write in English)	I want to be a better writer
Class 1								-37.5%
Class 2	-33.3%			-33.3%		-40.0%		
Class 3		-31.7%		-26.7%	-28.3%		-23.3%	
Class 4			-29.5%					-43.8%

The first six choices are showing a negative view towards writing in English, so negative percentage means these negative views might be lessened in the participants. The last two items expressed a positive feeling towards writing.

The third section is about the areas to improve in writing. The prompt said, “Which area would you like to improve in writing in English?” and there were five categories shown.

Table 7: Result of Section 3

	Accuracy	Speed	Expressiveness	Vocabulary	Fluency
Class 1	-12.5%	6.3%	-31.3%	-12.5%	-18.8%
Class 2	0.0%	6.7%	-6.7%	13.3%	0.0%
Class 3	23.3%	18.3%	8.3%	-28.3%	-8.3%
Class 4	-3.3%	1.9%	25.7%	16.7%	0.0%

The students in Class 1 chose “speed” to write as an area to improve. In Q2 Section, there were two sentences regarding to writing speed, “I can write fast” and “I cannot write fast” and no one chose “I can write fast” but the number of the students who chose “I cannot write fast” increased slightly, 6.3%, in Class 1. On the contrary, a large drop was seen in “expressiveness”. In Q2 Section, the changes seen in “I cannot translate Japanese to English (-12.5%)” and “I have no idea what expressions to use (to express my ideas) (-18.8%)” support the drop in “expressiveness” as an area to improve. They noticed that they could express their ideas better than they expected.

Unlike other groups, among the students in Class 2, big changes in the percentages were not seen. They showed they thought that they needed larger vocabulary. This result was supported by the result in Section 2. In pre-survey, 66.7% and in post-survey, 86.7% of the students in Class 2 chose “I do not have large enough vocabulary.”

The students in Class 3 paid more attentions towards accuracy and speed of writing after they used Criterion®. In Section 2, they chose “(Writing in English is) time consuming (Pre-survey 86.7%, post-survey 75.0%)” and “I cannot write fast enough (pre-survey 53.3%, post-survey 50.0%).” Expressiveness did not change very much, but in the pre-survey, 66.7% and in post-survey, 75.0% of the students indicated it was an important area of improvement. In Section 2, they said “I have no idea what expressions to use (to express my ideas) (pre-survey 53.3%, post-survey 50.0%).”

Expressiveness was the area of improvement for the students of Class 4, too. About one fourth of increase was seen in this area. This area gathered attention in both pre-survey, 60.0%, and post-survey, 85.7%. The meaning of “expressiveness”, however, might be different in their case. The percentage of the students who chose “I have no idea what expressions to use (to express my ideas)” showed a drop from 53.3% to 35.7%. Instead, there was a rise in “Thinking about what expressions to use is fun” in Section 2, from 13.3% to 21.4%. There was not a large difference seen in “accuracy” area, but the percentages of the students who chose this area were 53.3% and 50.0%, before and after using Criterion®. It probably reflected the results in Section 2, “I feel uneasy about making grammatical errors (pre-survey 53.3%, post-survey 50.0%).” When we see the item, “I do not pay attention to grammar when I write” in Section 2, there was a slight rise from 6.7% to 14.3%. The students in Class 4 might have found fun in writing.

The fourth section is prepared to probe their attitudes towards use of on-line learning materials.

Table 8: Main Result of Section 4

	am interested in	no interests	looks difficult	I do not wish to use on-line learning materials since I am not good with computer	want to try	can be a good way to use my time efficiently	cannot spare time	feel excited	makes me tired
Class 1	0.0	-12.5	0.0	6.3	-6.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.3
Class 2	0.0	-33.3	-6.7	-6.7	0.0	13.3	6.7	0.0	0.0
Class 3	3.3	0.0	-6.7	28.3	18.3	8.3	1.7	0.0	-18.3
Class 4	-16.7	0.0	21.9	-6.2	-6.2	0.5	1.0	0.0	14.8

The students in Class 1 showed rather stable attitudes towards on-line learning materials. Class 2 showed more friendly view of using on-line materials after using Criterion®. Except “cannot spare time,” drops are seen in negative statements, “no interests,” “looks difficult,” and “I do not wish to use on-line learning materials since I am not good with computer,” and rises in “can be a good way to use my time efficiently.”

Class 3 offered more complicated results. The statement “I do not wish to use on-line learning materials since I am not good with computer” increased 28.3%. When we see the percentage of each item, “am interested in” increased 3.3%, from 46.7% to 50.0%. On the other hand, the increase of “I do not wish to use on-line learning materials since I am not good with computer” was gained by the movement from 13.3% to 41.7%. Half of the students in Class 3 were interested in using on-line materials to learn English, but at the same time half of the class did not wish to use on-line learning materials since they were not good with computers. The surveys were not designed to identify each participant, it is difficult to say one half of the class accepts on-line learning materials, and the other half does not. Examining the overlaps is needed.

The largest difference in percentages happened in the statement, “looks difficult” in Class 4. The rise was 21.9%, from 6.7% to 28.6%. Many students were interested in using on-line learning materials (pre-survey 66.7%, post-survey 50.0%). They found it might be difficult to use on-line learning materials, but they still had interests in them after using Criterion®.

The fifth section asked about their perceptions of Criterion® itself. The prompt was “How do/did you feel about using Criterion? Tell us your feeling and images towards Criterion.” The top ten differences were as in the following table.

Table 9: Main Result of Section 5

	troublesome	I think quality of my writing was improved	it was useful to correct my errors	I used it when I worked on my writing assignment
Class 1			31.3	37.5
Class 2	-60.0		26.7	46.7
Class 3		-31.7	30.0	38.3
Class 4		-53.3	30.0	

The last two statements, “it was useful to correct my errors” and “I used it when I worked on my writing assignment” are about when to use Criterion®. The students noticed when to use it after they used it. In Class 2, “troublesome” decreased from 60.0% to 0%. It seems that the first year students, Class 3 and 4, had a high hope to improve the quality of their writing by using Criterion® before they use it. The students expressed their understanding of the use of this writing tool.

The section added to the post-survey collected the comments on Criterion®. The respond rates were rather high.

Table 10: Respond Rate of Section 6

	%
Class 1	68.8%
Class 2	46.7%
Class 3	100.0%
Class 4	85.7%

Many of the comments just said “easy to use” in the parenthesis in “I wish Criterion® were more ().” More realistic comment was “I wish Criterion® could indicate where to correct and how to correct.” They could not understand that Criterion® is just a “helper” in writing. It can suggest mechanical errors and structural indications, such as a topic sentence, but it does not correct errors automatically. The students indicated that the quality of their writing was not improved by using Criterion® in Section 5. They did not notice that they were responsible to improve their own writing.

Conclusion

This study is an action research to evaluate the employment of an on-line writing tool. The length of the use of Criterion® was not very long and it was difficult to gain significant differences. From the data collected, it might be said that the participants changed their view of Criterion®. They understood the features of the tool and started to see how they could integrate it into their writing activities. At the same time, they could gain clearer picture of “writing.” Their view of writing is more practical after using Criterion®.

They also suggested the need of more understandable feedback from Criterion®. One student stated that she wanted to see her instructor’s feedback. Behind this fact, there might be a problem of understanding the feedbacks. Giving feedback has been collecting attentions from instructors and researchers. It is said that students regarded receiving feedback from their instructors as valuable (Leki, 1990, Ferris, 2006). At the same time, importance of interpretable feedbacks was pointed out (Allen et al., 2016). It is supposed that the students of this study were not satisfied with the feedback given by Criterion®. They needed more detailed and personalized interpretation of the messages.

Lai (2010) mentioned “Computer anxiety” behind the disfavor of automated writing evaluation over peer feedback. In the present study, though, the participants did not show strong disfavor towards using on-line learning materials as seen in the results of Section 4. Investigating this topic, feedback, is one of the probable further studies.

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