

Writing in a Foreign Language

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Abstract

For many Japanese students, writing is probably the most difficult skill in English. The Ministry of Education of Japan (MEXT) conducted research on the English proficiency of the third year (senior year) students of high school in 2014 and 2015. They reported that in writing and speaking the scores of tests were significantly lower than in reading and listening. What can reduce writing anxiety, or change learners' attitudes toward writing, and improve their writing?

In this study, the changes of the learners' attitudes toward writing in English and the perception of an online writing tool are examined to understand how they feel about writing. Therefore the research question was: How can introducing an online writing tool affect the English language learners' perception of writing in English?

The participants were the university students of English writing classes. The questionnaires were distributed and collected at the beginning and at the end of the semester. The survey was divided into four sections: on the targets in learning how to write in English, on using computers in learning English, and on the online writing tool. Before they used the online writing tool, they were motivated to improve their writing, but their images of writing in English were very vague and they did not know what they needed to improve their writing. But at the end of the semester, they showed more focused images of writing in English, and kept their motivation to write.

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Introduction

Writing in a foreign language, in the case of the present study, in English, is often perceived as a difficult skill. Not only perceived, but actually the scores on one test showed the differences between the skills, and writing is the most difficult skill for the Japanese learners of English. In 2014 and 15, the ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan conducted nationwide English proficiency tests (MEXT, 2015a & 2016) to the third year senior high school students. In 2015, a preliminary report on the project was released (MEXT, 2015b). It was said that the scores of writing section of the test were significantly lower than other skills', reading and listening's, and rather lower than the speaking test's scores. The test was designed to indicate the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels. The levels of this reference are divided into six, A-1, most elementary level, to C-2, most advanced level. The test conducted by MEXT, however, corresponded only from A-1 level to B-2 level. The target levels for the senior high school graduates' are between A-2 and B-1 levels. The scores of the reading and listening sections of the test were primarily between A-1 to A2 levels. In the cases of writing and speaking sections of the test, not all test takers could take any scores. 13.3% of the students either did not answer or took 0 point on the speaking test, and 29.2% on the writing section of the test. MEXT pointed out in the report (2015b) that all skills needed to improve but especially writing and speaking proficiency should be improved. They also mentioned the lack of opportunities to write and speak in English in class. In other words, writing and speaking proficiency should be improved, and in order to develop these skills, we must increase the opportunities to use English to write and to communicate verbally in class.

If this perception changed into fear, it is said to be rather harmful in language learning. Cornwell & McKay (1999) conducted a research on measuring negative feelings towards writing, and found significant correlations between those feelings and the scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). They also concluded that the experiences of writing in English in high school affected the students' feelings towards writing in English. Between negative feelings towards writing and writing achievement, Al Asmari (2013) reported there was a negative correlation. Having fear, or negative feelings towards this skill, writing, seems to lead a vicious circle of negative effects.

If learners' perceptions towards writing is connected to the quality of writing, and giving opportunities to write in English will help improve the writing proficiency, can increasing opportunities to write in English change the students' perceptions towards writing in English? In this study, by employing the on-line writing tool, Criterion®, into the classrooms to increase the opportunities to write in English as well as to reduce the teachers' workload to give feedback, how students' perception towards writing in English and using an on-line writing tool were affected was investigated.

Methodology

This study aimed to investigate the students' perception of writing in English, learning with on-line learning materials, and Criterion®, an on-line writing tool. To study the perception, survey was chosen as a method of investigation. The questionnaires were conducted before and after using Criterion® in the spring semester in 2016. The

survey is in the multiple-choice style with space for comments. There are four questions: 1. How do you feel about writing in English? 2. What do you wish to improve in writing? 3. How do you feel about learning English using on-line learning materials? and 4. Criterion® is a writing tool. What image do you have toward it? The participants were asked to mark all of the opinions or feelings they have towards the question.

Criterion®

Criterion® is an on-line writing tool. It can give a feedback to a submitted written text. This writing tool was developed by Educational Testing Service (ETS), and using e-rater®, which is used for evaluating written texts on TOEFL iBT®, to give feedback (see <http://www.cieej.or.jp/toefl/criterion/>). Since this college is using TOEFL® test for streaming the English classes, it is acceptable for the students to use Criterion® for improving their writing proficiency.

Participants

The participants of this study were the first year college students in Japan. This college emphasizes on English education, and all of the students have to take 15 credit hours during the first two years. The classes are streamed according to the scores on Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and, when possible, students' wish. Class size is rather small, with 15 to 20 students in one class. There are four writing classes in the program, one class in each semester. The class meets once a week for 90 minutes. In one semester, there are 15 lessons. The questionnaires were given to two classes, 14 and 11 students. The same instructor taught these two classes. Each class submitted 96 submissions altogether. That indicated each student submitted the written texts and received the feedback 3 or 4 times.

Findings

The first survey was distributed on May 31 and the second in July. The results of the questionnaires will be analyzed under each question. The fourth question is different between the first survey, which was conducted at the beginning of the semester, and the second survey, at the end of the semester, since the first survey asked the students' image towards the writing tool before they actually use it, and the second survey investigated the feelings after they used the tool.

Q1: How do you feel about writing in English?

The item which indicated the largest change between the first and second survey is "It (writing in English) takes time." In the first survey 64% of the students marked this item, but in the second survey 40% of them marked it. There is a reduction about one quarter, 24%, in the answer. The second largest difference was seen in the item "I cannot write fast", 48% to 28%. The third largest was "I do not know what to write about (28% to 12%)." Seeing these items, it can be said that the students felt more familiar towards writing in English after using the writing tool. There are two items, "I do not have enough vocabulary (60% to 72%)" and "I am interested in writing (4% to 16%)" to show the 12% increase. The students showed more interests, but at the same time they seem to notice what they need to improve their writing proficiency.

Other three items are showing rather small changes; “It (writing in English) is difficult (72% to 64%)”, “I feel anxious if I make a grammatical error (68% to 60%)”, and “I wish to be a better writer in English (88% to 80%).”

Q2: What would you like to improve among the aspects of writing in English?

There are five items to choose and space for comments. Five items are: accuracy, speed, expressiveness, vocabulary, and fluency. Except “vocabulary (56% to 56%)” there are some changes. The changes are, “accuracy (76% to 88%)”, “speed (36% to 20%)”, “expressiveness (72% to 76%)”, and “fluency (20% to 24%)”, but not very large. The results indicated the students’ attention paid more on accuracy and less on speed.

Q3: You think using the on-line materials, or computer to learn English is/are?

Three items showed decline: “I would like to try it (40% to 20%)”, “I cannot make time for this (24% to 8%)”, and “It looks/sounds difficult (32% to 16%).” The students did not want to use on-line materials or computer to learn English, but they showed less fear and noticed it was not as time-consuming as expected. Interestingly, the item “I am interested in it (60% to 72%)” suggested more complicated feeling about using such materials. They showed interests to those materials and technology, but were not enthusiastic to try a new one.

Q4: What would you expect to Criterion®? / How did you feel about using Criterion®?

The items in this section presented more changes than in other sections. There were the largest changes in two item, “I think it (Criterion®) will help/helped me correct my grammatical errors (52% to 92%)” and “I want to use/used it to revise and to improve my writing (20% to 60%).” The students did not expect Criterion® much, but after they used it, they learned how to utilize it. The other item on usage of this writing tool, “I want to use/used it when I work on my assignments (36% to 60%),” was also well utilized. They felt less fear to use it, “It looks/sounds/was difficult to use it (28% to 4%),” and they knew they utilized it well, “I think I can use/used it well (0% to 24%).” As a result, they presented their opinion about using Criterion® as in the item, “I want to keep using it (40%),” which was asked only after they used the tool. In the items about the feelings, “It looks/sounds/was interesting (20% to 44%)”, “It looks/sounds/was fun to use it (4% to 24%),” the students enjoyed using it in practicing writing in English. Though, the item, “I think it will help/helped me improve my writing quality (44% to 20%)” indicated there would be a more complex feeling towards using this tool, but the survey did not probe this problem deeper.

Conclusion

In the present study, the students' perception of writing in English and using an on-line writing tool was investigated. At the end of the semester, the students showed more interests in writing in English, but at the same time, they started to think how to improve their writing proficiency. They also expressed interests more on accuracy and less on speed of writing. This tendency to emphasize accuracy in writing might come from the types of the feedback Criterion® provided. As Heffernan & Otoshi (2015) pointed out, the feedback Criterion® provided and the instructors provided are different.

The students indicated their motivation to improve their writing proficiency was not affected by receiving writing instructions and feedback on their writing. Rather, most of them, around 80% of them, kept their motivation throughout the semester. We cannot decide that result is caused by the use of the writing tool, but practicing writing can be a promoting factor of making better writers. Additionally, using the on-line writing tool lessened fear towards using on-line materials and computer to learn English, but did not invite the students to try a new material yet.

Other enigmatic results are in the 4th section. The students' answers indicated their acceptance of this writing tool. The tool was useful for correcting their grammatical errors and they used it for writing assignments, but they did not feel it did not improve the quality of their writing. There is a possibility that the participants did not recognize having fewer grammatical errors in writing as improvement of the quality of writing. Further investigation, such as interviewing the participants, is needed.

In conclusion, employing this writing tool in class might increase the opportunities to write in English and, therefore, help the learners to improve their writing proficiency.

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