

Action Research Final Report Spring 2018

1. “Developing Strategies for Improving Students’ Written Skills”

2. Context

1) Level: Senior High, Third Year Students of English major class. Their abilities range from low-intermediate to high. Team-taught. Table 1 shows gives some indication of students’ ability and its distribution, as measured by the EIKEN national English proficiency test which is strongly promoted by the school.

2) Subject: Third Year English Writing Class. 2X50 minute periods per week, in succession.

3) Textbook: EFL Press “TOPIC TALK ISSUES”: text is used as a base for lessons, yet not strictly adhered to. Generally, lessons are supplemented with the use of extra materials.

Table 1: Highest Level of EIKEN Achieved

EIKEN Level	Number of Students
Pre2	13
2	12
Pre1	4
TOTAL	29

Table 2: Main Language Spoken at Home

Language	Number of Students
Japanese	20
Spanish	2
Portuguese	3
Tagalog	4
TOTAL	29

4) Class: 29 (26 girls, 3 boys). Most students are Japanese, although there is some variety in ethnic backgrounds, such as with the language spoken in the home, as Table 2 above shows, with students of Brazilian, Peruvian and Filipino backgrounds. Additionally three Japanese students were returnees, having spent some years during their childhood, living in the USA, due to their parents’ work.

5) Problems:

- This year's content of the lessons has undergone considerable change to better reflect it being a genuine writing class, as opposed to a hybrid- free-writing and Japanese-sentence-translation class. Numerous changes have been made to student assessment. Also, regular examinations, where students would write in a high-pressure environment, have been eliminated. Changes to lesson content has involved extensive trialing of new activities with appropriate adjustments being made to both maintain students' motivation and better develop their written skills. The defining of what actually constitutes an improvement in written skills is problematic, with the balancing and possible inherent contradictions in developing the worthy twin goals of boosting students' volume of output and at the same time, quality of their writing.
- The development of an appropriate rubric for the take-home writing assignments proved challenging to say the least, and went through multiple incarnations before I settled on one that seemed to work best for the particular needs of my students.

3. Goals:

- 1) To ascertain the effectiveness of timed-weekly flash writing activities on the written output of students, as measured by the number of words written per student within a ten-minute time frame. At the start of the year the goal was for all students to write at least 100 words. However, due to the rapidly rising word-counts during first semester, this goal was revised upwards to 150 words.
- 2) To devise ways of increasing students' written volume and speed generally, while maintaining the quality of the writing.

Available research on the promotion of writing ability skills suggests concentrating on volume of output, at least in the initial stages. In a 1986 study, Robb, Ross, and Shortreed found that writing "improved less as a result of feedback on errors than as a result of having additional opportunities to write" (from 'Lee and VanPattern, 2003, p.269). Hence, I would like to provide ample opportunities for students to write, while making them aware of the importance of essay style and construction. With the latter in mind, I would like to set take home essays which can be drafted and rewritten. Thus, I need to develop an effective rubric to ensure quality standards are being maintained, and that students receive appropriate feedback about their written work. A well-designed rubric may assist in the process of the marking of papers, which currently takes considerable time. As periodic exam week tests have

been eliminated in this subject, it is even more important to develop a rubric of integrity and in which students trust.

- 3) To ascertain and break down students' attitudes to the effectiveness of the class a whole and its separate components, so as to make adjustments to next year's classes to ensure the process set in motion this year is continued and built upon.

4. **What I did:**

- Regular examinations were replaced with students submitting a file of their work at the end of each of the three semesters.
- Japanese-translation sentence activities were completely eliminated. All activities, assignments and portfolio are now based on English free writing activities.
- The textbook "Topic Talk: Issues" is theme-based and conducive to allowing students to explore various issues, writing first about them in a general manner and then following this up in more detailed pieces of writing.
- Weekly ten-minute "flash writing" sessions were introduced, which were not assessed, in order to motivate students to take risks and write as freely as possible. As a prelude to these flash writing sessions I prepared warm-ups as a means of exercising students' minds on that particular topic set for that day. Post-flash writing students conducted word counts, filled in their own record sheets and handed these in for me to record.
- I trialed and then eliminated students engaging in peer-correction of one another's pieces of flash writing with mixed reactions. Individual interviews conducted in September produced neutral to negative reactions. Some students felt embarrassment while others expressed the view that peer correction can only be beneficial advice as to overall impression of ideas expressed or possibly spelling correction. There was a general feeling that correction of sentence structure, grammar and so on needs the integrity of a teacher's input.
- I taught basic forms of writing, such as paragraphs, indentation, and essay introductions, body and conclusions. Also, the process of how individual components of writing are linked and expanded,

such as the concept of topic sentences and clearly outlining an argument, adding information and giving examples, contrasting, introducing a consequence and summarizing.

- About once in two weeks I set major homework written assignments. These assignment topics were based on the flash writing topics carried out in class, related activities and discussions done during class. Students were given a two-week deadline for final submission. Second semester topics were as follows:
 - 1) Write a review or the film: “Passengers” (which we viewed in class, as I conducted individual students with students to gain an insight to their views of our lessons)
 - 2) “Japanese schools are too strict”: Do you agree or disagree?
 - 3) “Movies and TV shows are a bad influence”: Do you agree or disagree?
- By the end of the year I had developed a student record sheet on which students can record their weekly word counts and easily hand in to me to record tallies. (see Appendix). It included a section for students to assess the difficulty level of each of the set topics, which may prove beneficial in assessing students’ progress in word count output in the future.
- I developed a writing rubric, that I believe sufficiently meets the needs of my students.
- I used the various speaking, listening, reading and writing activities present in the text “TOPIC TALK ISSUES” to further students interest in the topic studied on that day. I supplemented these with my own additional activities for warming up students on the topic in question.
- Based on individual interviews conducted in September, I came up with the idea of students making their own page on a topic on which they had a personal interest. These pages would be worked on in pairs, with appropriate titles, pictures and designed with the intention of producing a digital version to be attached to our school’s webpage. Hence, the intended audience was at a completely different level than previous writing activities. This was an ongoing project over nearly two months, and produced high quality work which gave students a sense of pride and achievement in their work.
- In third semester, I had students compose a few sentences about each of their classmates, who had for the most part, been their classmate for the three years of their senior high school schooling. They then wrote out these sentences on separate small pieces of colorful origami paper and walked around

the classroom, reading out what they had written to the student involved, handing over the paper to the student. After all students had received 29 pieces of paper from their classmates containing positive comments about themselves, they stapled and bound them into small booklets. This was an highly successful and motivating activity, which produced a momento that students will treasure for a long time.

5. Results:

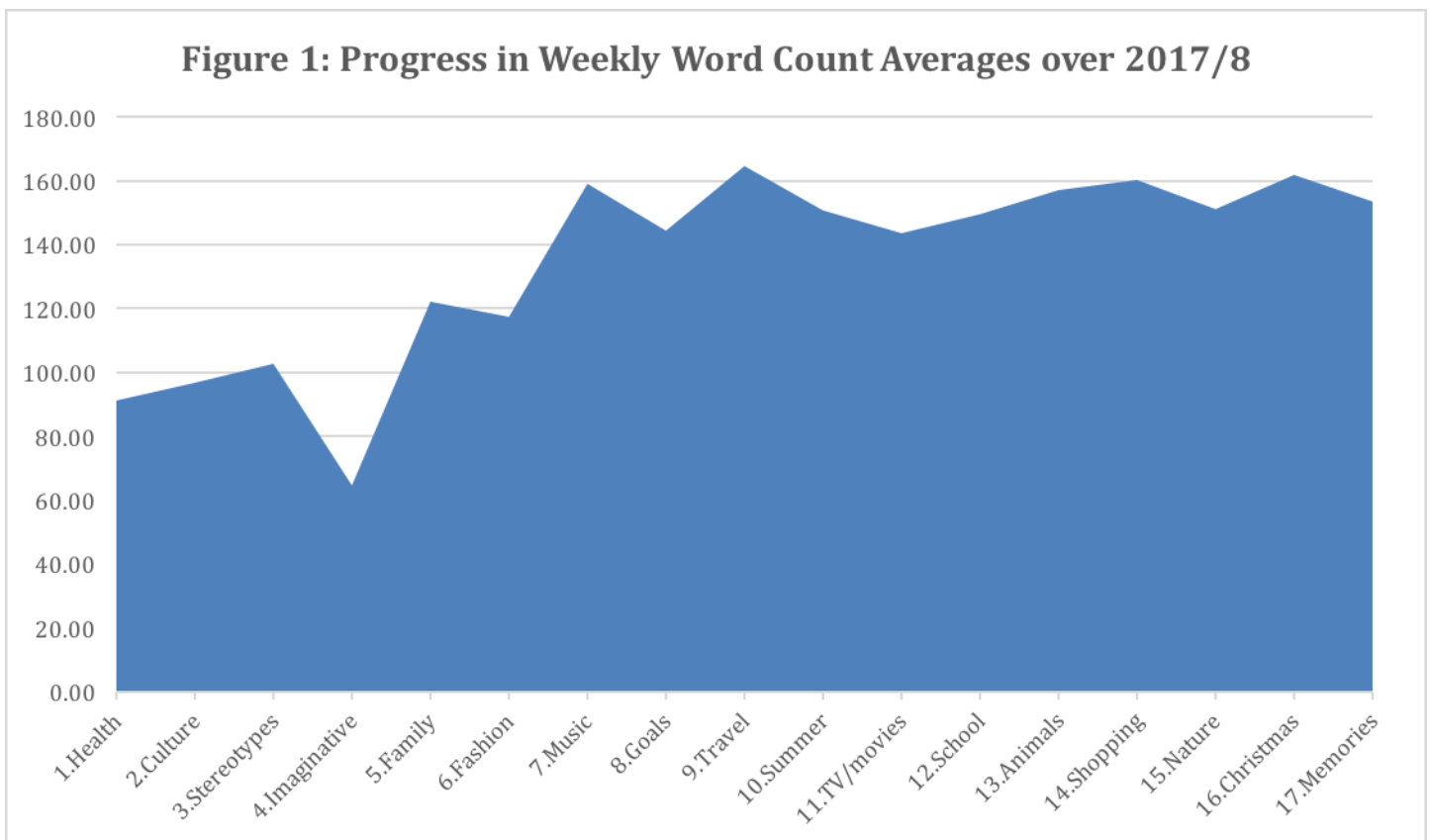
Overall, my target class' students have steadily increased their writing output during the first semester (from April to July), as measured by number of words written within ten minutes of flash writing. The first week of second semester saw a drop in word counts, from an average of 164.8 to 150.9 words. I attributed this to the long, six-week summer vacation break, where students engaged in little writing practice other than a film review assignment I had set. (*see Table 1 which records the results from the last week of first semester, "Travel", to the last week of third semester*).

There was considerable fluctuation in tallies over this period, with some students recording increases, and others, decreases. (*see figure 1: "Progress in Weekly Word Count Averages over 2017/18"*).

Over the course of the year I was able to have students conduct 17 flash writing sessions. The first week in April produced an average of 91.21 words, which peaked in the last week of first semester at 164.8 words, before falling to 153.6 words in the last week of third semester. The popularity and/or ease in writing about the individual set topics undoubtedly had some effect on the results. Topics which tend towards "listing" or provoking visual images in the mind (such as: Week 9's "Travel", Week 14's "Shopping" and Week 16's "Christmas") typically produced word count tallies of 160 words or more. In comparison, topics which probably entailed deeper thought and a more complex organization of ideas (such as: Week 7's "Summer Vacation", Week 15's "Nature" and Week 17's "Memories of the last 3 years") typically produced word counts of under 154 words.

Table 1: Weekly Tallies of Students' Flash Writing Word Counts										
Student No.	9.Travel	10.Summer	11.TV/Movies	12. School	13. Animals	14. Shopping	15.Nature	16.Christmas	17.Memories	Word Count Change
1	121			125	98	200	131	154	129	6%
2	145	130	147	150	152	158	99	130	117	-24%
3	361	289		220	261	333	294	221	288	-25%
4	45	125	82	96	114	137	132	150	91	51%
5	200	225	194	201	201	161	181	168	177	-13%
6	196	177	174	175	187	158	188		163	-20%
7	145	100	103	137	141	107	113	154	142	-2%
8	83	74	102	69	82	93	86	108	93	11%
9	205	161	193	174	191	170	200	202	153	-34%
10	111	55	108	145	137	132	156	141	140	21%
11	144	108	128	116	143	150	140	136	134	-7%
12	90	120	65	89	104	77	65	104	86	-5%
13	237	205	155	190		194	200	268	255	7%
14	178	165	160	160	132	114	94	154	153	-16%
15	172	173	137	144	172	164	153	164	161	-7%
16	254	224	238	262	268	278	269	294	253	0%
17	232	251	214	229	231	226	230	253	218	-6%
18	121	124	130	144	157	144	144	158	159	24%
19	135	110	140	132	134	157	125	126	101	-34%
20	168		161	154	165	148	100	130	145	-16%
21	110	102	103	112	124	143	112	96	125	12%
22	102	101	109	105	108	136	115	108	95	-7%
23	188	168	151	173	203	180		196	164	-15%
24	112	127	83	100		90	94	130		14%
25	146	106	139	119	118	133	126	134	143	-2%
26	84	60		54	52	60		52	60	-40%
27	176	155	115	122	136	154	149	151	98	-80%
28	149	133	121	131	97	123	91	137	155	4%
29	369	305	284	307	330	332	291	311	303	-22%
Average	164.7931034	150.8518519	143.6923077	149.4827586	156.962963	160.4137931	151.037037	161.7857143	153.6071429	-8%

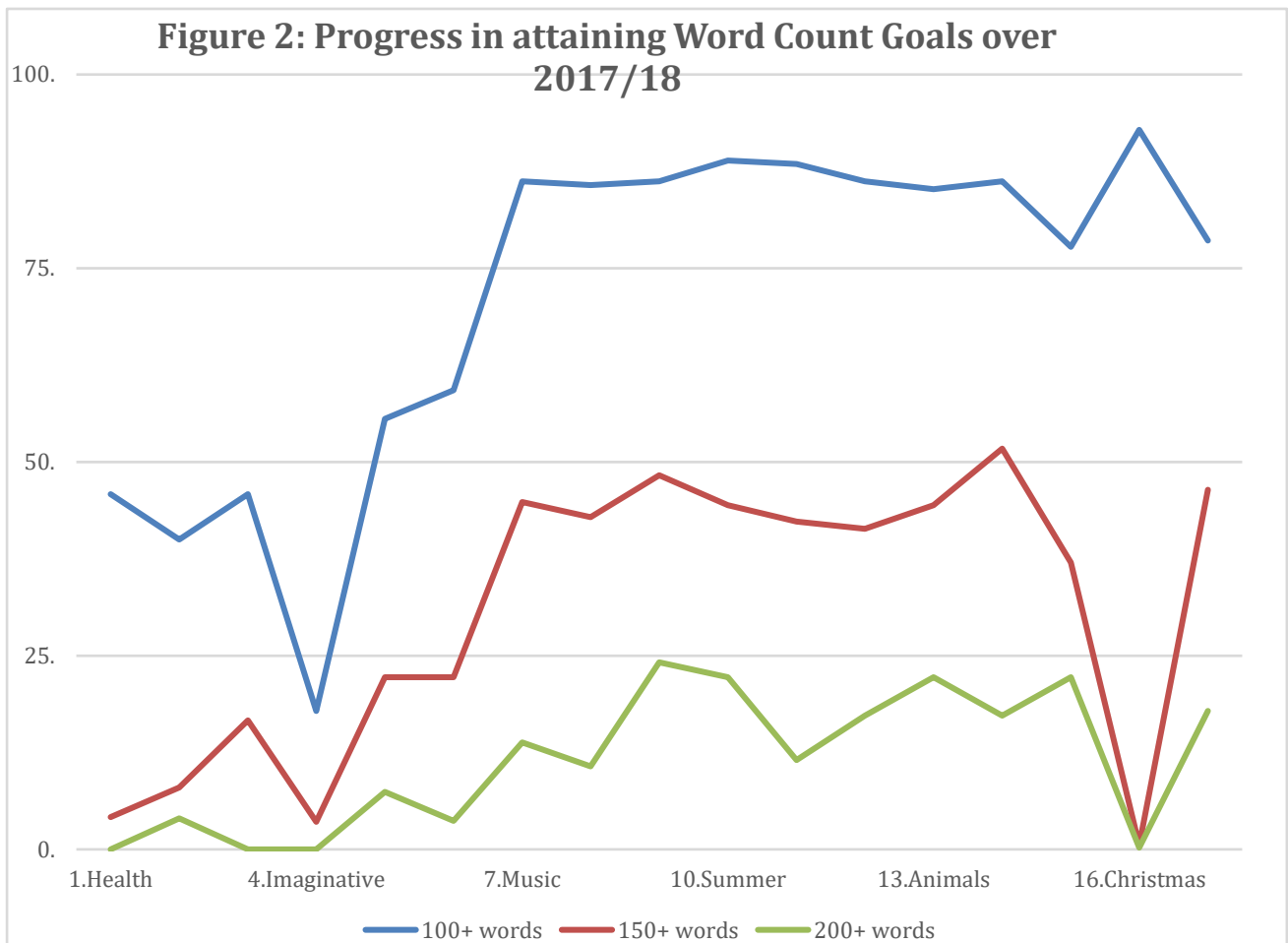
source: weekly tallies taken from student record sheets



source: weekly tallies taken from student record sheets

Overall, there was an eight percent drop in word count during this period. However, a comparison of students who had absences with those with no absences during this time frame showed the eight students with absences having an 11.1% drop. Those students who attended class every single week showed a considerably smaller 3.2% drop over the same time period. This data suggests a correlation that points to the need for students needing to practice flash writing consistently in order to maximize word count output. Intermittent breaks over summer vacation and during the semester have a detrimental effect on word counts.

Another approach to measuring the success of the weekly flash writing is the attainment of word-number targets. For first semester I had aimed for all students achieving at least 100 words words. By the end of first semesters “Travel” flash writing session, 25 out of 29 students had achieved this goal. Hence, I revised this figure upwards to 150-plus words, from the beginning of second semester. (see Figure 2: “Progress in attaining Word Count Goals over 2017/18”)



source: weekly tallies taken from student record sheets

From the outset of second semester at least 77.8% of students (and sometimes as many as 92.9% of students) attained the goal of one hundred-plus words. As for the revised goal of 150-plus words, between 37% (Week 15: “Nature”) and 53.6% (Week 16: “Christmas”) of students

successfully achieved these benchmarks. Looking at students who achieved 200-plus word counts, the figures ranged from 11.5% (Week 11's "TV & Movies") to the highest figure of 22.2% (in both Week 13's "Animals" and Week 15's "Nature").

Revised Rubric for Writing Assignments

Considerable experimentation with various incarnations of rubrics throughout the year culminated in my settling on the following revised and simplified rubric. (see Table 2 below)

Table 2: Revised Rubric for Take-home assignments

CATEGORY						POINTS
		1	2	3		
A: IDEAS		Shows only basic or very simple ideas.	Shows some research, originality and/or examples	Shows considerable research, originality and/or examples.	/3	
B: STYLE		Style lacks interest and words used are mostly those taught at junior high.	Shows some style and interest. Made some effort to choose appropriate words.	Style is very interesting. Words are well chosen and level appropriate.	/3	
C: STRUCTURE		Little evidence of argument development, introduction and/or conclusion.	Shows some development of argument. Basic introduction/ conclusion.	Arguments well developed. Good introduction/ conclusion.	/3	
D: USAGE		Shows numerous errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation, which impede comprehension.	Shows some errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation, but does not unduly impede comprehension.	Shows few or no errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.	/3	
E: PRESENTATION		Pays little attention to neatly displaying writing, which impedes comprehension.	Shows mostly neat handwriting and some evidence of paragraphs and indentation.	Shows neat handwriting and well set-out paragraphs and indentation.	/3	
F: WORD COUNT	1	2	3	4	5	/5
TOTAL						/20

Foremost in my mind was the need to create one that appropriately paid respect to aspects of writing, with 25% of the available marks assigned to volume of words (Category F: WORD COUNT). This rubric sub-category would be calculated thus: take the highest word count student and divide by five. For example, if the highest count was 200 the awarding of points would follow: 200 divided by 5 = 40, so 0~40 words = 1 point, 41~80 = 2 points, 81~120 = 3 points, 121~160 = 4 points, and 161~200 = 5 points.

The remaining subcategories were settled on as follows:

A: IDEAS. This was intended to reward students who showed evidence of originality and/ or research into the set topic.

B: STYLE: Well-chosen words and interesting sentences that engage the interest of the reader.

C: STRUCTURE: This reflects the importance of clear and concise introductions, development of arguments in the body of the essay and conclusions.

D: USAGE: This reflects the importance of the conventions of correct spelling, grammar and punctuation so as to create a piece of writing well understood by the reader.

E: PRESENTATION: From the first lesson I have emphasized the importance of paragraph-writing and indentation, which along with neat and legible handwriting can maximize comprehension of the piece of writing in question.

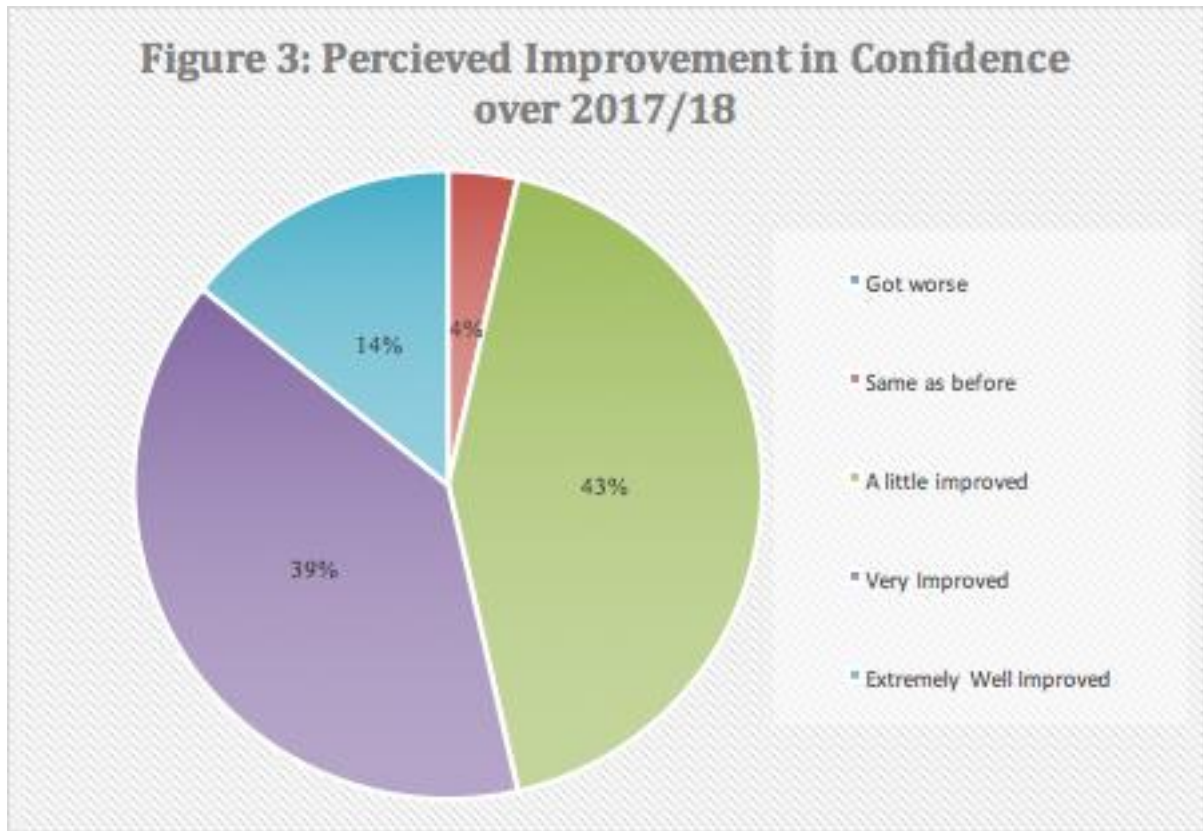
The five categories A to E were weighted at 3 points each, with the final category (F: WORD COUNT) weighted at 5 points, for a total of 20 points. These assignments and second semester's online magazine project pages made up most of the grade assessment for the class. Students were able to achieve an average of 14.4 points out of 20 for these take-home assignments, as shown in the following Table 3:

Table 3: Take-home Assignment Grades Throughout this Year

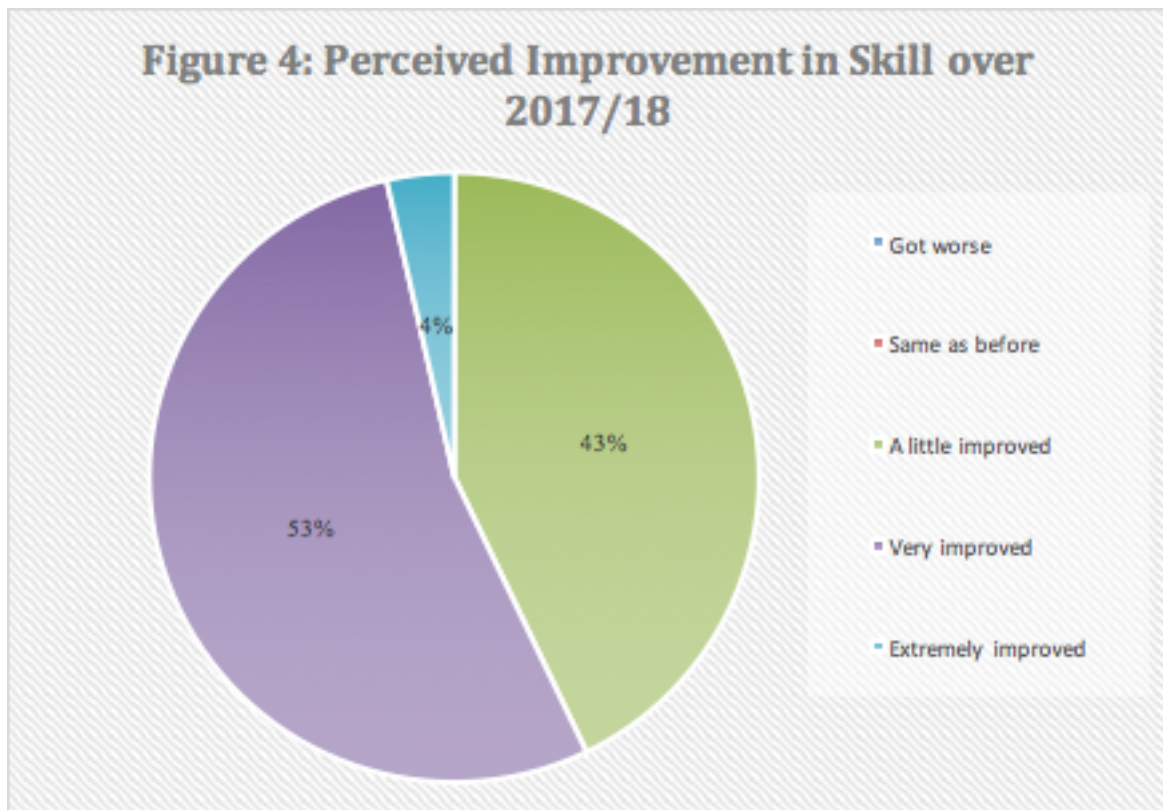
Student No.	Partner's He	Homestay	Self-Image	Summer Film	"Passengers"	Strict School	Movie Influe	Average
1	18	14	16	17	18	16	16	16.4285714
2	15	18	15	15	14	11	14	14.5714286
3	17	16	20	19	19	20	17	18.2857143
4	15	19	11	14	12	16	16	14.7142857
5	13	10	13	13	12	16	14	13
6		14	12	12	15	14	14	13.5
7	15	13	15	14	12	13	15	13.8571429
8	14	15	10	13	12	11	15	12.8571429
9	16	15	14	17	13	15	15	15
10	14	14	11	12	10	12	15	12.5714286
11	16	17	14	12	12	15	0	12.2857143
12	12	13	8	13	11	12	12	11.5714286
13	17	14	14	14	18	15	19	15.8571429
14	11	11	11	12	11	12	11	11.2857143
15	15	18	15	17	17	17	18	16.7142857
16	17	19	18	19	19	19	19	18.5714286
17	16	19	18	17	18	18	18	17.7142857
18	16	14	12	13	12	13	14	13.4285714
19	18	17	18	15	17	17	14	16.5714286
20	17	18	15	15	14	16	14	15.5714286
21	16	14	13	14	14	13	14	14
22	13	12	11	13	15	13	14	13
23	17	18	19	17	18	18	19	18
24	14	18	13	14	13	12	0	12
25	16	18	16	14	12	15	17	15.4285714
26	13	7	9	11	0	11	0	7.28571429
27	16	12	12	15	13	14	12	13.4285714
28	13	18	9	14	0	10	13	11
29	20	20	19	20	18	20	20	19.5714286
Average	15.3571429	15.3448276	13.8275862	14.6551724	13.4137931	14.6206897	13.7586207	14.4254046

Year-End Questionnaire

I conducted a third and final questionnaire during the last class of the year to ascertain students' thoughts on the year as whole. Students were surveyed on their impression on how their confidence and skill levels had changed since April 2017. No respondents indicated that these levels "got worse". Four percent reported their confidence had stayed the "same as before", whereas the biggest proportion of respondents (43%) indicated it had improved "a little". 39% and 14% of respondents respectively reported that it had "very improved" or "extremely improved". (see figure 3. Source: final questionnaire question 5; n=28)



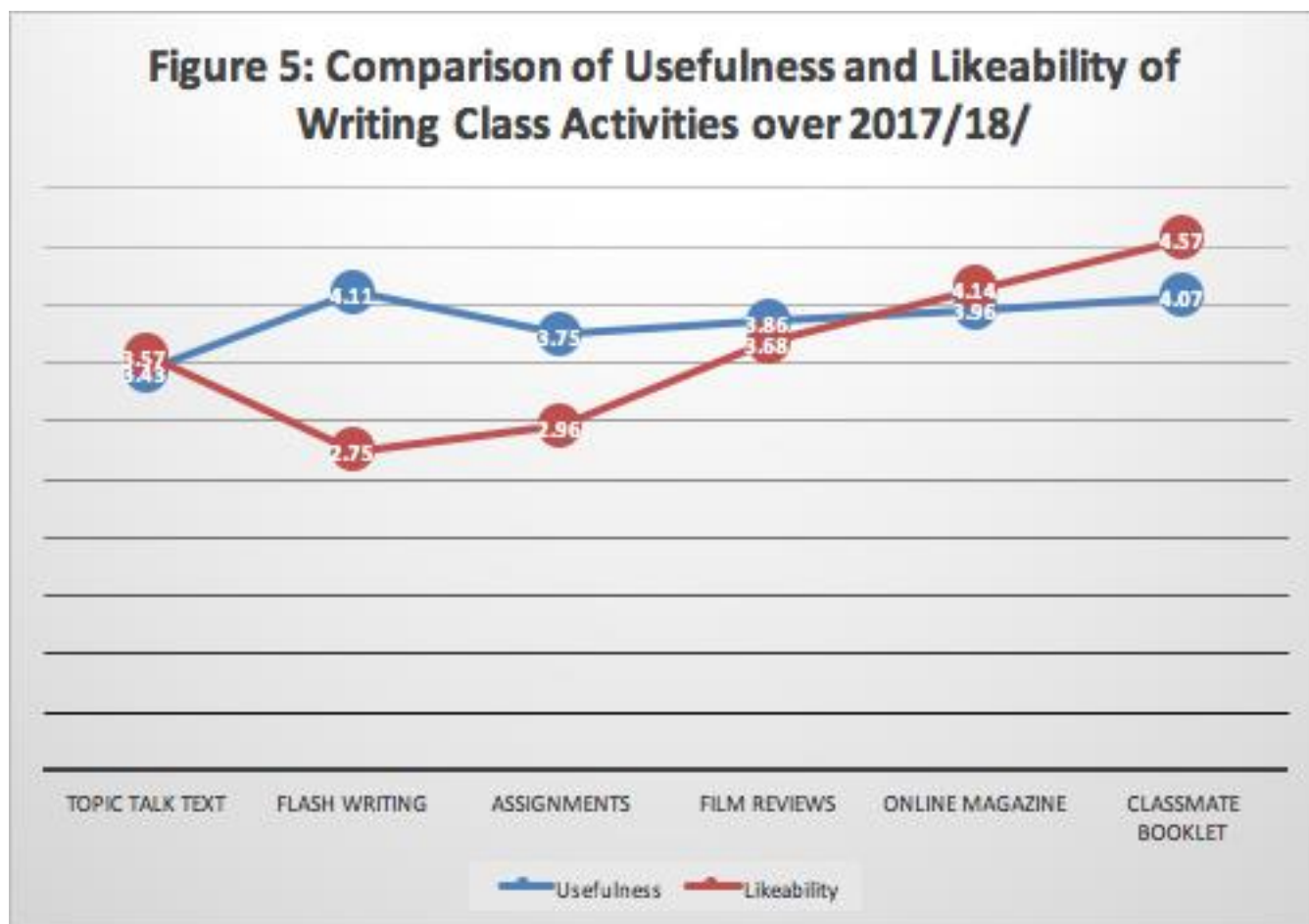
Alternatively, all students perceived their skill in writing had improved, with the largest proportion (53%) responding that they had “very improved” their skills. 43% chose “a little improved” and 4% “extremely



improved”. (see Figure 4. Source: final questionnaire question 6; n=28).

Hence, students expressed improvements in their confidence levels over the year, and perhaps more importantly, believed their writing skill had improved even more so.

Lastly, I quizzed students on how they felt the main activities we attempted during the year had improved their English and the extent to which they liked these same activities. The results are shown in Figure 5 below.



Source: Final Questionnaire questions 7 & 8.

Judging from this data, third semester’s “Classmate Booklet” activity was the most liked activity while also being considered the second most useful activity. Significantly, the most useful activity was considered to be “Flash writing”. The “Online Magazine” activity was also highly rated, being the second most liked activity of those surveyed, and the third most useful. The least useful activity was considered to be using the “Topic Talk text”, although the fact that we skipped and did not use vast sections of it may have influenced this result. The least liked activity was “Flash Writing”, possibly as students had to write under considerable concentration and pressure during the activity. Its high usefulness rating demands I continue with it as a feature of Writing classes into the future.

6. What I learned

Looking back over the year I am grateful for the opportunity to develop and improve my lessons through the cyclical process of Action Research. I attempted a considerable range of ideas, activities and projects over the twelve months in question, and settled on many improvements that are bound to become a mainstay of my Writing lessons into the future. The provision of three questionnaires throughout the year and one-on-one interviews with students proved invaluable in providing a rich source of data and a potential pool of ideas to assist me in creating the best lessons possible. Positive feedback from students in the last class really topped off what was an amazing year with an amazingly positive and hard-working class of students. (See Table 4)

Table 4 : Sample open-ended responses to: “Finally, do you have any other comments for teachers?”
1. "Thank you for one year! I really enjoyed this class. I couldn't write my opinion in English before but now I can write so many!"
2. "Thank you for three years. I think my writing skill is very improved."
3. "Thank you for teaching us about a lot of thing that language, culture and information!!"
4. "Thank you for teaching me English. Thanks to you I always enjoy in classes. I keep studying English!"
5. "At first, I didn't like class of writing, but I became to like little by little. I feel that this class is very useful. Thanks for wonderful class!."
6. "Thanks for teaching us for three years. I'll miss you because your class was really fun."
7. "Thank you so much for helping me improve my English skills."

Source: Final Questionnaire question 9.

7. Future Issues

Next year I will be in charge of third year Writing class again, and I would like to see the response of the new group of students to the activities I tried this year. The new group's character is widely seen as completely different to their seniors. In particular, they are considered more passive and considerably less responsive. Analyzing data from the new class and attempting to account for differences may prove beneficial in my action research overall. Additionally, I would like to further investigate ways to integrate the teaching of writing skills with speaking, listening and reading skills. The current curriculum in place may require changing, and the imperative for this only enhanced by the new course of study brought into Japanese high schools and associated changes for university entrance requirements. The issue of improving English writing skills is an important one that has had a tendency to have been neglected in Japanese schools up until now. Yet a wider question needs to be considered of how the teaching of these skills fits into the overall context of improving the four skills generally and how to link the teaching of these skills so as to maximize students' overall English ability.

8. Appendix

Sample Lesson Plan: “School”

Goals:

- 1) To have students flash write for ten minutes at least 100 words on the topic “School”
- 2) To engage students on issues related to the topic of the lesson with the aim of preparing to produce an essay- take home assignment on the topic: “Japanese schools are too strict”.
- 3) To develop writing skills and speaking skills.

Time	Interaction	Activity and Procedure
6	T-Ss	Greet and introduce topic, including showing a few minutes video comparing a day in the life of a Japanese and an American high school student. Go over a few sub-topics in the text, such as “uniforms”, “rules”, “clubs”, “cleaning duties”, “single-sex vs coed schools”..
10	Ss-Ss	Have students stand up and talk in pairs for a minute on 3 of these sub-topics
10	S	Have students flash write on the topic: “School”
12	S, Ss-Ss	Have students count the no. of words written. Then cover their writing and summarize what they wrote to their partner
12	Ss-Ss	Have students go back to the sub topics page and discuss in small groups about what aspects of the Japanese school system they would like to “keep” and what they would like to “get rid of”. The next lesson will be preparation for writing an opinion essay on “Japanese Schools are Too Strict”.

Total time:

Teacher-Students: 6 minutes

Students: 14 minutes

Student-Student: 30 minutes

End-Year Final Questionnaire:

Male 男 Female 女

* Please circle the **best** answer:

1. What is the highest level of EIKEN you have passed? 3 Pre2 2 Pre1 1
 どこまでの英検レベルを合格しましたか？
2. Before entering Anjo Gakuen, what contact did you have with the English language?:
 安城学園入る前どのように英語接してきましたか？
 1= no contact コンタクトがない。。。 5= a lot of contact コンタクトがたくさん
- A) through friends/ relatives 友達・親戚 1 2 3 4 5
- B) through music 音楽 1 2 3 4 5
- C) through TV/movies テレビ・映画 1 2 3 4 5
- D) through social media ソーシャルメディア 1 2 3 4 5
- E) through conversation or cram school(s) 塾・英会話スクール 1 2 3 4 5
- F) through living in an English speaking country 海外に住んだ 1 2 3 4 5
- G) through joining homestay/ study abroad programs ホームステイ 1 2 3 4 5
3. About when did you write your first original English written sentences?
 初めて英語の文章を書いたのはだいたいいつごろ？
- a) 0-5 years old 5歳まで
- b) elementary school years 小学校のころ
- c) junior high school years 中学校のころ
- d) high school 1st grade 高1のころ
- e) high school 2nd grade 高2のころ
- f) high school 3rd grade 高3のころ

After taking this writing class for almost a year, compared to April how do you now feel about:

一年間の WRITING クラスが終わって、四月の時に比べてみると。。。。

* Answer key: 1=got worse 2= the same as before 3= a little improved 4= very improved 5 = extremely improved
 悪くなった 前と同じ 少し良くなった とても良くなった 非常に良くなった

4. your confidence in writing? 1 2 3 4 5
 あなたの WRITING の自信？
5. your skill in writing? 1 2 3 4 5
 あなたのライティング能力について：

6. How much do you feel the following classroom activities improve your English?

次の授業活動がそれぞれどのぐらい役に立ったと思いますか？

1=not at all useful 2= not so useful 3= useful 4= fairly useful 5 = very useful
 全然役に立たなかった そんなに役に立たなかった 役に立った 結構役に立った とても役に立った

A)	TOPIC TALK の教科書使うこと	1	2	3	4	5
B)	10分間の FLASHWRITING	1	2	3	4	5
C)	宿題アサインメント	1	2	3	4	5
D)	映画のレビュー	1	2	3	4	5
E)	オンライン MAGAZINE ページ作り	1	2	3	4	5
F)	クラスメートの思いでブックレット	1	2	3	4	5

7. How much did you like the following classroom activities?
次の授業活動がそれぞれどのぐらい好きでしたか？

1=I hate it 2= I don't like it 3= it's ok 4= I like it 5 = I enjoy it
嫌いだった あまり好きじゃなかった 普通だった 好きだった 楽しかった

A)	TOPIC TALK の教科書を使うこと	1	2	3	4	5
B)	10分間の FLASHWRITING	1	2	3	4	5
C)	宿題アサインメント	1	2	3	4	5
D)	映画のレビュー	1	2	3	4	5
E)	オンライン MAGAZINE ページ作り	1	2	3	4	5
F)	クラスメートの思いでブックレット	1	2	3	4	5

8. Finally, do you have any other comments for teachers?

Thank you for being a great class of students this year! I appreciate your understanding this year!!

Student Record Sheet:

FLASHWRITING WORD COUNT STUDENT RECORD SHEET

Name: _____

THEME	1. Health	2. Culture	3. Stereotypes	4. Short Film	5. Family	6. Fashion	7. Music	8. Goals	9. Travel
1st Semester									
Level of Difficulty	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1
THEME	1. Summer	2. TV/Movies	3. School	4. Animals	5. Shopping	6. Nature	7. Christmas		
2nd Semester									
Level of Difficulty	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1		
THEME	1. Memories								
3rd Semester									
Level of Difficulty	5 4 3 2 1								

Class 3-1- _____