

Article

The Impact of Creative Writing on L2 Writer Confidence

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Abstract

Earlier research I conducted indicated that students lacked confidence in their L2 writing and in their ability to express themselves in their L2. It was hypothesised that creative writing could have an impact on these areas. Over the course of the 2019 academic year, third-year English majors in a Japanese university enrolled in a creative writing program completed a “Language Skills Assessment,” kept a learner diary under freewriting conditions and took part in semi-structured interviews which were conducted at the end of the year. Despite a small sample size, the results were positive. Results from the questionnaires showed an upturn in self-assessment of L2 writing ability. Word count in freewriting activities showed an increase indicating a concurrent increase in writing fluency, an indicator of increased confidence. Responses in learner diaries and in the semi-structured interviews supported these results, and students were clear that creative writing was a significant factor in their increased confidence regarding L2 writing.

Keywords

Confidence, motivation, academic writing, creative writing, identity

1 Introduction

In 2019, I began teaching a creative writing course at a Japanese university, the first time that university had offered such a course. Earlier research I had conducted (Maloney, 2019, 2022) indicated that students lacked confidence in their L2 writing and in their ability to express themselves in their L2. The changes to the writing programme in 2019 were, in part, a response to a perception in the department that the previous academic writing course had not met the students’ needs or goals.

These goals, as stated in the aforementioned earlier study (Maloney, 2022) concerned being prepared for careers that involve using English in both an academic environment (study abroad programmes) and a work environment after graduation. While the academic writing course did an excellent job preparing the students to join English L1 institutions (usually in their third year of study) and to meet the demands of course work there, the students expressed concern that a thorough grounding in APA style and the five-paragraph structure left them feeling unprepared for the kinds of writing a corporate life would necessitate: emailing clients and colleagues, and writing memos and reports.

In order to meet these concerns, third-year English majors were offered a series of compulsory electives including business writing, thesis writing and creative writing. Previous studies which will be discussed in the literature review section suggested that Japanese EFL students lacked confidence and harboured negative beliefs concerning L2 writing (Maloney, 2022). I therefore hypothesised that creative writing could perhaps be a useful tool for combating this problem. As I will discuss further in the literature review section, there is a deep connection between confidence, motivation and fluency, and I hypothesised that if creative writing could have an impact on students' confidence, that would in turn influence motivation and fluency. This hypothesis led to the research question: could creative writing have an important influence on students' confidence?

In order to test this hypothesis, three times during each semester the students completed a "Language Skills Assessment." This was a Likert scale questionnaire in English and Japanese which asked them to assess their ability to complete certain tasks in English. Every two weeks (seven times per semester) the students completed a learner diary under freewriting conditions. These were analysed for qualitative content and word count was logged. At the end of the year, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups of students consisting of four members in group one and three members in group two.

The results indicated that self-reported student confidence had increased over the year, and that their negative beliefs about L2 writing had changed. Results from the questionnaires showed an upturn in self-assessment of L2 writing ability. Word count in freewriting activities showed a definite increase indicating a concurrent increase in writing fluency, an indicator of increased confidence as I will go on to show in the literature review. Responses in learner diaries and in the semi-structured interviews supported these results, and students were clear that creative writing was a significant factor in their increased confidence regarding L2 writing. The research question proposed was whether creative writing could be part of the solution to a problem most language learners have encountered.

While this study was conducted in the context of a Japanese university, self-confidence is not an issue restricted to Japanese learners of English. Through the work of theorists like Dörnyei (2005, 2006, 2009), we can see that self-confidence is intrinsic to second language acquisition in all contexts. As such, it is one implication of this study that creative writing could be beneficial across the spectrum of language-learning contexts internationally.

2 Literature Review

The initial thinking behind this study was informed by previous studies into confidence, motivation and writing fluency, and specifically the impact creative writing could have on those areas. Underpinning the previously stated research question was the work of Dörnyei (2005, 2006, 2009) and Ushioda (2009, 2013), but in this context specifically Dörnyei's *The psychology of the language learner* (2005) and their jointly edited book *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (2009). In second language acquisition, identity and motivation have come to be seen as key factors. Dörnyei (2005, 2006, 2009) and Ushioda's (2009, 2013) studies and theories have highlighted and unpacked the role identity and imagination play in SLA motivation, an important driver in continued study and progression.

The revolution in this field, led by Dörnyei (2005), was "the shift of focus to the internal domain of self and identity" (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009, p. 3) away from external sources. Dörnyei (2005) created the L2 Motivational Self System to explain the process by which a language learner motivates and continues to motivate themselves. His system is built on the foundation of the ideal self, "the representation of the attributes that someone would like to possess" (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009, pp. 3-4). This works in conjunction with their ought-to self, "the attributes that one believes they ought to possess" (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009, p. 4). In other words, their second language acquisition motivation is inextricably entwined with their self-image, their sense of who they are now and who they would like

to be in the future.

Dörnyei's system puts identity and imagination at the heart of successful second language acquisition. However, as Norton (2000) points out, that isn't the end of the matter. Language acquisition takes years—perhaps a whole lifetime—and so motivation, and under the umbrella of motivation, identity and ideal/ought-to selves, cannot be said to be a fixed constant. In the language classroom and in the L2 environmental context, pressure from many directions comes to bear on the language learner. This is where the complexity, flexibility and subtlety of Dörnyei's (2009) theory can be seen. Since the concepts of the ideal and ought-to selves are predicated on imagination and imagery (Dörnyei, 2009), it forms a dynamic feedback loop with the language learner. The imagined future self motivates language learning in the present, while progress within the language (and experiences such as studying or living abroad and using that language) in turn update and alter the nature of the future imagined selves, prolonging and freshening motivation. This is why his separation of motivation from external sources and the division between “future self-guides versus future goals” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 15) is so powerful. The motivation that makes a junior high school student study hard for a language test is not the same motivation that makes the same person study abroad at university, join in multilingual activities when they are in their thirties or read a novel in their L2 when they are in their sixties. As our identity changes over time, so too our imagined future selves (Nitta, 2013). This shift in emphasis is particularly relevant in Japan, the context in which this study took place, where motivation is often seen purely in terms of future goals - usually passing exams or achieving promotion (Ryan, 2009; Ushioda, 2013), with little or no reference to L2 personal identity. In Dörnyei's (2005) system, personal identity is returned to the heart of second language acquisition.

Where this system becomes particularly relevant for my study is contained in Dörnyei et al.'s 2006 book *Motivation, language attitudes and globalisation: A Hungarian perspective* (2006). In this study the authors formulate a “structural equation” to represent the variables that feed into SLA motivation. Alongside factors such as cultural interest, milieu and attitudes towards L2 speakers, self-confidence is notably presented as a vital cog in the mechanism. As my earlier study (Maloney, 2022) had shown that self-confidence was clearly an issue for some students, it follows Dörnyei's (2006) schemata that this would also be affecting their motivation. This conclusion is further supported by Csizér and Kormos (2009).

I am dwelling on Dörnyei's (2005, 2006, 2009) theories at this point in order to establish firstly, the importance of self-confidence in language acquisition since from a pedagogical perspective any instructor looking to better aid their students would do well to look into this area, and this paper suggests one possible approach, namely creative writing. Secondly, I am lingering on Dörnyei's (2005, 2006, 2009) theories in order to lay out the connective pathway between creative writing, increased self-confidence and language acquisition so that the results of this study can be understood in context.

The role which imagination plays in Dörnyei's (2005, 2006, 2009) process opens a clear route for bringing creative writing into the story. Creative writing is, in a sense, a catch-all term for non-academic writing (Maley, 2012), while Pelcova (2015) defines it as all writing that prioritises self-expression. In the language classroom, creativity is often, at best, an afterthought despite an increasing body of work testifying to its efficacy across a range of significant areas (Liao, 2012; Maloney, 2019; Smith, 2013; Sullivan, 2015). Removing limitations and widening focus can have beneficial consequences (Schrader, 2000). Studies by Smith (2013), and Tok and Kandemir (2015) show how creative writing can bring low-frequency vocabulary into use, while Smith (2013) goes on to show how creative writing can also help with pronunciation. Maley (2012) and Pelcova (2015) demonstrate positive benefits for grammar. All the above examples show that creative writing specifically, and creativity more generally, are powerful tools in language acquisition.

Allowing students to be creative can have positive effects beyond the nuts and bolts of language acquisition. Sullivan (2015) and Bussinger (2013) have shown how creativity can empower students and lead to greater autonomy, echoing Hyland's (2019) concern that by dictating content and themes to

writing students disconnects them from the subject which, in turn, has harmful effects on motivation. Maloney (2022) delves into this topic, exploring student disengagement with L2 writing on two fronts: the first reflects Hyland's (2019) and Sullivan's (2015) findings that students disconnect from the topic of their paper when they feel no ownership of it. The results of my earlier study (Maloney, 2022) showed that students believed L2 writing was difficult, boring and not particularly useful in their language acquisition careers. The second finding from my study (Maloney, 2022) relevant here is that students suffered from a lack of self-confidence in their ability to express their ideas, emotions and opinions in their L2.

As earlier outlined, the purpose of this literature review is to establish a theoretical link between creative writing and self-confidence within the larger framework of Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System. This is a relatively new area of exploration in creative writing studies, hence the need to spell out the steps on the road. However, while the connection between creative writing and L2 identity is still a relatively fresh pasture, Zhao (2015) has been a pioneer in the field, and her contributions to it cannot be underestimated. Her 2015 book *Second language creative writers: Identities and writing processes* is an important milestone in the exploration of this subject. Taking as already established the benefits creative writing has for second language acquisition, she moves focus to creative writing's utility in promoting "self-identification and hence self-esteem, which in turns feeds into positive motivation for language learning" (Zhao, 2015, p. 2). There is an understanding that for the language learner, L1 and L2 identity can be different (though not completely: "bi-directional cross-linguistic transfers in bilingual speakers should be expected" (Zhao, 2015, p. 16)) and that this identity develops over time.

To bring the argument full circle, this is where the sphere of L2 creative writing theory and pedagogy intersects with Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System. Work by Elbow (1973), Liao (2012), Listyani and Tananuraksakul (2019), and Zhao (2015) suggested that creative writing can have a beneficial impact on both confidence and motivation (connected as they are in Dörnyei's (2006) schemata) without strong statistical evidence, as the issue of confidence wasn't central to their research. Elbow (1973) showed how freewriting could remove anxiety from the equation by bypassing the self-censorship process. Spiro (2014) showed a direct negative link between anxiety and writing fluency, a finding implicitly backed up by Clark and Ivanič (1997). The motivation for this research was the lack of statistical formality regarding the measurement of confidence in these earlier studies together with my desire to put the claim that creative writing can have a positive impact on confidence on a solid foundation.

L2 creative writing "provides the medium for the performance of certain personas which could surpass the roles for the L2 individuals as language learner, student, or just writer" (Zhao, 2015, p. 17). Writing is "a social practice consisting of a complex set of physical, socio-political, cognitive and affective elements" (Clark & Ivanič 1997, p. 81) and authorial voice is to a large extent performative (Hyland, 2019).

At this point it is worth taking a moment to clarify what I mean by voice and writer identity. Spiro (2014) suggests that voice is the way in which a writer's identity, or personality, shows through their work. Clark and Ivanič (1997, p. 134) go so far as to state that "writing cannot be separated from the writer's identity." This may be true in a genre like memoir, for example, but it becomes more problematic when dealing with fiction where writers regularly adopt voices and modes of discourse (Keen, 2015). Bakhtin (1981) shows how all novels are polyphonic and his theory can be extended to all texts. Writers display a number of different selves through their writing (McKinley, 2017). Clark and Ivanič (1997) go so far as to claim that there is no such thing as a singular writer's voice. They posit three categories of voice, or "subject positions": the autobiographical self, the discursal self and the self as author (Clark and Ivanič, 1997, p. 137). The second and third categories are ones which the L2 student is familiar. The discursal self is the representation of the writer in the text, the "I think" taking a position in an argumentative essay. This is a form of mimicry all students are familiar with, where we "take on

identities inscribed in the particular conventions” (Clark and Ivanič, 1997, p. 143). This is what is taught in academic writing classes (Maley, 2012). The self as author is the author’s “own voice in the sense of its content rather than its form” (Clark and Ivanič, 1997, p. 152). These are the ideas that come after “I think,” the student answering the writing prompt given by the instructor. It is the autobiographical self that is most difficult for L2 writers because it is embedded in the form the language takes, in how the author uses language to exhibit their identity. Identity, however, isn’t a single, fixed, constant thread through life, but rather “the view of identity as a dynamic, complex, and changeable construct is increasingly supported by contemporary researchers” (Chin, 2014, p. 123). Spiro (2014), drawing on Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), shows that, as progress is made in L2 acquisition, particularly for those living in the context of the target language, a distance is created from L1. This process includes a “loss of linguistic identity” (Spiro, 2014, p. 27), in effect a loss of voice through which the autobiographical self can be exhibited and by which connections can be made to others. People are forced to construct a new identity to replace the one which has, in essence, been silenced. The new identity of course is not truly new, rather it is a “hybrid” (Ibid., p. 28), a mixture of the old identity refracted through the new language. Chin (2014) shows that this isn’t a process that happens in isolation, rather it is one done in a “community of practice” (Chin, 2014, p. 120), be it within the classroom or a wider migrant community. This is where creative writing can be of value:

L2 creative writing could be employed by L2 learners as an empowering symbolic tool of “counterdiscourse” that provides opportunities, perhaps denied in many L2 learning activities, to construct and perform agentive and authoritative subjectivities through imaginative, creative, personal or aesthetic self-articulations (Zhao, 2015, p. 25).

Through creative writing therefore, learners can develop and exhibit imagined future ideal selves that will, in turn, feed back into their motivational system (a system in which self-confidence is vital). They can also use creative writing as a safe space in which they learn how to express their identities, their ideas, opinions and emotions. This process should then resolve into increased confidence in their L2 ability in general and their abilities with these tasks in particular. This is a theory that underpins the field of art therapy and trauma treatment (van der Kolk, 2014) has even been applied to the development of confidence and reflective skills in student nurses (Cronin & Hawthorne, 2019).

To summarise, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) has demonstrated that self-confidence and SLA motivation are directly related, while scholars such as Zhao (2015), Elbow (1973) and Spiro (2014) have all shown that an increase in confidence or a removal of anxiety about ability can have important effects on writing fluency. It was upon this foundation that my hypothesis was based. This paper goes on to explore whether creative writing could have a positive impact on learner confidence and beliefs concerning L2 writing in a specific context, and thereby support the ideas summarised above.

3 Method

In order to test my hypothesis that creative writing may be beneficial to students’ confidence and therefore have a positive effect on their motivation and writing fluency, I designed a mixed-methods study using triangulated data collection to minimise researcher bias and provide overall richness. Scheduling conflicts limited the course to one 90-minute class each week, while caps kept class sizes small.

3.1 Research site and participants

The class consisted of third-year English language majors at a Japanese university. All the students were of Japanese ethnicity and had lived Japan all their lives with Japanese as their L1. The year is divided

into two 15-week semesters (April-July/September-January). In the first semester there were 15 students in the class and 16 in the second. The change was a result of the university's study abroad programme: one student from the first semester departed during the summer vacation, while two others returned and joined the class in September. These students were not included in the data collection although they did participate in every activity. The gender balance in the class was 13 females to 2 males in the first semester, and 14 females to 2 males in the second semester. This is broadly in keeping with the school population which has a roughly 80: 20 female:male split. The 14 students included in the study were 12:2 female:male. The data discussed in the results section comprises that collected from the 14 students (labelled students A to N in the results) present in both semesters.

Entrance to the university required students to be around B2 on the CEFR scale although fluency varied across the student body and classes were not streamed. Due to the structure of the Japanese school system, students tend to do well in exams but less well in communicative tasks. Students took communicative English classes, intensive and extensive English reading classes, as well as culture and history courses taught in Japanese. The majority of students would study abroad in an English-speaking country at least once during their four-year degree, either on a programme during the vacations or on one of the half-semester or year-long programmes.

For the first two years of their university career, every student in the Department of British and American Studies enrolled in an academic writing programme. This course met once a week for 90 minutes. Over two years the students were taught to write five-paragraph researched argumentative essays in the APA style on a variety of topics including gender equality, Japan's aging population, immigration and renewable energy. By the end of their second year, they would have written seven papers of this type. As previously stated, students expressed low levels of confidence in their general L2 writing ability and tended to view L2 writing ambivalently at best, and often negatively overall. Students did sufficiently well to pass their courses (failure rates were very low) but, since their needs and goals extended beyond graduation, they didn't view passing as a measure of success.

In their third year, students were offered a range of *compulsory electives* from which they had to choose one course. Changing elective between semesters was not permitted. The electives included business writing, journalism, academic writing, thesis writing, and creative writing, amongst others.

The creative writing class was based on an extra-curricular course I had been teaching at the university for the previous two years. In semester one the focus was on travel writing (unit one) and poetry (unit two). After the summer vacation the class moved on to script writing (unit three) and short fiction (unit four). Work was submitted and graded at the end of each unit. Classes consisted of writing workshops looking at specific aspects and techniques related to the unit genre while students worked on the writing that was to be submitted outside of the classroom. For instance, in unit one (travel writing), they would do activities related to descriptive writing, to drafting catchy opening paragraphs, and to writing dialogues. In unit two (poetry), each week would be devoted to a specific form (haiku, acrostics, concrete) leading to a portfolio of poems at the end of the unit. For unit three (script writing) we focused on radio drama, looking at exposition through dialogues. For unit four (short fiction) the emphasis was on narrative arcs, drawing on skills learned in the previous units, such as character development and dialogue.

In the last two weeks of each unit, they engaged in peer review activities and received feedback on their drafts from the teacher. Most students had never taken a creative writing course in English before, though a few had engaged in creative writing in their L1. No experience of creative writing prior to joining the class was required or expected.

It is worth noting at this stage that my initial aim was to conduct this study as action research, but the outbreak of the coronavirus in the following academic year (2020) required moving the course online for the entire year, meaning lessons from 2019 couldn't be implemented. A change of institutions in 2021 provided a further obstacle to implementation.

3.2 Data collection

During the first lesson, the students were asked to complete a 13-question Language Skills Assessment (LSA) presented in English and Japanese (and reproduced in full in the appendix). The LSA was developed with reference to previous work by Dörnyei (2003) and Shachter's (2018) "Nervousness Metric." On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being "Not at all confident" and 10 being "Very confident," students rated their confidence to carry out various tasks in English such as writing an essay (question one), explaining their opinions clearly (question four), or helping a lost tourist in Japan (question nine). Some questions were directly related to the creative writing course: write a story (question three) and write a haiku (question seven) while others were unrelated (question 11: order coffee in a Starbucks in the USA). This mix was designed to give an overall sense of their L2 self-confidence and thus provide context for the creative writing-related questions. The questionnaire was presented in both Japanese (L1) and English (L2). A full example of the questionnaire can be found in the appendix. The questionnaire was completed in weeks 1, 7 and 15 of both semesters.

Every second class beginning in week 2 and culminating in week 14, the students completed a freewriting activity. Each student was given a lined A4 sheet of paper. The same type of paper was used by each student in each iteration of the activity. This was an attempt to remove any psychological variables that may be brought in by differences in paper size (filling a B5 sheet seems less daunting than A4, for example) or layout. The students were given a prompt and a time limit of 10 minutes regulated by an alarm timer. As per Elbow (1973) and Spiri (2020), they were instructed to keep writing for the full 10 minutes without stopping to read, edit or erase. They were encouraged to keep writing even if they couldn't think of anything to say or had exhausted the perceived possibilities of the prompt, changing subject or writing "I don't know" until a new idea occurred to them. As Elbow (1973) notes, this encourages production and removes fear of the blank page, which, this study hoped to show, which is to lead to an increase in writing fluency reflecting an increase in self-confidence. The connection between freewriting and increased writing fluency is long established and has been clearly demonstrated in studies by Clarke and Walker (1980), Hwang (2010) and Patterson (2014) as well as being the basis for Elbow's seminal work *Writing without teachers* (1973).

In addition to their well-documented benefits (Schrader, 2000), the freewriting activities had a two-fold aim. Firstly, it was hoped that the private and ungraded nature of the activity combined with frequent repetition leading to familiarity would lead to increased confidence. This would be shown by an increasing word count across the semester and across the year, since confidence and fluency are connected (Elbow, 1973; Liao, 2012; Zhao, 2015; Listyani & Tananuraksakul, 2019). Secondly, since the writing prompts directed the students to concentrate their attention on their writing, their experiences in class, their homework, their English use in general, and their freewriting activities acted as a learner's diary, and therefore captured their reflections as their skills developed. Some of the prompts were specifically related to the creative writing course, such as "What do you think will be different between this class and your previous academic writing classes?" and "What is poetry?" Others were more general such as "What do you like to read in your free time?" The rationale behind using prompts related to creative writing was to try to explore their beliefs and attitudes towards the subject and to see if anything relevant to the study surfaced. The rationale behind mixing in more general or light-hearted prompts was to see if the thematic nature of the prompt had any impact on word count and therefore on fluency. This two-fold aim would therefore provide both quantitative and qualitative data to bring to bear on the hypothesis. A full list of the prompts is provided in Appendix B.

Finally, in week 16 of the second semester (so once the 15-week semester had ended) two semi-structured interviews were conducted. The first was with four students, the second with three, each of whom volunteered their time. Two interviews were conducted because there was no time when all seven students were available together. I knew all seven students well having taught them in a variety of classes over the previous three years, so the atmosphere was relaxed and friendly. Each interview began

with the prompt “So what did you think of creative writing?” and developed from there along natural conversation dynamics. The interviews were wide-ranging and covered many aspects of L2 writing as well as English study and their university experiences more generally. Both interviews were recorded on video and separately as audio (as a backup) with the students’ written permission. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and were fully transcribed.

It was hoped that the combination of quantitative data produced by the LSA questionnaires and the analysis of word count in the freewriting activities, combined with qualitative data from the content of the freewriting activities related to creative writing, and the semi-structured interviews would confirm the hypothesis that creative writing can have a positive impact on L2 learner’s self-confidence.

3.3 Data analysis

LSA responses were collected and logged after each iteration. Freewriting output was collected at the end of each iteration. Word count for each student was logged and responses coded through deductive coding first to filter responses relevant to the study and then to categorise by theme: confidence, motivation, identity, positivity towards creative writing, negativity towards creative writing, positivity towards academic writing, negativity towards academic writing. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and coded according to the same parameters as the freewriting output.

4 Results

At the end of each semester, I analysed and collated the data collected. Given the large parameters set and the diversity of collection methods, a large amount of data was accumulated over the year. This paper seeks only to explore a section of those results as they relate directly to the hypothesis of this paper. Thus, for example, I will focus only on three of the 13 questions in the LSA and will not bring work from the students’ portfolio into this paper at all, since it does not directly address the topic.

4.1 LSA

The LSA was designed initially to get a broad understanding on each student’s confidence in their general English ability, so a number of the questions had no direct bearing on writing per se. In the design stage of this study and based on experiences from an earlier study (Maloney, 2022), I envisaged a situation whereby students may have a high level of confidence in their communicative ability, for instance, but a low level of confidence in their writing ability. It was hoped that this design of the LSA would tease out those differences. In the end, this proved to be unnecessary as the students showed roughly the same level of confidence in their abilities across the spectrum. With hindsight, questions 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11 and 13 were superfluous but this was perhaps a feature of this group of students rather than a failure of design. The possibility of significantly higher confidence in one skill area than another is still eminently imaginable. As a result, and in order to save the reader from an overload of redundant statistics, data for those eight questions have been omitted from this paper. The questions themselves can be seen in Appendix A.

Of the 13 questions on the LSA, questions 4, 10 and 12 dealt specifically with issues of concern in forming the initial research question: 4: How confident are you that you can explain your opinions clearly in English? 10: How confident are you that you can express your emotions clearly in English? 12: How confident are you that you can express your ideas clearly in English? Questions 3 and 7 were directly related to creative writing and both saw an overall increase, so the data from those questions is included here, but as most of the students had started the year with no experience of writing a story in English

(question 3) or a haiku in English (question 7) any increase in confidence could be down to the practice effect and therefore can have no more than circumstantial bearing on the conclusions of this study. As such, I will focus mainly on questions 4, 10 and 12, which were related to areas in which the students had plenty of experience from their other classes and study abroad trips and therefore cannot be simply explained by practice effect.

In each of the figures, the Y-axis represents the possible LSA responses (1-10), while the X-axis represents the response given by each student (labelled A-N for anonymity). The figures have been constructed this way to give an easy illustration of how each student changed from the initial iteration of the LSA (LSA1) at the beginning of the academic year to the final iteration at the end (LSA6). LSAs 2-5 have been omitted in the interests of space and comprehensibility.

Figure 1

Question 3- How Confident Are You That You Can Write a Story in English?

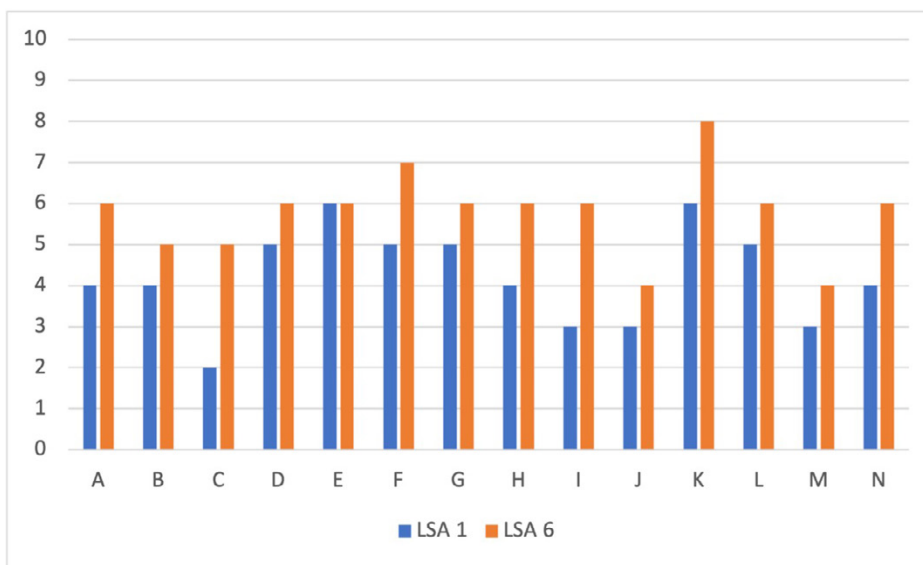


Figure 2

Question 4- How Confident Are You That You Can Explain Your Opinions Clearly in English?

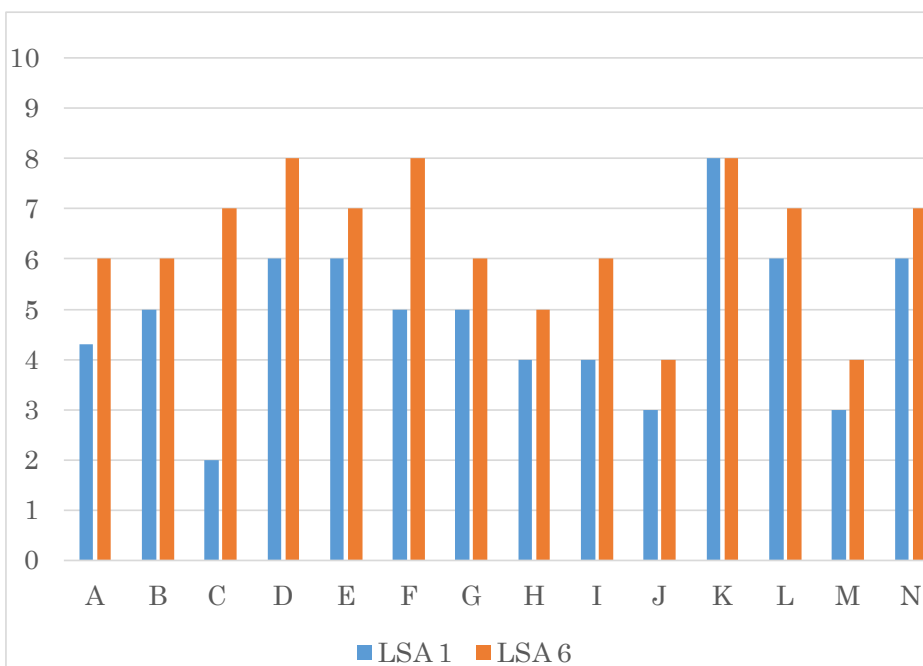


Figure 3

Question 7- How Confident Are You That You Can Write a Haiku in English?

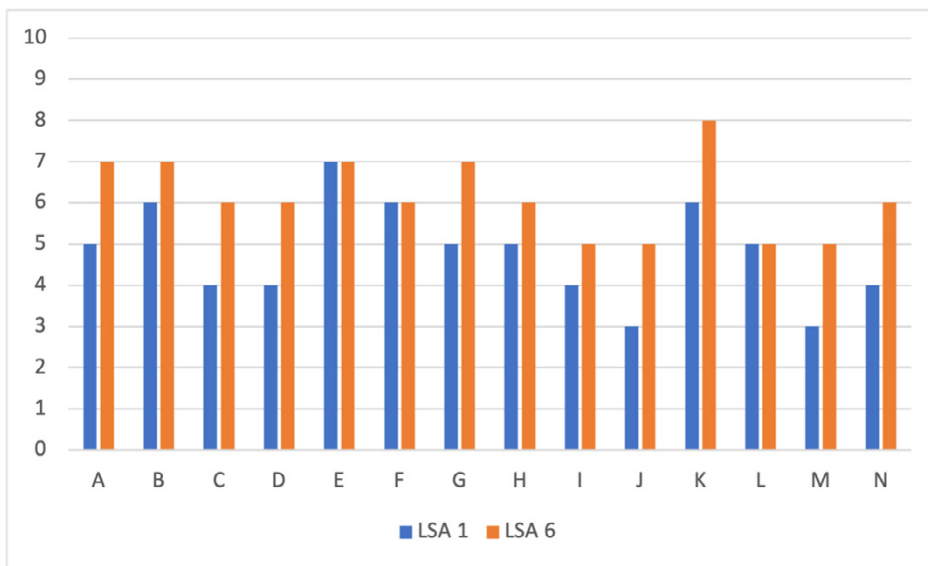


Figure 4

Question 10- How Confident Are You That You Can Express Your Emotions Clearly in English?

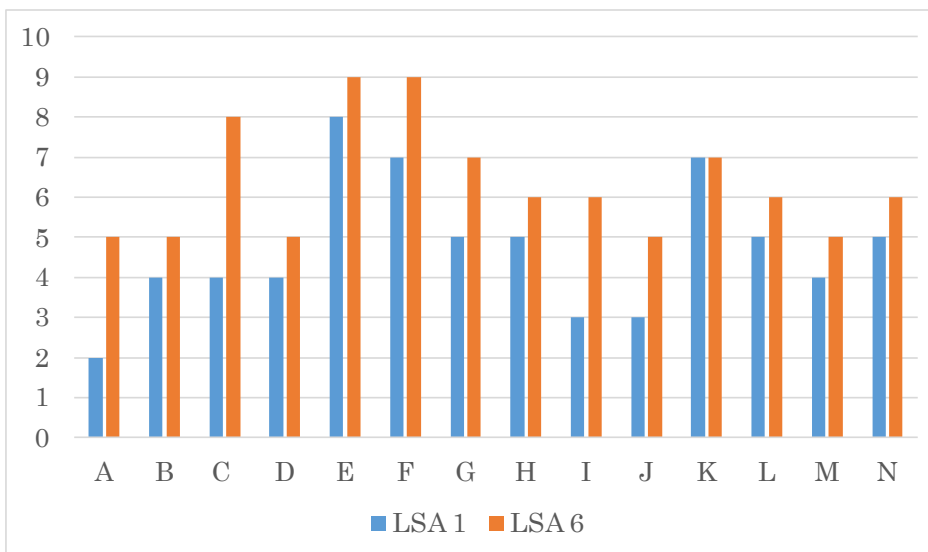
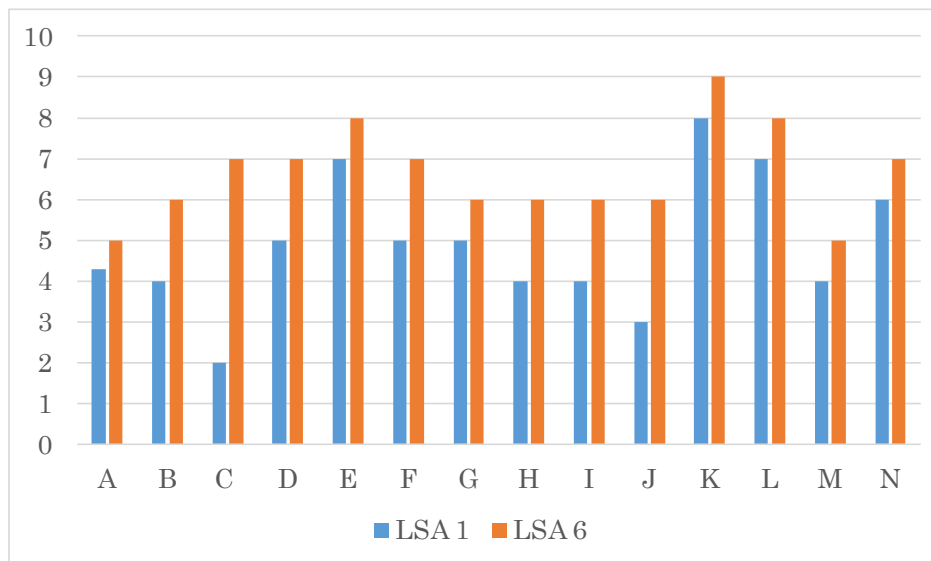


Figure 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 (see below) show the results for LSA Question 3, 4, 7, 10 and 12 in iterations 1 (semester one, week 1 and 6 (semester two, week 15), the first and last data collection point. As can be seen, some students began with very low confidence in their ability to express themselves clearly (Student C and J in particular) while others were more confident (Student E and K, for example). In all cases the students showed an increase in confidence over the year. For some the increase was only by a single point while others went up by three or four points. The biggest increase was seen in students who began the year with a low opinion of their abilities. In all six iterations of LSA data collection scores either remained level or increased. The sample size was too small for a reliable *t*-test to be conducted but the general trend is clear to see. The students' written output and qualitative data supports this.

Figure 5

Question 12- How Confident Are You That You Can Express Your Ideas Clearly in English?



As mentioned however, the results for Question 3 and 7 can be ascribed to the practice effect. None of the students had any experience of writing stories in English (Question 3) or writing haiku in English (Question 7) when completing LSA 1 but did have experience of doing this successfully by the end of the year (LSA 6). As a result, their increased confidence can simply be attributed to this experience. Therefore, I feel confident in putting these two questions aside in the further discussion.

4.2 Freewriting

Figure 6

Average Word Count Semester One

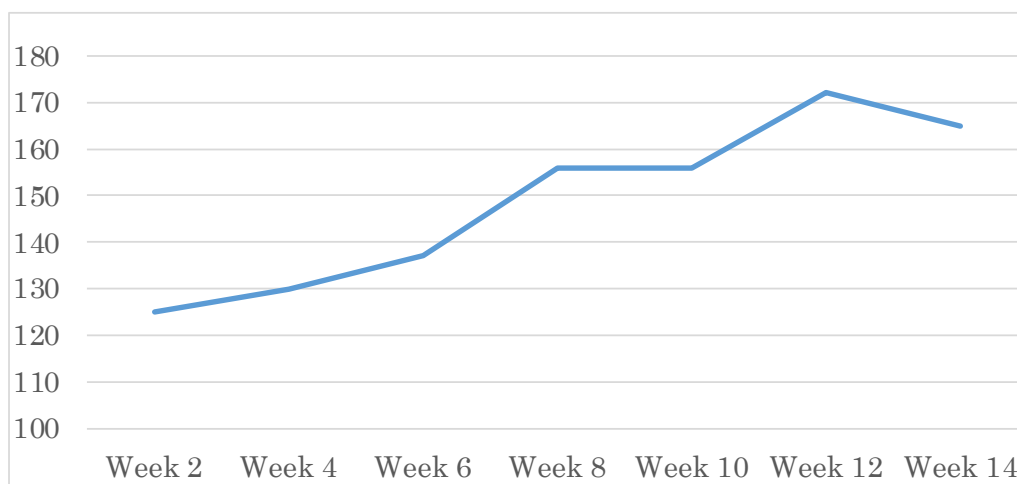


Figure 6 shows average word count in the first semester. Figure 7 (see below) shows average word count in the second semester. In the first semester the general trend is upwards showing an increase in writing fluency. Beginning at an average of 125 words written in ten minutes, performance peaked at 172 words before ending with an average of 165 words written in the same period. Semester two began with an average of 140 words per ten minutes before peaking at 172 and finishing the year at 157. Despite fluctuations which will be discussed in the next section, the overall flow shows an increase in average word count across the year.

Figure 7

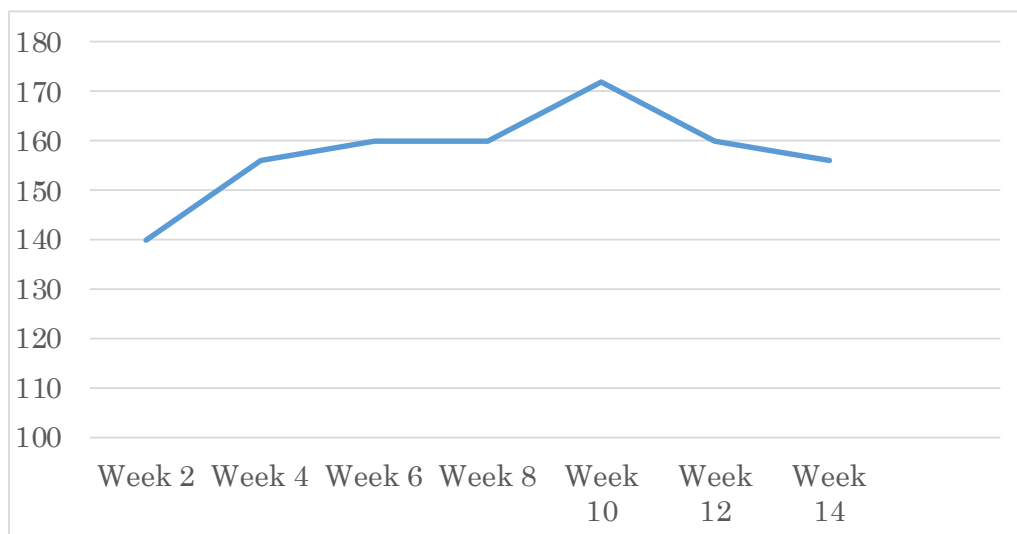
Average Word Count Semester Two

Table 1

A Sample of Freewriting Quotes

Student	Quote
B	Creative writing is good because I could write my feeling and express.
C	We can explain my thoughts by writing so creative writing can improve my writing skills.
E	It is fantastic to write creative writing in this semester. This is because I could write down my feeling smoothly and get confident with it.
G	Before I started the class, I thought it is difficult, but now I enjoyed it this semester.
M	Before I took the this class that creative writing, I did not like writing... I because like a writing more than before.
N	Freedom of writing, and new style of writing gave assignments much less stress. I haven't imagine about I would feel fun in writing class.

Table 1 shows a selection of quotes taken from freewriting activities across the two semesters. I have presented the data in this format to more easily see a connection between how students responded to the LSA and their direct comments on their experiences. Were the results grouped by coding, as is common in other studies, it would be unclear how they specifically related to the rest of the results. Students B and C directly addressed the connection between creative writing and expressing themselves, while Student E (who showed a large increase in self-confidence through the LSA results) attributed this increase in confidence to creative writing. Student M and N both mentioned feeling more positivity towards L2 writing as a result of taking the creative writing class. It should be noted that while there were a number of comments similar to those by Student M and N that showed negativity towards L2 writing in general and academic writing in particular, none expressed negativity towards creative writing. Of course, this may be down to the students not wishing to voice their negative feelings to me.

Major themes which emerged from the freewriting data reflected this sense of progress and improvement, with many reflecting on previous academic years or semesters. As new literary forms were introduced, students used freewriting to express their feelings towards the class activities.

4.3 Semi-structured interviews

Table 2

A Sample of Interview Quotes

D	I think also my skills is developed because I can write more words than before.
E	I think interesting too because academic writing is so formal and topic is difficult but this writing can write my impression directly so it is good.
J	I felt like this class was much more interesting. Like, you know you teach us like how to write stories like smell and something what you see, that's what I never learned before. So new ways of.. Yeah, yeah. Do you feel more confident now? Yeah, and that's pretty useful.
M	I felt a little shame because I have to write just my opinion so someone thinks maybe someone disagrees my opinion. Would you feel the same writing in Japanese? Yes.

Table 2 shows a sample of quotes from the semi-structured interviews. Student D directly connected the increase in their production output with raised confidence while Student E and J (the two students who had high levels of confidence at the beginning of the year) specifically pointed to feeling more in control of their ability to express themselves and to communicate more confidently. Their responses, while showing an increase in self-confidence (particularly Student J) also showed an increase in motivation, demonstrating Dörnyei's (2006) direct link between the two. Student M was more negative about the experience and didn't enjoy the freedom and independence creative writing provides, but it was clear from the follow up that this was also an issue for them in L1 rather than something specific to L2 writing generally or L2 creative writing specifically.

The major themes that emerged from the interviews echoed those from the freewriting. Students had finished third year and were exhausted, looking forward to the vacation, but also worried about their final year in which they would have to secure graduation but also find a job or a post-graduate course. They were generally in a contemplative mood, looking back on their experiences, and looking forward with both apprehension and excitement at the challenges ahead.

5 Discussion and Implications

This study was designed to move towards answering the research question “Could creative writing have an important impact on students’ confidence?” Taken together, the results show an overall trend towards an increase in confidence across both semesters. Previous studies in this area such as those earlier cited by Elbow (1973), Liao (2012), Listyani and Tananuraksakul (2019), and Zhao (2015), have not gone into statistical detail on how and to what extent creative writing is connected to an increase in writing fluency nor an increase in confidence. Dörnyei (2005, 2006, 2009) and Ushioda (2009, 2013) laid the theoretical groundwork from a motivational perspective while Spiro (2014) and Clark and Ivanič (1997) have outlined a framework from an authorial perspective. Some authors have suggested a link (Elbow, 1973; Liao, 2012; Listyani & Tananuraksakul, 2019; Zhao, 2015) while others have shown partial pieces of the puzzle (Clarke & Walker, 1980; Hwang, 2010; Patterson, 2014). By combining this earlier work and extending it, this study shows that there are definite grounds for optimism when considering whether creative writing can have a beneficial influence on the self-confidence of language learners.

The uneven nature of the word count results can be attributed to a number of factors. The fact that the high point of 172 occurred in Week 12 rather than Week 14 in semester one and Week 10 in semester two reflects outside pressures on the students at the time: conflicting deadlines and approaching exams as the semester neared completion in both semesters saw a decline at the tail end presumably due to late-semester fatigue. It also suggests that perhaps there is a natural ceiling to freewriting output, since 172 was the highest average word count produced in either semester.

Qualitative responses to the writing prompts and in the semi-structured interviews show that the students’ confidence in their L2 writing ability and their ability to express themselves increased over the course of the year. It is worth highlighting that no new language was taught in this class—and indeed most of the third-year classes at this university where the research was conducted are predicated upon student output rather than teacher input—so their perceived ability improvement is based on language and skills already within their arsenal. It is clear from both the quantitative and qualitative data, particularly the students’ self-reflection, that after a year of creative writing, they felt more confident and that they attributed this confidence at least in part to the creative writing class. Where they still lacked confidence, particularly with Student M, this was more deep-seated than concern about their second language.

It must be noted that these classes were not taken in isolation; the students had continued their usual third-year studies and so, being a year older and a year more mature, one would expect an improvement. A larger sample size and a control group of non-creative writing students would have allowed the use of statistical analysis to see whether or not the change was significant. This was the intention following on from this 2019 study but the Coronavirus pandemic necessitated distance learning and created numerous problems for a study of this kind.

The small sample size and the inability to repeat with a control group means it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the efficacy of creative writing as a means of boosting confidence in either L2 writing or L2 self-expression. Furthermore, in the future, textual data from student writing (both assignments and freewriting work) could provide more data on which to base conclusions.

In the future it would be desirable to conduct a larger study across many groups both within the Japanese context and across the international arena. As stated at the beginning, this group of 14 students all shared a generally similar educational background and L1, but that is no longer representative of the Japanese university environment. In fact, even for this university it was relatively unusual. A study which considers ethnic background, other language influences (for some, English may be an L3 or L4) and other socio-economic factors (such as experience of living overseas) could tease out more specific issues relating to confidence and how that interacts with motivation and second language acquisition.

For example, a student for whom English is their L3 would be expected to have a higher level of confidence since they have presumably been through the SLA process before. Likewise, a study taking into account prior experience of creative writing could prove beneficial, as could one in which creative writing is mandatory rather than elective, as this would bring motivation much more strongly into the mix. Furthermore, a comparative study of different countries could highlight issues which may be context specific and others which are more general to language learners. However in the current Japanese context, in which creative writing is a relatively niche subject, studies like this may have to wait for a wider acceptance of creative writing in the curriculum.

6 Conclusion

LSA scores show that some students felt much more confident after a year of creative writing while others recorded a smaller increase, though an increase nonetheless. Out of the 14 students who took the course in both semesters, none maintained a constant level of confidence in their abilities nor did any feel less confident despite learning completely new skills and undertaking activities for the first time.

Freewriting word counts increased which, given previous studies on freewriting, was expected. Two relevant discoveries emerged during the analysis phase: first, average word count did not return to base levels after the summer vacation. A seven-week gap in which the students are rarely called upon to use anything other than L1 often sees a temporary decline in output but from a baseline of 125 words produced in ten minutes in April, the initial average in September was 140: a decline from the high of 172 in early July, but not a full reversion. This shows that freewriting had the desired effect of increasing writing fluency. Secondly, the students, without prompting, associated their increased word count with increased fluency, demonstrating their increased confidence and motivation. Given that confidence is, in a sense, self-supporting (confidence breeds more confidence), this awareness on their part is key.

As laid out earlier in this paper, the work of Dörnyei (2005, 2009) and in particular his L2 Motivational Self System demonstrates that confidence is an intrinsic part of second language acquisition. The work of Spiro (2014) and Clark and Ivanič (1997) further confirmed the link between identity, voice and language acquisition, pointing the way towards creative writing having a potential role in this process. Studies by Clarke and Walker (1980), Hwang (2010), Liao (2012), Patterson (2014), Zhao (2015), and Listyani and Tananuraksakul (2019) have shown a strong connection between writing fluency and confidence. This study was formulated with the intention of combining these theories and concepts, and of bringing them together in the hope of providing a strong statistical underpinning to the idea that creative writing can be beneficial towards the confidence of L2 learners and therefore act as an aid in L2 acquisition.

The results produced by this case study are certainly promising. Self-confidence is a nebulous and shifting aspect of language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2005). However, this study and others in this special issue of the journal, and those mentioned earlier in this paper suggest that creative writing can and often does play an important role in allowing language learners the space and freedom within which to flex their linguistic muscles and deploy their natural talents for creativity. As the theoretical framework on which this study is based shows, confidence is intrinsic to language learners in all contexts. While this study is situated in the Japanese context, its conclusions may be universal. For teachers of any language, in any environment, creative writing can be a useful tool whether as a distinct course in its own right, or as an activity included in a four-skills curriculum alongside other activities. If practice truly makes perfect, we must provide our students the arena and the equipment with which to practice.

Appendix A: Language Self-Assessment (LSA)

How confident are you that you can:

次のことができるという自信はどれほどありますか。

(1: Not at all confident. 10: Very confident) (1: まったく自信がない . 10: 自信満々)

1. Write an essay in English? 英語でエッセイを書く？	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2. Watch and understand a movie in English with no Japanese subtitles? 日本語字幕なしで英語の映画を見て、理解する？	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. Write a story in English? 英語で物語を書く？	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4. Explain your opinions clearly in English? 自分の意見を英語ではっきり説明する？	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5. Study abroad in an English-speaking country? 英語圏の国へ留学する？	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
6. Become a better writer of English? 英語で書くことが良くなる？	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
7. Write a haiku in English? 英語で俳句を書く？	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
8. Read a newspaper in English? 英語で新聞を読む？	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
9. Help a tourist in Nagoya who is lost? 失われた名古屋で道に迷った観光客を助ける？	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
10. Express your emotions clearly in English? 自分の感情を明確に英語で表現しますか	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
11. Order coffee in a Starbucks in the USA? アメリカのスターバックスでコーヒーを注文する	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
12. Express your ideas clearly in English? 自分の考えを明確に英語で表現する？	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
13. Write an email in English? 英語でメールを書く？	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Appendix B: Freewriting Prompts

Semester One

Week 2: What do you think “Creative Writing” is?

Week 4: What do you think will be different between this class and your previous academic writing classes?

Week 6: Write about a trip you made.

Week 8: What is poetry?

Week 10: What do you like to read in your free time?

Week 12: Write about your opinions of peer review.

Week 14: How do you feel about creative writing now?

Semester Two

Week 2: What do you remember about Creative Writing from last semester?

Week 4: Write about a person you love chatting with.

Week 6: Write about a film or TV show you watched recently.

Week 8: Tell me a ghost story.

Week 10: Do you prefer fiction or non-fiction. Why?

Week 12: Write about any topic you want.

Week 14: How do you feel about creative writing now?

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