
Speed Writing for Young EFL Learners

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Introduction

Teaching writing to young EFL learners can be quite challenging. Picture a grade 7 student in an EFL environment where only 2.3% of the population are foreigners and English is not one of the official languages of that country. He or she may not be very motivated to practice writing in English class. This is what I was facing when teaching grade 7 English in Japan. According to Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (2019, from hereon MEXT), starting from the 2011 changes to the Elementary School Japanese Curriculum Guidelines, students in grades 5 and 6 started learning English with a focus on listening and speaking, and reading and writing were primarily taught from grade 7. However, according to the 2019 changes, "what was learned through listening and speaking in elementary school was not transferring smoothly to reading and writing in junior high school" (MEXT, 2019, p.7) which starts at grade 7. In order to make the transition to reading and writing easier, I created a speed writing activity based on Kitahara's (2010) dictionary word look-up activity. In the reading activity, students race to look up new words in the dictionary at the back of the government-approved textbooks, and stand up when they found the word. Students can also help their classmates until every student is standing. I applied a similar concept to the speed writing activity as explained below.

Procedure

Step One

Prepare a handout that contains the new words and sentences with the key grammar point for the unit that you are going to teach. Below is an example of part of the key target sentences and new words in a grade 7 textbook that I have previously taught.

Table 1. Lesson 1 Part 1 Target Words and Sentences

Target Sentences	Please write each sentence one time
I am Tanaka Hana.	
I am fine.	
I play tennis.	
I play basketball.	
Target Words	Please write each word 5 times
happy	
sad	
angry	

Step Two

After teaching the new vocabulary for the day’s lesson, assign students the unit vocabulary worksheet and ask them to take out a pencil to practice writing. Then create teams. One way is to assign teams by row and create a score sheet on the blackboard (see Table 1). For example, row 1 could be team 1, and row 2 would be team 2, and so on (if you have time, you can have the students create their own team name for that lesson too).

Table 2. Sample Scoresheet

Team 1	Team 2	Team 3	Team 4	Team 5
III	II	II	I	

I also make sure to change the way I make the teams every now and then. This way, a weaker student will not be picked on for slowing down his or her team.

Step Three

Inform students that you will read one of the new words. Students have to read the word that was said aloud while writing it. At this stage, it is important to tell the students that the writing must be clear enough to pass a test. Otherwise, the activity will get out of control. Students also need to read the words aloud so you can monitor your student's pronunciation. With large classes, this may not be possible but when I hear a word that many students are having trouble with, I make sure to practice as a class after the game is finished. After they have done this 5 times, they stand up. The first person to stand up in the row wins a point for their team and the first row to have all members standing will get a team point. This way, it is both an individual and team competition. In the past, if there was a really weak student in a team, he or she might be teased for being slow. Therefore, I added an individual competition element to prevent negative energy in the classroom. I usually start this activity by having students write single words by theme within the unit if possible followed by full sentences at the end.

Step Four

For key sentences that include the lesson's grammar point, read the sentence and students will only have to write the sentence once, but they still need to read each word out loud while they are writing. I keep full sentences at one repetition because I want students to work more on their sentence patterns in their textbook assignments which has meaningful context.

Step Five

Ask students to finish reading and writing each word 5 times for homework and 2 times for key sentences. The reasoning is that in deliberate learning, students need around 7 repetitions of the same word before they can learn it (Webb & Nation, 2017). If students write 5 times in class, 5 times for homework, and if they practice recitation of the readings that contain the new word, or key phrases in class, without stress, students will get enough reading repetitions to learn the new words for that lesson. I do not give any more writing at the beginning since my students will see the words again when doing their workbook that accompanies the text. I also create digital flashcards using the Quizlet app so students can

increase the number of repetitions in another manner. This allows for more spaced repetitions in the following week during review practice.

Variation Activity

If you usually assign vocabulary and sentence writing as homework in a notebook, you could have students do this activity in their homework notebook. I ask my students to leave a line after each word so they can continue to do the remaining vocabulary writing at home next to what they have written in class.

Conclusion

Not all elementary school EFL programs start with a focus on listening and speaking like in Japan in the past. However, for many young learners, spelling practice can be a chore. The activity was especially effective for my male students that did not like to do homework. To them, this activity was like a race in their club activities. Furthermore, some students even re-wrote all of their vocabulary words. Some students said, “I want to re-write the words nicely so I can have beautiful writing.” This simple reading and writing activity is a fun way to have students practice their writing while reading aloud. It also provides students with the required number of viewings of the new vocabulary necessary to learn the word in a fun manner. Since this activity is easy for students to do, each small achievement will boost students’ confidence so that they can move on to more difficult reading and writing that will follow in the higher grades.

References

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About the Author

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