

Online D-I-E Quick Write: An Activity to Develop Impromptu Writing and the Fact-Opinion Distinction

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Online teaching with Zoom allows teachers to share information easily with students, while it also provides every student with an opportunity to participate. These advantages are amplified with a large class. This paper describes a ten-minute activity the author conducted with 118 second-year university students while taking advantage of online instruction. It aimed to promote impromptu writing and raise awareness about the fact-opinion distinction. Student questionnaire responses demonstrated the positive effect of instruction. Zoomを使用したオンライン授業は、教師が簡単に学生と情報を共有することを可能にするとともに、すべての学生に参加する機会を提供する。これらの利点は、大人数クラスほど強く感じられる。本稿では、そうしたオンライン授業の利点を利用し筆者が118人の大学2年生に行った、10分間の活動を取り上げる。その活動は、短時間で英語を書くことと、事実と意見の区別についての意識向上を目的とした。学生のアンケート回答により、指導の効果が示された。

The amount and types of writing exercises are limited compared with those of reading and listening practice. Students lack chances to reproduce English grammar and vocabulary learned through the textbook in an uncontrolled way. Kobayakawa (2011) revealed that 41.4% of all the tasks in the 10 top-selling senior high school writing textbooks in Japan were translation tasks, followed by fill-in-the-blank tasks without translation (16.3%). Evidence for lack of free composition from the student perspective (e.g., Yasuda, 2014) is also available. Yasuda asked 481 university students of various majors studying at six universities about the types of writing tasks and the frequency they experienced each type of task during high school. The result showed that the two most common types

of tasks in high school English were writing exercises focusing on accuracy in grammar and translation of Japanese into English.

A call for change to this situation has been heard. Brown (2012) suggested that the focus should be shifted away from teaching grammar in and of itself and toward teaching grammar via writing. By stressing content with grammar and vocabulary, he argued that teachers can “shift from ‘structure for the sake of structure’ instruction to the use of structure in the function of writing” (p. 2). Similarly, Murakoshi (2015) claimed the need to give learners ample chances to express themselves to add their new knowledge to a repertoire of skills they can use freely on other occasions. Despite these arguments, teachers are hesitant to adopt writing activities in their lessons. Part of their reluctance may be due to the extra effort required for this type of student writing. For this reason, writing activities that will free teachers from correcting errors or grading student writing are preferred.

Besides, raising student awareness about and sensitivity to differences will help students to improve their communication. Greater respect for and acceptance of many differences are sought in our society. It is, therefore, timely to learn that people do not necessarily share the same way of thinking.

The author designed an online activity that integrated a reflective training method for critical thinking skills with a writing task to address the needs mentioned above. The activity had two primary goals: developing impromptu writing and enhancing awareness of the difference between observable facts and subjective interpretation based on our experiences. The following sections describe two instructional approaches adopted by the present study: a quick write and the Description, Interpretation, and Evaluation (D-I-E) exercise.

Quick Write

A quick write is a “brief written response to a question or probe requiring students to explain a principle or phenomenon” (Green et al., 2007, p. 39). In practice, quick writes are short written responses to lectures, in-class activities, assignments, or school events for teachers to examine student understanding, satisfaction, or needs. The author thought the informal and less threatening

nature of the task could bridge the gap from the mostly controlled writing activities students experienced at high school. Moreover, Sato (2008) provided evidence that fluency-oriented instruction contributed to a larger word count in Japanese junior and senior high school students' writing. Therefore, a quick write may help Japanese learners develop writing skills as well.

D-I-E Exercise

The D-I-E exercise is originally an activity for cross-cultural training (Yashiro et al., 1998) and for communication training (Wendt, 1984). It is not clear who developed the method, but training based on the fundamental principles of description, interpretation, and evaluation was presented in Ball and Byrnes (1960). The exercise consists of three phases. Participants describe what they see in a photo. In the interpretation phase, they make subjective statements about the picture, e.g., what they think the people are doing. Participants need to add a reason because interpretation is the work completed in our minds. Evaluation is another type of interpretation. Participants write how they feel about the people in the photo. This activity aims to make participants aware of the danger of making groundless, often culturally biased interpretations unconsciously. Ryan (2018) argued that by reflecting on unusual things or places repeatedly, participants would come to ask themselves “how they know what they think they know” (p. 77).

The D-I-E exercise is played with pictures selected “from cultures other than the culture of the participants” (Intercultural Communication Institute, 2008, p. 9). Kawamura et al. (2006) provided a case where the D-I-E activity was conducted with intermediate and advanced learners. They used pictures from the listening section of the TOEIC as prompts for speaking activities. After completing the oral D-I-E exercise, students took the listening test. Kawamura et al. (2006) reported that students had become highly interested in the listening prompts of the test by that time. One advantage of this exercise the author previously realized is that once students are used to the activity, they become ready to describe photos and drawings found in the textbook.

Methods

The study was conducted in an English course for 118 second-year university students (21 males and 97 females) majoring in health sciences for 14 weeks in 2020. They were in three groups (41, 38, and 39), and the author instructed those students. The average TOEIC scores of 157 students in the department, including 39 students who attended the class taught by another teacher, were 462.0 in January 2020. Considering the average TOEIC scores of the first-year university students in Japan being 438.0 (IIBC, 2020), participants' English proficiency levels in this study were slightly higher than those of the average Japanese university students. Students attended a 90-minute class once a week, and the class was conducted online via Zoom. Learning basic medial English with the textbook was the main activity, and the D-I-E quick write was used as a warm-up activity for the class. It did not account for any percentage of the grade.

Instruction of the Online D-I-E Quick Write

Photos showing everyday life in 14 countries were selected among the pictures the author took on his overseas trips (Figures 1 and 2). The first 10 minutes of each class were spent on the D-I-E quick write. The teacher showed a new photo on Zoom with the slide share function. Students then typed in their descriptions into a chat message within one and a half minutes, and with the teacher's instruction, they sent out the message to all participants. Then, another one and a half minutes were provided for the interpretation of the photo. At the teacher's signal, students submitted their writing.

Later, the teacher explained the image in English within three minutes. While explaining, he showed the location of the country on Google Maps. A website with more images was sometimes introduced to help students understand the pictured situation. For instance, in Week 14, the teacher showed a picture of a huge cow-shaped object being prepared on the street (Figure 2). The cow was being crafted for a cremation ceremony in Bali, Indonesia. To fully understand this unique tradition, students should know that Balinese people believe in Hinduism and that a cow is regarded as a sacred animal in their religion. For this purpose, the teacher displayed a travelogue website about the cremation festival



Figure 1. Image for Week 3.



Figure 2. Image for Week 14.

and explained how the massive cow-shaped float would be used in a funeral.

When Zoom meetings were closed, the student writing was automatically saved to the teacher's computer as a chat message, with their IDs and names included. Student entries were then sorted by the ID number. The teacher read through the student entries and prepared the comments he would make in the

next class, highlighting the related parts in the writing in a few colors (Figure 3).

In the second week onward, four minutes were spared at the beginning of the activity for the teacher's debriefing about the student writing completed in the previous class. Showing students' writing on the computer screen, the teacher focused on writing skills and the distinction between description and interpretation.

For language learning, the teacher gave three pieces of advice one by one. First, writing many English words was encouraged. Later, providing expressions such as "in the foreground" and "in the background," the teacher instructed students to indicate the location of things or people in the picture. Thirdly, instruction was given to make sentences longer. Sato (1991) revealed that Japanese learners tend to use fewer adjective clauses than adverb and noun clauses. The teacher told students to describe the people and things in more detail by adding modifying phrases and sentences. Illustrating good samples, e.g., "so many round-shaped fruits in the bowl," the teacher recommended using modifiers more frequently.

For sensitivity training, students were told not to confuse facts based on what they saw in the picture with opinions based on what they thought in their minds. Attention was called to the use of words expressing social status, such as "teacher," "student," and "parents" for description. Moreover, students were reminded to add reasons to their interpretations because they may differ

- 32: This photo shows many people standing in a row and eating something.
- 33: I think that they are families. This is because there is one boy
- 33: This photo shows the same table has a man and a boy and two women, and they eat food. The boy eats some kind of food with the fork that a handle is red.
- 34: I think this photo is taken popular food court at lunch because many people in there.
- 34: Many people line up for food. Family are eating the foreground.
- 35: I think this is a food festival because many people are waiting in front of food shops and there are eating space.
- 35: There are Many people in front of the food shop. Four people are eating dishes.
- 36: I think that it may be Singapore because the way the stalls are lined up and the atmosphere. I think that eating at the stall is a habit.
- 36: Many people lined up at the stall. Family eating at the front of the photo.
- 37: I think there is cafeteria because many shops are standing in a row. there are various food shop.
- 37: I can see many people who buy food and eat food.
- 38: I see the family who sits down and eating food in the anterioris of the phot. and the
- 38: I think there is food area because many food stand line up.
- 39: I think that this time is lunch because some of men are making a line to buy dishes and family is eating something
- 39: Some of men make a line to buy some dishes. There are a family in this photo. they are sitting to eat something. there are a lot of tables and chairs to eat somethings.
- 40: I can see lots of people lined up in front of some food shops. The four people sitting at the front table are eating food.
- 40: It's like a food court with several shops. I think the shop is crowded and it's lunch time. The four people sitting at the front table are like a family.

Figure 2. Sample of student writing.

from person to person. Many Japanese learners tend to use a subordinate clause starting with “because” without a principal clause (Kobayashi, 2009). Therefore, the teacher reminded students not to start a sentence with “because.”

Data Collection and Analysis

A questionnaire was administered in Week 14 to examine the effects of instruction. The questionnaire had three questions: two multiple-choice questions (Table 1) and one open-ended question asking students to write their thoughts freely about the D-I-E activity on the Moodle platform. The number of responses to the first two questions was counted to examine how strongly students perceived the effects of instruction in developing their impromptu writing and the distinction between subjective and objective descriptions. Student comments were divided into smaller comments until each comment had a single point of view. Later, the comments were thematically classified into topics. Students responded in Japanese, and translation into English was done by the author.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the degrees of the perceived strength of the instructional effect by students. With one absentee, 117 students attended the 14th session. As for Question 1, 93.1% of the students responded that the online D-I-E quick write helped them improve their writing skills. In response to Question 2, 94.0% answered that the activity helped them learn about the subjective-objective

Table 1

Student Perception of the Effect of Instruction

It helped a lot.	It helped.	Neither yes nor no.	It didn't help very much.	It didn't help.	Total
Q1 “Did the D-I-E activity help you raise your writing skills?”					
52 (44.4%)	57 (48.7%)	7 (6.0%)	1 (0.9%)	0 (0%)	117 (100%)
Q2 “Did the D-I-E activity help you distinguish objective matters and subjective matters?”					
59 (50.4%)	51 (43.6%)	6 (5.1%)	1 (0.9%)	0 (0%)	117 (100%)

distinction.

The results of the investigation based on student comments are presented in Table 2. Of the 117 students who participated in the 14th session, 88 students (75.2%) filled in their reflections. Students were numerically coded from S1 to S88, and their comments were further divided into 153 discrete comments. The table shows nine topics into which 153 discrete comments were sorted in descending numerical order. The topic which students commented on most was improved writing skills and a sense of progress (39.2% of the total number of comments). Five subtopics emerged as reasons students felt a sense of improvement.

The first subtopic seems to show the teacher's explicit instruction on useful expressions scaffolded for students. One student wrote, "By using fixed phrases repeatedly, I expanded the vocabulary I could use actively" (S43). Some students referred to the increased English they wrote as the session progressed (S30, S66). Other students commented that their writing skills and their imagination

Table 2

Thematic Classification of Student Reflections on the D-I-E Quick Write

Ranking	Topic	Number of Comments	Percentage
1	Improved writing skills & sense of progress	60	39.2%
2	Different cultures & foreign affairs	31	20.3%
3	Lack of time	14	9.2%
4	Analysis of own productive skills	12	7.8%
5	Enhanced motivation	10	6.5%
6	Difficult tasks	9	5.9%
6	Others	9	5.9%
8	Subjective-objective distinction	4	2.6%
8	Fun activity	4	2.6%

improved (S14, S21, S49).

The second reason was related to their desire to use English. Students may have wanted opportunities to write in English. A student responded, “I haven’t attended this kind of training, so I thought it very good to have practice in describing pictures” (S53). There was another student who went so far as to say, “Without activities like the D-I-E, I wouldn’t have had a chance to write English” (S51). Moreover, seeing other students’ writing may have exerted a positive effect on students. Comments in this third subtopic included, “It was good for me to learn various ways of expression by looking at other people’s writing” (S17).

The fourth subtopic that emerged as a reason for students to feel progress was the spontaneity of the task. Students were urged to write within the time limit. One last point that emerged was the sense of difficulty. Many students mentioned that they found the task challenging at first. However, the initial feeling of difficulty may have given students an even greater sense of confidence and joy once they felt they could complete the task well. A student stated, “The activity was difficult for me in the beginning because I didn’t know how to write in a limited time. However, I became able to write in that way in the latter half of the course, thus finding it fun to do the task” (S36).

Moving forward, the second most popular topic was different cultures and foreign affairs (20.3%). Student comments suggested a pleasant learning experience. For example, one student wrote, “It was much fun to try the D-I-E exercise with a picture of different countries. I have never been abroad, so I was able to gain not only English skills but also knowledge about foreign countries” (S82). Another student commented, “Seeing interesting photos every time made me feel as if I were visiting a foreign country. I was able to engage myself in the activity with fun” (S22).

The next three topics were a lack of time (9.2%), analysis of own productive skills (7.8%), and enhanced motivation (6.5%). Some students felt pressed for time because they had to type in English messages on their computers. The comments sorted into “the analysis of own productive skills” were primarily negative reflections on their current level of mastery.

On the other hand, the topic that followed in percentage, “enhanced

motivation,” was positive. “I want to brush up my English by doing similar training on my own” (S35). “I found myself spending more time outside of class in making sure of grammar and trying to expand my vocabulary, thinking about the D-I-E exercise” (S51). “The activity made me feel like exposing myself to English more often” (S81). All these comments suggested positive development of student motivation toward English language learning. In addition, there was a comment referring to self-confidence, i.e., “I was rather poor at writing, but I became slightly more confident by making sentences on my own” (S83). Attitudinal change in learners is a goal of language instructions. Therefore, these comments suggest that the activity may have been helpful to foster independent learning attitudes and language skills.

The D-I-E quick write aimed to teach the fact-opinion distinction. However, only a small percentage of comments fell into this category (2.6%). Though small in number, the comments suggested the effect of instruction. For example, “I haven’t thought about the difference between objective and subjective information, so I was surprised to know that ‘unique’ and ‘mysterious’ are words expressing our subjective evaluation. I came to think about the distinction in using English, too” (S48). “I had seldom cared about the subjective-objective distinction when I talked about pictures before. However, after I experienced the D-I-E exercise, I became able to tell the difference more clearly” (S52).

Benefits of Online D-I-E Quick Write

Conducting the D-I-E quick write online saves teachers time and effort for class preparation. The author gave the D-I-E exercise to 40 students in a classroom before, but he found it much easier and more efficient to conduct the activity online. Teachers do not need to prepare copies of a picture. Moreover, the ease of showing the works of other students is an advantage of online instruction. In addition, the online activity gives each student a chance to participate and use English instantly. This guaranteed opportunity to participate and use English is a great advantage.

Concerning areas for improvement, teachers must consider the wide range of student English proficiency. Providing students with formulae with blanks,

e.g., “We can see ____ in the center of this photo. A man is _____. There are _____ in front of the man” might help low proficiency students to participate. Besides English proficiency levels, teachers should pay attention to student typing skills. Typing skills can also vary from one student to another. Some students are not used to typing the English alphabet. Therefore, typing practice, with the use of websites providing free training, should be considered before starting the online quick write so that more students have the required technical skills.

Conclusion

This paper described the instruction of online D-I-E quick write. The analysis of student responses supported the instructional effects of impromptu writing and training on the fact-opinion distinction documented in the literature. In the questionnaire, students typically mentioned increased writing skills and a sense of progress. Though preliminary, this study has provided a practical suggestion to teachers and a path for further research. Interested teachers can try this activity with their students by using free images available on websites.

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