

A Report on Class Activity regarding Participation in the Extremely Short Story Competition: University Students' Responses to the ESSC

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1. Introduction

Many English contests in Japan focus on the speaking of English, i.e. speech contests, debates, and story contests (reading aloud), etc. In such an environment, however, the Extremely Short Story Competition (ESSC) can provide an important new setting where English learners write English with freedom, while following certain rules. They can both demonstrate their writing skills and unleash their imagination. Moreover, researchers expect the ESSC to have positive educational effects.

The ESSC was originally created by Professor Hassall of Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates. He developed it so that his students could both practice English writing with a specific goal, and be rewarded for their excellent performance (Takeshita, 2006, p. 104). The idea was soon exported to Japan. In this competition, adults and students of all levels of English ability are invited to write extremely short stories with the following rules: a) the students must write EXACTLY fifty words - not 49 or 51, b) the subject must be one of their own choice, c) the story can be fact or fiction, d) they may add a title, e) they may use a nickname, and f) individuals must confirm that the writing is "all their own work" (Hassall, 2006, p. 90).

No matter what English ability the students have, it requires effort to make the story exactly 50 words. According to Takeshita (2006, p. 105) "A Japanese junior high school girl will figure out without much difficulty that she needs to write "do not" instead of "don't" if her story turns out to be 49 wordlong. She will look up in a dictionary and decide that she may write "deliberately" instead of "on purpose" if she needs to get rid of a word to make it 50. Such a small effort here and there will enable a writer at any level of proficiency to come up with an extremely short story."

From 2006, when the first ESSC started in Japan, writing Extremely Short Stories (ESS) was experimentally introduced in some "English e-learning" classes of Tokyo Keizai University, Japan. The following is a report on progress (from 2006 to 2011), describing how students of

lower English ability reacted to participating in this English competition.

2. Participants

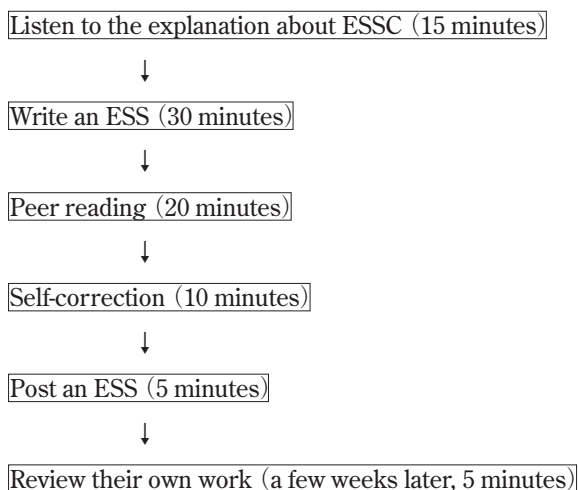
The participants in this study were 460 university students (129 students/4 classes in 2006, 113/4 classes in 2007, 95/3 classes in 2008, 82/3 classes in 2009, 35/1 class in 2010, 6/1 class in 2011) of Tokyo Keizai University. In terms of English proficiency they were at beginner level and most of them were still experiencing difficulty in making sentences with basic English constructions (e.g. SV, SVC, and SVO). All of the participants had achieved basic skills in operating a PC, but none knew the rules of writing ESS, or how to submit their finished work, so the teacher first had to acquire much knowledge on the ESSC, and then explain it to the students.

The competition from 2006 to 2008 required applicants to post their work in PowerPoint format¹⁾, but the students were unfamiliar with the software. Thus, the teacher prepared hand-outs to explain in detail both what ESSC was and how to use PowerPoint. It took about 15 minutes to explain both.

3. Procedure and Results: Students' Responses to the ESSC

In the classes, the students were instructed to take the following six steps.

Figure 1. Six Steps of Class Activity regarding Participation in the ESSC



3. 1. During the Explanation about ESSC (15 minutes)

As stated in the previous chapter, the students were unfamiliar with the competition, and only a few had used PowerPoint software, so handouts to explain both ESS(C) and PowerPoint in detail were needed. The following lists show the outline of each handout:

ESSC handout

- What is ESS(C) ?
- An example of ESS
- Rules of ESS
- How to submit

PowerPoint handout

- How to start
- How to type words
- How to use a design template

During the 15-minute explanation, the students started to have misgivings about this project because most of them did not like and/or have confidence in writing English. Thus, the following six points were emphasized to motivate them;

- (1) This is a very new competition in Japan.
- (2) You will have a great chance to express yourself in English.
- (3) You can write exactly 50 words about any topic you choose.
- (4) "50 words" is much shorter than you think.
- (5) Your work will be published on the website of the ESSC after submission, that is, people around the world may read your story.
- (6) Even if your English proficiency is low, that does not really matter and you will still have a chance to win a prize.

Towards the end of the instruction, the students' motivation was successfully increased.

3. 2. During Writing an ESS (30 minutes)

To follow the ESSC's rules, the teacher did not correct or edit the students' works but did offer support. The term "support" here means answering the students' questions about both ESS rules and technical aspects. The most frequently asked question about the former was

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“What is the difference between 50 words and 50 letters?” and for the latter, “How can I change the font size and the color?”

Most of the students started to use translation websites such as “Excite”, “Google” and “Yahoo!”. They were advised not to use such websites and to write English sentences by themselves, but they were hesitant to stop using these sites due to their lack of grammatical knowledge. Therefore, instead of preventing them from using translation sites, they were told that translations produced on these sites were not of high quality. Then they started to correct the sentences by themselves or with the assistance of friends.

3. 3. After Writing an ESS (30 minutes)

Students were instructed to print out the ESS and show it to at least five other students (Peer reading; 20 minutes). The readers were asked to check whether the spellings of the words were correct, and write their comments on the story in Japanese. Many of them enjoyed reading their friends’ stories. On receiving the comments, the writer corrected misspelled words and rewrote the story to make it more understandable for readers (Self-correction; 10 minutes). The students’ reactions appeared to be very positive. The teacher did not point out grammatical errors, inappropriate choice of vocabulary, or count the number of words in each work before posting the work on the website. This was because there is a rule that teachers cannot help students with the English.

Q: Can my teacher help me with the English for my Extremely Short Story?

A: Nobody, including your teachers, can help you with the English for your Extremely Short Story. When you submit your story you confirm that it is all your OWN work. (ESSC website of Zayed University)

3. 4. Posting an ESS (5 minutes)

There is an application form on the ESSC site. The ten items below are required to submit a completed ESS.

- Name
- Sex
- Age
- Affiliation
- How long have you studied English? (year(s)/month(s))²

- ・ Address
- ・ E-mail address
- ・ Title of your story
- ・ Your name or pen name
- ・ Story

Students asked many questions about this application form. The most frequently asked questions were “Must I type my real name?”, “Does ‘Address’ mean my present address or my parents’ address?” and “My story doesn’t have 50 words when clicking on the 50-word checking button, so what should I do?” However, the moment of posting an ESS seemed to be a stimulating one for the students. Though their English ability was not high, they all looked happy to have “completed” at least one story.

After posting an ESS, teachers could correct some grammatical errors students had made in their work. The errors seemed to become very memorable for students because they could not change the work after posting it, even if they felt ashamed of their mistakes. This might be another positive educational effect for English learners.

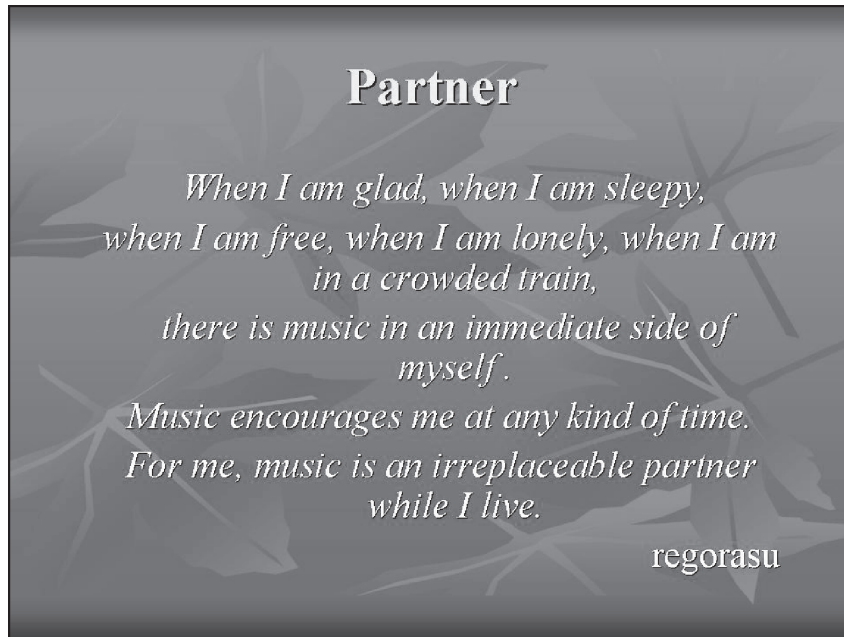
3. 5. A Few Weeks Later (5 minutes)

A few weeks later, all the students looked at the ESSC website to confirm that their work had been posted. The students’ reactions appeared to be very positive. Most of them were pleased to see their work, and others enjoyed reading their friends’ work and talking about the contents with each other. Students who had been absent from the class also became interested as a result of their peers’ reactions, and voluntarily asked me how to write and submit an ESS.

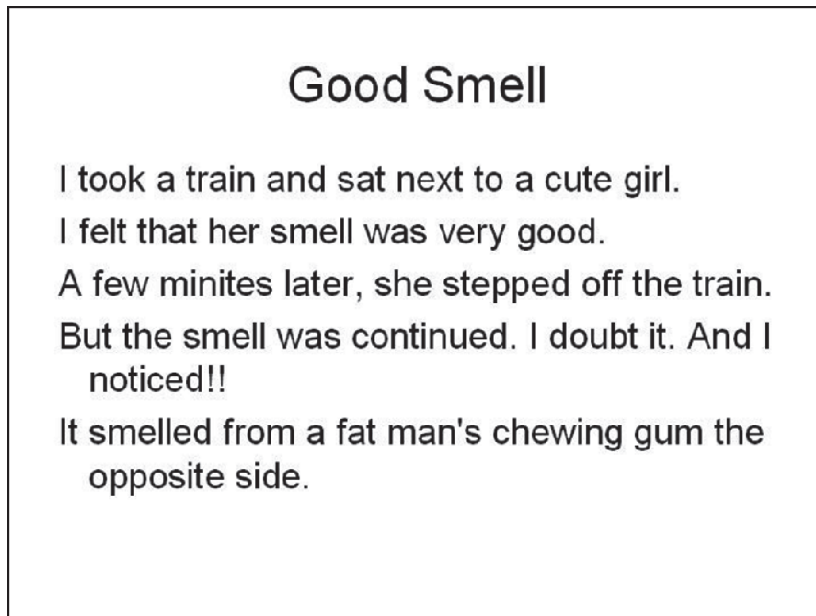
4. Discussion

Writing an ESS seemed to be a stimulating and motivational practice for the students. Though their English ability was not high, they all “completed” at least one story. Observing the students’ attitudes toward ESS in the classes, the word-limited story writing was appropriate for lower level English learners. It was not too easy or too difficult to write 50 words. In particular, the word limit of “exactly” 50 words seems to be a challenging and motivating number. Here are some award-winning works.

Figures 2. Award-winning Works



A. K., 4th Prize, 2006



S. T., 4th Prize, 2009

Mirror

I am a mirror.
If you laugh, I become happily.
If you cry, I become sadly.
I am here because you are there.
When you are gone from my presence,
I do not know what kind face I should have.
Because...
I want you to return in front of me.

K. I., 4th Prize, 2010

However, student ESS participation posed problems for the teacher. First, students' ambiguous questions such as "Is my English correct?" could be difficult to answer. As mentioned above, the rules clearly state that teachers cannot help students with their English, thus the teachers may be placed in a non-traditionally helpless situation, i.e. wanting to help, but restricted in their effectiveness as an educator.

Secondly, students in lower ability classes were sometimes unable to comprehend words and sentences which the translation website produced. They were advised to use online dictionaries, but assisting such learners can be particularly difficult.

Thirdly, although some questions regarding grammatical issues were answered by their friends, students often ignored the advice as alterations would result in a story which would no longer adhere to the word limit. For example, one student asked, "Which is better, 'I like a dog.' or I like dogs.?" to which the latter was proposed as a better alternative. However, the student kept writing "a dog" (two words) instead of using "dogs" (one word). If their English ability had been high enough, they could have rewritten other phrases or sentences to make the story 50 words, but they tended to give up doing so.

Finally, each student's choice of words was beyond the teacher's control. Before the students posted their work, the teacher could not examine all the works to confirm whether every word was used correctly in the sentence or whether it might give a bad impression to others. In

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fact, some stories gave a false impression to the ESS committee because of their poor English, and were deleted from the ESSC website.

Although the problem of the role of the teacher in this activity should be discussed, more and more teachers can implement ESS practice in class and share problems they encounter in order to improve ESSC for English learners.

Notes

- 1) The competition from 2009 to 2011 required applicants to post their work using an online entry form, so they did not need to use PowerPoint.
- 2) This item appeared only from 2006 to 2008.

References

- ESSC (Extremely Short Story Competition) in Japan. <http://www.jafae.org/essc/>
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Hassall, P. J. (2006). International Collaboration to Promote Literature and Linguistics via the Extremely Short Story Competition [ESSC]. *Asian Englishes*, 8 (2), 90–95.
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