

Student Feedback on the Effectiveness of Prewriting Activities

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Abstract

Often assumptions are made about the effectiveness of certain activities in the English as a Foreign Language writing class. One such assumption is that prewriting activities used with the process writing approach common in second language writing classes is a key step in helping students to begin compositions. It seems, however, that the usefulness of these activities is sometimes taken for granted without considering student opinion. In this action research project, an EFL writing class of first year university students at Toyo Gakuen University was surveyed on the effectiveness of prewriting activities as the first step in composition writing. The results of the survey provided mostly encouraging results. In general, the students endorsed freewriting, brainstorm, and clustering as useful activities to initiate composition writing especially with a bias towards freewriting. This article will then conclude with a discussion on how to further apply prewriting activities and possibly make them more effective.

1. Introduction

When activities are used in the EFL class, it is usually assumed that students will benefit for a specific reason based on the approach of which the activity is designed for. Sometimes, however, it seems that these benefits are logically justified by the instructor with little input from the students for whom the activities or tasks are intended. Also, due to the vast diversity among EFL learners, feedback from one group of students does not necessarily represent the norm for all EFL learners in general. Student feedback on classroom activities should be a high priority and may lead to revised expectations and provide direction to tailor activities to suit a specific group of learners.

In the EFL writing class, activities such as freewriting, brainstorming, and clustering are part of the prewriting stage of the process writing approach to writing and are commonly used in class. These activities are designed to help students generate ideas and get their thoughts down on paper. Though these types of activities have been used for years, do students see value in these activities? If so, which of the three; freewriting, brainstorming, or clustering do they find the most effective for helping them to get started on their compositions?

The aim of this action research project was to do as mentioned previously; survey students in an EFL writing class to find out if the students themselves believe that prewriting activities do indeed help them get started on their compositions and which of the three they felt was the most effective. I will discuss how these activities were used in class and I will discuss the results of the questionnaire and how this information can be used to make decisions about the future use of prewriting activities.

2. Process Writing and Prewriting Activities

The process writing approach, commonly used in contemporary EFL writing classes, was developed because linguists in the 1970's and 80's felt approaches at that time focused too much on the imitation and manipulation of model text or on the rhetoric of paragraph structure. The problem according to Zamel (1987) is, "Methods that emphasize form and correctness ignore how ideas get explored through writing and fail to teach students that writing is essentially a process of discovery" (p.267). Therefore, the process writing approach was created to provide students with a guideline to create, develop, and refine their compositions. This process is explained by Seow (2002) as, "...process writing in the classroom may be construed as a programme of instruction which provides students with a series of planned learning experiences to help them understand the nature of writing at every point" (p.316).

In process writing, Blanchard and Root (1997) state that there are five basic stages; prewriting, planning, drafting, revising, and editing. At the prewriting stage, students need to gather their thoughts and generate ideas before planning and beginning their compositions. This stage is very important especially for lower level students who often struggle with the ominous task of beginning a composition. Kroll (2001) suggests investing a fair amount of time working with prewriting activities and introducing a variety of them so that students can discover which strategy works best for them to generate ideas. The most common of these prewriting activities are; freewriting, where students are instructed to write nonstop for a short duration of time on a topic; brainstorming, where students in groups randomly generate and record words or phrases relating to a topic; and clustering, where the topic is written in the center of the page and related items are linked radiating from the center from general to specific.

Although these prewriting activities have been developed to assist EFL students to begin their compositions, it is difficult to say how effective they truly are with a specific group of learners. Writing is perhaps the most difficult language skill to master and is a very personalized

activity by nature. It is worth considering the opinion of students who are required to use these strategies in class to find out how they feel about these activities so adjustments can be made which will benefit future students in similar conditions.

3. Action Research Project

3.1 Purpose

The purpose of this action research project was to obtain feedback from a first year university EFL writing class to find out if the students found activities commonly used in the prewriting stage of the process writing approach useful and if so, which of the three prewriting activities; freewriting, brainstorming, or clustering they found the most useful and why. Also, I wanted to find out their experience using these activities and if they would consider using one or more of these activities on future writing assignments.

3.2 The students and course

The class consisted of 24 first year university students of a first year compulsory English writing class (Kiso Eigo) at Toyo Gakuen University, a university located in the Kanto region of Japan. Of the 24 students 22 were 18-19 year-old (10 male and 12 female) Japanese as a first language speakers and two male students were Chinese as a first language speakers, 20 and 23 years old respectively. At Toyo Gakuen University, all first year students are given a placement test, and in general, students are placed in classes ranked from ten (the highest) to one (the lowest). Students are also separated by major; 'G' for Gendai Keiei (Business Administration), 'K' for Kokusai Komyunikashon (International Communication), and 'N' for Ningen Kagaku (Human Science). The class used in this study, K9, represents a high level class (one from the top) of the Kokusai Communication majors, though in reality they have very little experience, practice, or instruction in writing in English. Their experience is probably limited to high school English classes only.

The goals of this writing class were to introduce and practice paragraph writing and to practice language forms, such as conjunctions and articles, to improve accuracy and quality of writing. Therefore, a structural syllabus was adopted which also included some functions to allow students practice writing in different genre. There were four writing assignments in the spring term in which their grades were based on: *a letter of introduction, a description of a friend or a family member, a day when everything went wrong, and a description about a favorite place to go shopping.*

Since the general syllabus focused mostly on form, process writing activities were also incorporated to promote skills and processes for developing content. These included activities for generating ideas, increasing writing fluency, organizing ideas, and revising, which are typical of the process writing approach. The main focus of the first term (the duration of this study) with respect to process writing was to introduce activities to generate ideas and improve writing fluency in the prewriting stage. The three main prewriting activities used were freewriting, brainstorming, and clustering.

3.3 The use of prewriting activities in class

The prewriting activities, freewriting, brainstorming, and clustering were intended to be used in conjunction with writing assignments, however, I felt it was necessary to first introduce and give students practice with these as independent activities. After students became familiar with these activities, they were later used as prewriting activities linked to specific writing assignments.

The concept of freewriting was introduced in the first class according to guidelines similar to those listed by Martin (2010) in which students were given the following instructions: write nonstop for ten minutes, do not use an eraser, do not worry too much about grammar and mistakes, and do not stop to use a dictionary. In total, freewriting activities were used seven times throughout the term and the topic of the freewriting activities usually related to the topic of upcoming writing assignments.

Brainstorming was also introduced in the first class and students worked together in groups of four or five during this activity. The general procedure of brainstorming was first modeled as a class activity followed by group work where each group selected a general topic from a list. After 15 minutes of generating ideas, students were told to consider 'what', 'where', 'who', 'why', and 'how' as they relate to the topic of their brainstorm to help generate more ideas. In the following class, groups were told to organize their ideas generated from the previous week's brainstorming into three or four categories in an attempt at planning; however, since essay writing was not a goal of the course, this activity was only carried out to form a simple outline. No further specific brainstorming activities were done in class, however, students were encouraged to use brainstorming before beginning assignments and were given time to do so in class.

Clustering was introduced later in the course, in the fourth week, where students were asked to read a short passage about a man and fill in a partially completed cluster diagram about the

man. Students were then instructed to complete a cluster about themselves as a homework assignment. A similar cluster activity was done in the sixth class in which students were asked to complete a cluster diagram about a friend or a family member which later became the topic of one of the writing assignments.

The following table lists the date/class number, prewriting activity used, the topic, and any additional comments:

Date / Class number	Pre-writing activity	Topic	Comments
April 9 (class #1)	Freewriting	Self Introduction	The topic of the first writing assignment
April 9 (class #1)	Brainstorming	Various	Group activity
April 16 (class #2)	Freewriting	Topic of brainstorm from the previous week.	To help generate more ideas for the brainstorm
April 16 (class #2)	Brainstorming	Same as previous week	Included activities for planning paragraphs
May 7 (class #4)	Freewriting	Golden week	
May 7 (class #4)	Clustering	Who am I?	Homework assignment
May 14 (class #5)	Freewriting	My family	
May 21 (class #6)	Freewriting	My best friend	
May 21 (class #6)	Clustering	A friend or a family member	The topic of the second writing assignment
June 11 (class # 9)	Freewriting	A bad day	The topic of the third writing assignment
June 18 (class #10)	Freewriting	Shopping	The topic of the fourth writing assignment

4. Results

After one term (Spring 2010-13 lessons) where students had been introduced to and had extensively practiced using prewriting activities, I conducted a survey to obtain student feedback on the effectiveness of the prewriting activities in general and which of the three, if any, that they particularly favored. On the last day of class, I gave them a questionnaire (see appendix) in both English and Japanese with questions relating to prewriting activities. In total, 22 out of 24 students (two students were absent) completed the questionnaire.

The following table shows the question by question results of the survey:

1. Did you find “freewriting” to be useful to generate ideas for writing in English?				
Very much	Somewhat	A little	Not at all	Other
7	12	3	0	0
32%	54%	14%	0%	0%
2. Did you find “brainstorming” to be useful to generate ideas for writing in English?				
Very much	Somewhat	A little	Not at all	Other
7	12	3	0	0
32%	54%	14%	0%	0%
3. Did you find “clustering” to be useful to generate ideas for writing in English?				
Very much	Somewhat	A little	Not at all	Other
5	16	1	0	0
23%	73%	4%	0%	0%
4. Which of these activities (freewriting, brainstorming, or clustering) did you think was the most useful?				
Freewriting	Brainstorming	Clustering	Blank	Other
13	6	2	1	0
59%	27%	10%	4%	0%
5. Have you used any of these activities before in other writing classes, in either English or Japanese?				
Yes, freewriting	Yes, brainstorming	Yes, clustering	Yes, undecided	No
7	0	0	4	11
32%	0%	0%	18%	50%
6. Do you think you will use any of these activities in the future if you write a paper in English?				
Yes, freewriting	Yes, brainstorming	Yes, clustering	Yes, undecided	No
12	1	1	3	5
55%	4%	4%	14%	23%
7. Do you think you will use any of these activities in the future if you write a paper in Japanese?				
Yes, freewriting	Yes, brainstorming	Yes, clustering	Yes, undecided	No
12	0	1	3	6
55%	0%	4%	14%	27%

The first three questions asked if the students found the prewriting activities, freewriting, brainstorming and clustering to be useful for generating ideas for writing and all students surveyed agreed to a certain extent. For both freewriting and brainstorming, 32% of the students agreed ‘very much’, 54% ‘somewhat’, and 14% ‘a little’. Student endorsement for clustering was slightly less at 23% for ‘very much’, 73% for ‘somewhat’, and 4% for ‘a little’. When asked which of the three prewriting activities they preferred (question # 4), the majority chose freewriting

(59%), followed by brainstorming (27%), and clustering (10%). Therefore, freewriting is clearly the favorite; however, as mentioned earlier, it was the most commonly used prewriting activity in class.

Another reason for the popularity of freewriting is, as question 5 indicates, 32% of the students claimed to have used freewriting (or perhaps a similar activity) in the past while none of the students claimed to have used brainstorming or clustering, though 18% were undecided and 50% claimed to have no prior experience.

Finally, students were asked if they would use any of these activities in the future if writing a paper in either English (question 6) or Japanese (question 7) and only 23% and 27% of the students respectively responded with 'no' indicating that approximately three quarters of the students would consider using prewriting activities in the future prior to writing papers in either their first language or second language. This indicates that the students value these prewriting activities enough to consider using them not as class activities but independently as strategies to generate idea for writing assignments in the future. Also, in both cases, 55% of the students responded, 'yes, freewriting', thus making freewriting clearly the preferred prewriting activity.

5. Conclusion

From the results of the questionnaire, the students overwhelmingly agreed that the prewriting activities, freewriting, brainstorming, and clustering were beneficial in helping them to generate ideas for writing assignments. Of the three activities, freewriting was chosen as the most popular, however, as mentioned in the results, some students had prior experience using freewriting and it was the most commonly used prewriting activity in this class which may have skewed the results somewhat. Though it may not come as much of a surprise that the students in this class found prewriting activities a useful first step in composition writing, it is rather curious at first glance that freewriting was selected as the most useful because it seems to be the most straightforward and mechanical method as opposed to brainstorming which involves group interaction or clustering which requires linking related ideas in designing a cluster diagram.

There are several possible reasons for these results. Perhaps the most influencing factor is the language ability of the students, which is low, resulting in the students having difficulty with brainstorming activities. The students seemed to struggle to generate ideas which was probably compounded by a lack of confidence resulting in an apprehension to list ideas rapidly. Also, with brainstorming, groups generally listed only a narrow range of items and failed to diversify into

different categories related to the topic, for example, with the topic 'movies', the group listed almost exclusively titles of movies. One possible explanation for this is that the students' cognitive ability to think of other possibilities was severely limited due to the need to focus on language.

Age and motivation are also possible contributing factors. In general, first year university students lack intrinsic motivation and quite often fail to take the initiative in classroom activities. Students often take a passive approach which may limit the success of group activities such as brainstorming. Also students in this age group tend to have short attentions spans and often need to be reminded to stay on task, especially when working in groups.

An activity such as freewriting is easy to understand and allows students to focus individually for a relatively short period of time on one task. Although, freewriting may seem like a rather dry approach to prewriting, it proved to be the most effective method as chosen by the students. Most likely it is this 'keep it simple' factor which contributed the most to the success of this activity.

6. Discussion

The purpose of any action research project is to gather data which will allow the teacher to make changes or modifications in the classroom resulting in a more effective learning environment for students. This action research project has allowed me to reflect on how I presented these prewriting activities and how I could modify my instruction to make them more effective and efficient for my students in the future.

In regards to freewriting, students, especially lower level students, usually benefit if the teacher allows some time before the beginning the freewrite for students to collect their thoughts on the topic. It is a good idea to write the topic on the board and give a few examples verbally of personal anecdotes followed by allowing a few minutes for ideas to be developed. Although the primary function of freewriting is to promote writing fluency and content, it is worthwhile to monitor students' writing and encourage students to write 'margin to margin' to include the whole width of the page. Students have a habit of beginning a sentence on a new line instead of continuing to the end of the right margin of the page. This is a habit which seems to be surprisingly difficult for students to break.

Brainstorming was surprisingly ineffective probably due to the reasons listed in the results.

Possibly, group brainstorming would benefit by introducing an element of competition, for example, to see which group can brainstorm the most ideas in a certain period of time, perhaps ten minutes. The same principle could probably be applied to clustering to see which group has the most links or bubbles from the center. Also, rotating different brainstorms on poster paper or cluster diagrams among groups could be useful in adding variety and an element of excitement to both of these activities.

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Appendix

FE1 L3 Questionnaire: Pre-writing Activities

In this class we practiced several ways to generate ideas to help you begin your writing assignments. The activities we used to generate ideas were “freewriting”, “brainstorming”, and “clustering”. I would like to know if you found these activities to be useful and which activity you thought was the most useful. Please answer the questions by circling one of the words in the brackets following the question. Feel free to comment if you like.

このクラスでは、ライティングの課題に取り組む前の準備として、いくつかの方法を用いて発想力を伸ばす練習をしてきました。用いた方法は「フリーライティング」「ブレインストーミング」「クラスタリング」の三つです。これらに効果があったか、どの方法が一番効果的だったかなどを聞かせてもらえればと思います。質問を読み、[] 内の答えをひとつ選んで○で囲んでください。よければ何かコメントも書いてください。

1. Did you find “*freewriting*” to be useful to generate ideas for writing in English?

「フリーライティング」法は、英作文の内容を考える際に効果的だったと思いますか？

[**very much** **somewhat** **a little** **not at all**]

非常にそう思う そう思う ややそう思う まったくそう思わない

2. Did you find “*brainstorming*” to be useful to generate ideas for writing in English?

「ブレインストーミング」法は、英作文の内容を考える際に効果的だったと思いますか？

[**very much** **somewhat** **a little** **not at all**]

3. Did you find “*clustering*” to be useful to generate ideas for writing in English?

「クラスタリング」法は、英作文の内容を考える際に効果的だったと思いますか？

[**very much** **somewhat** **a little** **not at all**]

4. Which of these activities (*freewriting*, *brainstorming*, or *clustering*) did you think was the most useful?

あなたにとって、上記三つの中でどの方法が一番効果的でしたか？ _____

5. Have you used any of these activities before in other writing classes, in either English or Japanese?

あなたは、上記三つの方法のいずれかを、ほかのライティングのクラス（日本語・英語）でも活用しましたか？

[**yes** **no**]

If so, which activity(s) did you use?

yes と答えた方へ→どの方法を活用しましたか？ _____

6. Do you think you will use any of these activities in the future if you write a paper in English?

今後英語で論文・レポートを書くことがあったら、上記三つの方法のいずれかを活用すると思いますか？

[**yes** **no**]

If so, which activity(s) will you use?

yes と答えた方へ→どの方法を活用すると思いますか？ _____

7. Do you think you will use any of these activities in the future if you write a paper in Japanese?

あなたは、今後日本語で論文・レポートを書くときに、上記三つの方法のいずれかを活用すると思いますか？

[**yes** **no**]

If so, which activity(s) will you use?

yes と答えた方へ→どの方法を活用すると思いますか？ _____