

The Use of Freewriting in the Teaching of Writing

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When our students are asked to write, they find that the most difficult part of the writing task is starting the writing task itself. Students seem to suffer from 'writers' block', awed by the fact that they have to write out their thoughts on a blank piece of paper. Very often they don't quite know how to go about it. As Donald Murray (1978) puts it: 'Writing means self-exposure. No matter how objective the tone or how detached the subject, the writer is exposed by words on the page. It is natural for students and for writers to fear such exposure.'

Freewriting

An effective technique of helping students overcome their fear of writing is to encourage them to engage in freewriting as often as possible. The freewriting approach stresses quantity of writing rather than quality, the emphasis is on content and fluency, rather than on form. All too often the fear of making grammar mistakes or writing wrong sentence structures retards the student's capability to write. By encouraging the student to express himself freely on any topic he wishes without having to worry about grammar, he is relieved of the 'grammar burden'. He can then concentrate on the task of discovering and conveying meaning through writing.

Janet Emig (1971) in a study of the composing processes of native English-speaking twelfth graders found that students lacked commitment and interest in teacher initiated topics. She contends that school sponsored writing with its models and rules do not reflect real life writing which involves a self-motivated, explorative, and contemplative process of composing. Emig points out that first-utterance, expressive writing, which she calls 'reflexive', is essentially a form of thinking, 'a unique mode of learning' different from talking, reading and listening.

In a research project conducted by James Britton (1975) and his colleagues at the University of London, 2,000 pieces of writing from sixty-five secondary schools were collected. The findings revealed that 84 per cent of the writing was transactional in nature, poetic writing accounted for less than 7 per cent and expressive writing less than 4 per cent.

The findings suggest that few teachers value the expressive mode of writing. Britton (1975) like Emig believes in the importance of using freewriting in helping students develop their writing abilities. He states that freewriting 'may be at any stage the kind of writing best adapted to

exploration and discovery. It is the language that externalizes our first stages in tackling a problem or coming to grips with an experience'.

Journal Writing

To ensure that students practise freewriting as regularly as possible, initiate the students into journal writing. Students should write in their journals every day for just a short period of time (about ten minutes). Through journal writing, students are given the chance to practise writing regularly. They will find that the act of expressing themselves through writing becomes easier and the flow of ideas smoother through constant practice. Journal writing also gives the students a break from the usual school routine - it is a time for reflection, introspection or self-examination. It is a time when the students are given complete leeway to wish, hope, fantasize, admire, preach, grumble, ponder, deliberate, reminisce or simply remember.

Contents of Journals

The 'voice' that the student uses in his journal should be his own personal 'voice' - his 'self' should come through. He should try to avoid being too formal as if writing an academic discourse, or being too 'slangy' and informal. He, after all, has a reader, that is his teacher, and therefore his journals should not sound like diary entries. In short, his natural voice should come across, modified by his purpose.

Students should not be given any specific topics to write on. Instead they should be free to write on anything they wish or on anything that comes into their minds. However, if a particular student appears absolutely stuck, the teacher can help by suggesting some topics.

As your students become more familiar with journal writing, encourage them to experiment with their journals, to write on a wide variety of topics and to take some risks with form, style and voice. If a student is feeling angry or despondent, he can vent his feelings in the journal. If a student wants to try his hand at poetry, the journal is the place. Flights of fancy, dark black moods, anxiety, restlessness, sheer happiness - all these moods can be conveyed in a journal. The student does not need to prepare. He does not have to brainstorm or outline. He just has to freewrite, and in the process, discover the close relationship between thinking and writing.

Responding to Journals

Journals should be collected, looked at and then returned the next day. Regardless of class size, reading the journals should not take up much teacher time. Journals can be spot-checked, skimmed, read thoroughly or not read at all depending on the teacher's time, interest and purpose.

Some teachers feel that they should not read students' journals, as they have no right to pry into the personal views of their student. I disagree with this view. Students write in their journals with a purpose and that is to convey their feelings, moods and information to one particular person -the teacher. If the teacher does not read or respond, then it makes their writing task 'audienceless' and therefore purposeless.

After each journal entry, the teacher should respond with a few short, non-judgemental comments. Providing only positive feedback as our goal in journal writing is to teach our students to overcome their fear of being misunderstood in a second language and to feel confident in their ability to

communicate. As Widdowson (1975) states, they should use the language rather than be concerned with its usage. Students look forward to the written responses of their teachers and seem thrilled over this little two-way 'secret' dialogue. Spack and Sadow (1983) state that the students can 'see, through our comments, that even in English, they can invoke a response with their written words'.

Unless specifically requested by any student, teachers need not correct journals. Without the fear of making grammar errors, students can become more comfortable in expressing their ideas in English. Ann Raimes (1975) states that we want the students to be able to write in their new language without fear of red marks. The extensive time that teachers spend on correcting and grading the other written assignments more than compensates for this need to focus on accuracy in the students' use of the language.

Evaluation of Journals

Journals can also be evaluated. One way to evaluate a journal is to count the number of journal entries. Some teachers grade according to the quantity of writing the student has done: for example a hundred pages equals an 'A', seventy-five a 'B', fifty a 'C' and so on. Others attempt to grade according to the quality of insight or evidence of personal growth.

In the Written Communication I and II courses at the Language Centre, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, journal writing is given a weightage of 10 per cent of each course in the evaluation. Both the quantity of journal entries and their quality are evaluated. Students are given a mark ranging from 0 to 5, based on the percentage of journal entries written in one academic semester. Similarly a range of 0 to 5 marks is given for the quantity of each journal. A qualitative rating scale is used in which the originality, variety and treatment of the subject are considered. Grammar is not evaluated.

A Writing Relationship Lastly, through journal writing, a writing relationship is developed between the teacher and the reader. The students' journals sensitize the teacher to the students' hopes, joys, fears, anxieties, problems and frustrations. FuIwiler (1980) states that the teacher himself improves through this constant contact with the hearts and minds of his/her students: 'Teachers, regardless of discipline, who understand the everyday realities of student life may be better teachers when they tailor assignments more precisely toward student needs. Reading student journals humanizes teachers.'

The following extracts are taken from journals written by some of my students. Knowing that they had benefited made all the time and effort spent on the journals, most rewarding and satisfying.

Today would be my last journal writing. I think it is a pity that it has come to an end. I have come to enjoy it very much. I would want to keep this book as it would be a pleasant memory to go through my writings when I have graduate. I showed my journals to my friends who are involved as some of the characters I've written about, any they felt proud to be mentioned. They too wished that they could write things to keep as memories. Lastly I hope that we will be able to write journals in the next semester. I feel proud to be able to look at my writings and I want to thank you for this opportunity.

- Ruby Jeyalamer

One of the things that I learn is writing journals. First of all I learn to love writing and it is a very good way of improving my English writing. Secondly I learn to sit down and think what I really like and dislike. I learn to try and make my dreams come true. I have discover I must make the best of what I have and overcome the things I may never have

- Yong Sweet Ching

This definitely is the last journal for the Written Communication course. Yes, I'm a bit releived it's all over but actually I feel very sad. This small book has been my good friend. I confess all my worries, problems, joys as well as sorrow in it. Sometimes I feel better after writing my burdens and problems in this book.

During the start of the semester, I felt very bad. I considered journal writing very difficult. Now I know that's not true. Nowadays I can easily write on whatever topic I choose, unlike those days when I took several hours just to jot down a few lines. My confidence was low. I'm not boasting but I find that my writing is improving. I don't want to be a writer but I like to write. Goodbye, my dear old friend!

- Azmi Atan

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