

# Brainstorming Before Speaking Tasks

Brian Cullen

[brian \[at\] celtic-otter.com](mailto:brian[at]celtic-otter.com)

Brainstorming is an activity used to generate ideas in small groups. The purpose is to generate as many ideas as possible within a specified time-period. These ideas are not evaluated until the end and a wide range of ideas is often produced. Each idea produced does not need to be usable. Instead, initial ideas can be viewed as a starting point for more workable ideas. The principle of brainstorming is that you need lots of ideas to get good ideas.

Brainstorming has a wide range of applications. Since 1930, it has been used successfully in business for invention and innovation (VanGundy, 1981). In the language classroom, brainstorming is often used in teaching writing. Activities such as free-association and word-mapping are often included as part of the pre-writing or warm-up phase (Richards, 1990:112).

Is brainstorming useful in teaching conversation? In particular, is it a useful activity for warm-up in conversation classes? This paper will help answer this question. Section A shows how brainstorming can help our students to become better learners. Section B describes a research study on brainstorming in the conversation classroom. Section C gives some simple brainstorming techniques.

## Section A : Brainstorming Encourages Better Learning

Some learners are more successful than others. In order to find out why, Rubin and Thompson (1984:114, Rubin 1975) studied the characteristics of good learners. Four of these characteristics are discussed below. These may explain why brainstorming is a useful tool in our classrooms.

### Good Learners Organize Information About Language

Good learners try to organize their knowledge. As teachers, we can try to facilitate this organization by using suitable warm-up activities. A warm-up activity can remind our students of existing knowledge. At the same time, it can direct their minds towards ideas that they will meet in the main activity. In this way, it provides a link between new and existing knowledge.

However, each learner has a different store of existing knowledge organized in a unique way. A textbook or teacher presentation can never use this knowledge to its best potential. In many warm-up activities, the teacher and students can be frustrated because the organization of language in the warm-up activity is different from the organization in the learners' minds. This mismatch is a block to good learning. Brainstorming invites the learners to organize existing knowledge in their own minds. Many learners have a large passive vocabulary which does not translate directly into productive capabilities in the classroom. Brainstorming can help to activate this. It works to mobilize the resources of the student by creating a series of connecting ideas. This leads to an organization of language. The links which appear on paper created in word mapping are visible evidence of this organization. At this point the learners will be better oriented to the topic and better motivated to fill the gaps in their knowledge.

### Good Learners Find Their Own Way and Take Charge of Their Own Learning

Students who do not take charge of their own learning are unable to take full advantage of learning opportunities. This is a problem that faces many Asian students who are generally more reserved than western students (Tsui , 1996). Many teachers find that lack of self-initiative is usually more of a problem than lack of ability in conversation classes.

Brainstorming can help learners to take charge. Learners begin examining their existing resources and identifying gaps in their knowledge. The free association nature allows learners to become involved in the selection of language used in the speaking task.

### Good Learners Make Intelligent Guesses

The good learner makes intelligent guesses, but the language classroom often works against this. Because of nervousness in a foreign

language or fear of teacher correction, many students are afraid of using language unless they are sure that it is totally correct (Lucas 1984). This stops them making intelligent guesses and slows down learning.

Brainstorming can help students to learn to take risks. McCoy (1976) makes a strong argument in favour of learning problem-solving skills in order to reduce anxiety. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers in brainstorming and no danger of teacher correction. By carrying out a simple brainstorming warm-up, students can obtain a sense of competence and feel more confident in making intelligent guesses.

### **Good Learners Use Contextual Cues to Help Them in Comprehension**

The good learner uses the context of language to help in comprehension but the foreign language classroom can often seem artificial. Brainstorming allows the students to create a context for the subsequent speaking task. Relevant existing knowledge (content schema) can be called up from memory and can provide a context which supports comprehension and production in the subsequent speaking task.

As discussed in this section, brainstorming can help our students to become better learners, but equally importantly, students will benefit just by working in groups. They will learn language from each other and by interacting together they will become better communicators.

## **Section B : A Research Study on the Use of Brainstorming**

A research study on the use of brainstorming was carried out in Oral Communication classes at a Japanese senior high school. The students had studied English since junior high school, but it was their first introduction to spoken English. Many students carried out the speaking tasks very slowly which resulted in very little speaking time. Many learners seemed to have a low level of the characteristics of the "good learner" which were previously discussed. Brainstorming was introduced as a short warm-up activity that could direct the minds of the students towards the speaking task and maximize their speaking time.

The study was carried out in six classes of 40 students. Each class was split into two groups by student numbers. Both groups were assumed to be at the same level of ability. Odd-numbered students did only the speaking task and acted as a control group. Even-numbered students did a brainstorming warm-up followed by the speaking task.

The type of brainstorming used was word-mapping. In word-mapping, students write one word in the center of the page and link other related words to it. Students did several examples in small groups and groups competed with each other to get the highest number of words. For each brainstorming session, the students were given only two minutes to encourage quick thinking and to reduce the time for worrying about mistakes.

The speaking task was a simple information gap involving the exchange of personal information. The students were given a time-limit of five minutes. Each piece of information exchanged was noted in a box on a worksheet. At the end of the task, the scores were counted. If a box was filled, a student got a point. There was no penalty for incorrect answers.

Since the goal of the task was to maximize student speaking time, a larger amount of information exchanged was assumed to mean a better performance. The score was assumed to be a suitable measure of this performance. Other variables were not considered. Changes in score were assumed to be due to the effect of the brainstorming session. The scores for the test groups and control groups are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

	A	B	C	D	E	F	Total
Control	19.5	18.8	19.4	20.4	20.4	24.5	20.5
Test	20.3	22.4	22.5	25.5	24.1	27	23.6
%Change	+ 3.8	+ 19.3	+ 15.7	+ 25.3	+ 18.0	+ 10.3	+ 15.3

### **Evaluation of the Study**

All of the test groups performed better than the corresponding control groups and the average speaking time was about 15% longer. The increases in speaking time for the individual groups ranged from 3.8% to as much as 25.3%.

Brainstorming had a strong positive effect on the atmosphere of the classroom and behaviour of the students. The students in the study got involved in the brainstorming immediately. In the warm-up, groups competed and got increasingly higher scores in each consecutive brainstorming. The average number of words written during the brainstorming rose from under 10 words in the first example to over 50 words in the last example. This seemed to indicate an activation of self-initiative.

In the test groups, the game-like activity of the brainstorming carried over into the speaking task. In addition, students had already worked with a partner before the main speaking task which helped to overcome shyness or anxiety. This probably helped the making of intelligent guesses. The students were familiar with the vocabulary in the speaking task because of the organization of knowledge and introduction of contextual cues in the warm-up activity. The whole pace of the task was much faster in the test groups and the students seemed to enjoy it more. Japanese was used very little by the test groups in the course of the task.

In contrast, in the control groups, there was a general fear of making mistakes in the speaking task and many of the students were nervous. In addition, they were not as familiar with the vocabulary and had to be constantly reminded not to use Japanese.

The test-group students seemed to move towards the characteristics of the good learner through the warm-up and speaking task. The brainstorming activity achieved the goal of increasing the student speaking time.

Although, the study covers a narrow area, it shows that an increase in speaking time and a more positive atmosphere are two benefits that brainstorming can bring to speaking tasks. This can be seen as a result of guiding the students towards the characteristics of the good learner.

## **Section C : Practical Aspects of Brainstorming**

Brainstorming is an ideal warm-up activity because it takes little time. Also, it can be explained easily and be used with any chosen topic. There was only one type of brainstorming used in this study. However, some others are listed below with brief examples and many other types can be imagined.

### **Simple Word Lists**

1. List words to describe people's appearance.
2. List all the items you need for a party.
3. Make a list of house furniture.

### **Lists Based on a Principle**

1. Write down a food that begins with each letter of the alphabet.
2. Make a list of animals starting with the smallest animal and getting bigger.

### **Finding Alternatives for a Blank in a Sentence.**

1. The man got off his \_\_\_\_\_ and walked away. (answers could include : horse/bicycle/letter/backside)
2. Peter lived in a \_\_\_\_\_ (answers could include : caravan/house/fantasy world/apartment)
3. I don't like her because she is \_\_\_\_\_ (answers could include : too talkative/the teacher's pet/boring)

### **Brainstorming on a Picture**

Pictures are a rich source of inspiration for brainstorming. Strange events evoke the biggest variety of responses. Most students will let their imagination roam if the pictures are strange enough. Use pictures from the textbook, magazines or other sources.

1. What are these people doing?
2. List the objects in the picture.

3. What is this man thinking about?
4. Write four words to describe this person.

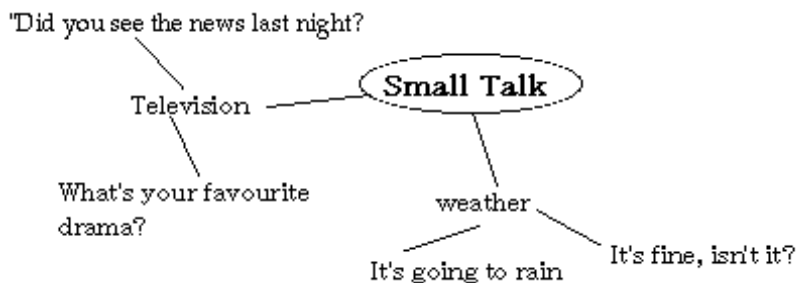
## Brainstorming Using a Song

Songs are wonderful for reducing nervousness. They seem to be particularly effective in whole-class brainstorming when the teacher is writing the ideas on the board. Play a song for the class and ask questions like the following.

1. How does the singer feel?
2. What do you think the singer looks like?
3. Suggest titles for this song.
4. When do you think that this song was written?

## Word-mapping or Phrase-mapping Around a Central Theme.

Write a word or phrase in the center of a page. All the other words or phrases should link off this in a logical manner. Word-mapping can be useful for establishing groups of similar things, for example animals or food. Phrase-mapping can be useful for developing topics or functions.



## Changing One Word in a Sentence Each Time

Each word must be changed, but each sentence must have a meaning. This can be useful to show the students the role of each word in a sentence prior to a substitution drill or other activities. It can be a fun activity to do on the blackboard.

Example :

1. Peter played flute in the orchestra.
2. Peter played flute in the park.
3. John played flute in the park.
4. John played soccer in the park.
5. John watched soccer in the park.
6. John watched soccer near the park.
7. John watched soccer near a park.

Variations: add one word, take away one word.

## Listing Different Ways of Expressing a Particular Language Function.

Example : Ask Someone to Move his Car.

1. Please move your car.
2. I'd appreciate if you could move your car.
3. Get your car out of my way.

## Prediction

Guess what the speaker will say next. This can be used in conjunction with dialogues in textbooks. It is a powerful technique to encourage students to take a risk. If the dialogue is recorded, stop the tape and ask the students to predict what the speaker will say.

## **Free Association**

This is best done orally and can be a lot of fun. One student gives a word in your chosen topic and asks another student to say the first word that she thinks of. The second student continues to make associations. The first student simply repeats the word in each case. After making about 10 associations, the first student should try to work backwards from the last association to the original word.

Example :

1. A : apple
2. B : red
3. A : red
4. B : rose
5. and so on.

Variation : Free association in pairs or in groups. Students make the associations from the previous student's word.

## **Group Storytelling**

Students work in groups and take turns adding to a story, either spoken or written. It is usually better to give the first line of the story.

Example :

John was late for school because

1. Student A : he missed the train
2. Student B : and there wasn't another for 20 minutes
3. Student C : so he went to a game center
4. Student D : but he lost his wallet

If the students are writing, it is interesting to write several stories at the same time.

## **Conclusion**

Brainstorming is a very useful activity that can be easily introduced into language classes. The research study previously discussed shows that it helps our students to become better learners. In addition, it is a fun activity which students enjoy and well worth trying out in your own classes.

## **References**

Brown, H.D, 1994 Principles of Language Learning and teaching, Prentice Hall Regents

McCoy, R.I 1976. Means to Overcome the Anxieties of Second Language Learners, Foreign Language Annals, pages 185-9, No. 12, 1979.

Richards, J.C., 1990 The Language Teaching Matrix, Cambridge University Press.

Rubin, J 1975. What the "Good Language Learner" Can Teach Us, TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 9, No.1, March 1975.

Tsui, A.B.M. 1996. Reticence and anxiety in second language learning, Voices From the Language Classroom, Cambridge 1996, 145-167.

