Freewriting, Prompts and Feedback

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Introduction

Playing chess requires precision, mistakes are obviously penalized, and you have to know what your strategy is, otherwise you will lose the game. However, using these skills when facing a blank page can be quite counterproductive, creating frustration, disappointment, and even resentment among students when they attempt to write fluently.

Freewriting can help students overcome the sense of block. Jacobs outlines the nature of freewriting as having three important aspects "concentrating on content, not worrying about form, and writing without stopping" (Jacobs, 1986). As such, freewriting offers a student-centered activity that can benefit writing class students significantly by helping ease their expectations of themselves and their writing while at the same time increasing their sense of motivation to write in English. This article outlines the basic method for freewriting, introduces variations, and details practical ways to make the best of freewriting. This type of exercise encourages students to overcome their reticence in writing by providing both the opportunities and stimulation to write.

I. What is 'Freewriting'?

Freewriting is an opportunity for students to write freely for a brief period in each class, usually 10 minutes or thereabouts. This offers students a rewarding experience of writing because it can avoid the inhibitions which normally influence writing, inhibitions that have developed since first grade of elementary school, i.e. writing had to be clear, correct and neat. ESL students especially can benefit as their level of competency develops. To be successful, though, freewriting, while free for the students, still requires the teacher to be organized, disciplined and methodical.

Method

At the beginning of each class, allocate about 15-20 minutes for the whole freewriting exercise. The basic process can be broken down into four steps.

1. Preparing for writing

Students must prepare a piece of paper, or a notebook, and a pen. Freewriting is usually best done as the first activity in class because other activities, anxiety over assignments, and classroom stress may all interrupt or even hinder the creative process. Freewriting needs space, time and a certain degree of freedom from anxiety.

2. Setting up the task

Jacobs advises nine basic criteria for freewriting in an ESL environment (284) while Elbow describes clearly and simply the philosophy of freewriting in Writing Without Teachers:

> "The idea is simply to write for 10 minutes ... Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, 'I can't think of it.' Just put down something. The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck it's fine to write 'I can't think of anything to say, I can't think of anything to say' as many times as you want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you never stop." (3)

3. Freewriting

Initially the teacher may provide an example of what to do themselves by sitting in front of the class and doing the same task. However, the other role as facilitator of freewriting is also important. Ensuring that students aren't correcting, changing what they wrote, consulting their dictionary, or one of the hundred and one other activities that distract or interrupt students writing. Moreover, merely acting as an encourager can also provide students with the necessary reminder to remain focused on the task at hand. This is not a test, but it does require concentration. An involved teacher can play an important role, here.

4. Post-writing

Warning them that the time is up about 2 minutes before the end helps to round up the class activity. Students write their name at the top and may be asked to note the number of words in that particular freewriting. The teacher can collect paper or notebooks for later reading although no explicit correction or grading should be carried out on the papers. Freewriting like this may form an important element of a portfolio of writing.

Follow-up Suggestions

If this is the first time for freewriting, a survey or short discussion afterwards may provide the teacher with extra opportunities to explain any aspects that are still unclear, deal with reactions to the exercise, and handle any difficulties that arose. In general, freewriting needs to be done regularly throughout the semester to foster more involvement from the students. Elbow reckons three times a week as the minimum (3). However, most class schedules are less frequent than that. Students can be encouraged to write more frequently in their own time, perhaps even keeping a journal. Increased frequency of writing should at the very least resolve most of the difficulties in the early stages. Outstanding problems, however, may persist.

II. Dealing with Problems

Five different kinds of writers suffer problems during freewriting. Identifying the symptoms will help you spot those having difficulty with the task and allow you to provide an appropriate solution for them.

The reluctant writer

- Symptom: This writer stops repeatedly, writes briefly, and is always looking around. He/she never seems to concentrate for more than a few seconds at a time.
- Solution: Gentle encouragement to return to the task at hand and a reminder that perfect work is not expected will both usually work.

The always-has-to-be-correct writer

- Symptom: The use of an eraser, liquid paper or scoring out of whatever has been written indicate a writer with perfectionism as his/her ideal.
- Solution: Reminding writers that they do not have to be perfect in this task, they just have to complete the task by writing down their stream of consciousness thoughts. Asking them to put away these devices or to stop deleting what they write should also work well.

The keyboard tapper

- Symptom: Frequent use of the pocket electronic dictionary (or flipping of dictionary pages) indicates someone pursuing the most accurate word possible.
- Solution: Ask them to put away the dictionary, to paraphrase any word they don't know, or leave a space or write the word in their own language. Remind them just to keep writing until the task is finished. All of these will help remedy this situation.

The talker

- Symptom: Since a quiet class is usually required for this task, the talker is immediately noticed above the silence of the

classroom, either as the buzz from the back of the class or audible words coming from the corner.

- Solution: Ask this writer to capture on paper some of the thoughts that are being expressed verbally, since he/she seems to have a lot to say.

The copier

- Symptom: This writer has another piece of paper on which is written a topic, title and even some notes or a plan. He/She can be seen copying or referring to it frequently.
- Solution: This writer obviously feels that he/she can't write well and so needs some linguistic or content-based support for the writing. However, this defeats the point of freewriting, that it is unprepared, open-ended and flowing, in all three aspects that are essential to freewriting. A suggested way to deal with this might be to talk to the writer about his or her concerns and find out why they feel it is necessary to do prepare this. You might also need to reassure them that their writing is good enough for freewriting since the aim is merely to write something, not to write a perfect composition.

Reminding students of the purpose and method of freewriting from time to time is an effective strategy to solve a lot of the problems that appear. An observant and pro-active teacher can easily solve most of the problems that occur in freewriting.

III. Post-writing Activities: Prompts

Three variations on the basic technique that have proved successful in my classroom include using prompts, encouraging sharing, and varying feedback.

Writing Prompts

In freewriting, some students do report negative experiences, mostly complaining that they do not know what to write. In these situations, a stimulus or prompt can be very helpful to start writing. However, these 'prompts' are not topics, in other words, they do not set down limits to what can be written about. They are merely places to start writing, and if the students end up writing about something completely different, the freewriting exercise will still have been completely successful.

There are a number of prompts that have worked well in my class. So, set aside a time at the beginning of the writing session and use it to present the stimulus for writing. Present the instructions and prompt clearly to students. Either during or after the prompt, the students can begin writing. Students should not worry about whether they understand everything they heard or saw; rather they should allow the prompt to inspire or stimulate their writing. They do not even have to keep to the topic, they just have to let the writing take over. Open-ended prompts also tend to work better as they allow students to explore the range of responses possible.

1. Quotation

A quotation, if it has a strong theme or provokes a strong response, provides a good prompt for students to explore. Choose quotations that should be easy for your particular students to understand. There are many websites with databases of quotations available, including Quoteland, which can be found at http://www.quoteland.com/, and Familiar Quotations from Bartlett's, Simpson's and Columbia all of which are at http://www.bartleby.com/100/.

2. Short story

A short story can be read out to the class. Perhaps it will be familiar to students already in their first language, such as one of Aesop's fables. Keep the story time limit to less than five minutes. Even an interesting chapter or part of a story that inspires can be chosen from a longer book.

3. Music

Music works very well as a prompt, because it allows space for the imagination to grow and develop during the freewriting time, as well as provides a break from the monotony of the teacher's voice. However, avoid songs with lyrics because students may become frustrated with trying to comprehend the lyrics. The lyrics themselves may also lack subtlety, thus limiting the range of responses students may have.

4. Memory

Think of a powerful memory that you have. Set the scene by sharing your memory with the class. Elicit other kinds of memories from students, e.g. from childhood, a trip, even a person in their lives. Then tell students to share a memory that had a powerful effect on them.

5. Picture: piece of art or photograph or abstract drawing.

Again, a picture that can stimulate a variety of responses will work better than one that demands a 'correct' interpretation. Abstract art may work better than traditional art. Simple sketches can also be very effective in creating a variety of responses, since interpretation remains open for the writer.

6. Question

A provocative question can also be a good stimulus for writing. Find a question that provokes your students into responding in writing, but also one that allows students a variety in the type of responses. This gives them freedom in what to write, while avoiding numerous pieces all dealing with the same ideas and content in more or less the same fashion.

7. Poetic license

A short poem that has a strong theme may also work. Do stress to students that they do not need to give you the correct interpretation, but just ask them to respond however they like.

8. Video segment

A good video segment or situation that presents itself, such as a scene from a movie that most of the class have seen, or a scene in which the situation is obvious. Again avoid closed situations where there are only a few possible stances, as this will help students to focus on expressing their ideas and interpretations.

9. Odd predicaments

An open-ended situation can present an ideal opportunity for students to react in an unhindered way. You can use a 'what if' scenario, such as 'What if you woke up tomorrow morning and found you had been turned into a dog'; or an ethical dilemma like 'You see a poor woman stealing in a store, what would you do?'; or even a situation that happened to you in real life, but posed as a question.

10. Proverbs or sayings

This is an effective way to encourage students to write. Get the students to write down a favorite proverb or saying on a piece of paper and drop it in a bag that you pass around. Then distribute the pieces at random. Elicit a student response to the proverb or saying that they receive.

Some of these prompts (e.g. the story, video, and odd predicament) require setting up prior to writing, so allow adequate time to prepare, provide the prompt before students begin writing, and deal with unexpected impediments. Any story, situation or activity may also consume more time than usual with follow-up questions from students (story or odd predicament) or technical problems (video/audio equipment). Some prompts, such as the musical prompt, should be started before freewriting begins, but students can begin writing whenever they feel ready.

IV. Completing the Cycle: Sharing and Feedback

The complete freewriting cycle contains two more aspects that are important for students: sharing and feedback.

Sharing

Since all writing is communicative in nature, sharing is necessary in order for students to benefit the most from the feedback they receive. This sharing can have a number of formats: most obviously, student - teacher, but also student - student, student - group, and student - class. Each form has a different set of dynamics and so may appeal to particular students.

1. Student to student

One variation that struck a chord with students was sharing their writing with each other. After the end of each writing session, students swapped their writing with two or three partners/friends/classmates on an individual basis. Students were expected to follow the same parameters laid out for teachers commenting on their writing when reading and commenting on their partners writing, i.e. to remain limited to a comment on the content. Sharing had another consequence: It allows students to see how writing and sharing can be an effective way to foster friendship, communication and writing skills altogether.

2. Student to group

Students work together in a group of four or five. Each student may, if they want to, share their piece of writing with the group as an audience by reading it aloud. Students should work together with the same members on a regular basis in order to build up trust. This will help create more open and less critical reactions to pieces, since everybody has to share with each other.

3. Student to class

This may be a more formidable challenge for students, but Tillyer reported a positive experience with it in her class (Email). You may have to begin by setting up the stage for students to share and telling them that they do not have to share. Providing a model of your own writing read aloud may inspire others to share their pieces with the class when they realize that they are all in the same boat.

4. Teacher to class

Writing class is quite a different environment from the more typical conversation class, especially when it comes to the nature and amount of interaction between students and teachers. The contact is more formal and less frequent than in a conversation class.

So, to counteract this, students often commented that they wanted me to share more of myself in class, so I also did freewriting each week and then shared the result aloud with the class after they had finished theirs. This is a good technique because it models how messy freewriting can be and provides a good way for students to know the teacher better.

Feedback

As part of this cycle of writing and response, students expect to receive feedback from the teacher, as well as from classmates. This feedback usually takes two forms: comment and error correction.

1. Comment

Focus on what students are trying to communicate and share your personal reactions to their ideas. Never correct their writing, either in grammar, usage or vocabulary. Never use a red pen because again this creates a notion of correction, and some students may feel that you are correcting their ideas. Only share your own ideas in response to their writing, no more and no less. By avoiding these traps, students can begin to experience the freedom from their inhibitions as they explore their writing and their own identity.

The feedback on students' writing falls into one of four categories:

- **Empathy** merely means finding something within the writing that you can echo with your own experience.
- **Sharing** is the act of sharing an experience that in some way directly relates to the writer's ideas.
- **Elicitation** allows you to suggest ways in which the writer could add to what has already been written on the paper, and takes the form of either questions or direct commands such as "Tell me more about..." or "I'd like to know more about this..."
- **Encouragement** is perhaps the most vague of the categories since it merely acknowledges that the writer has written well by saying "You have written a good piece."

2. Error correction

Normal correction techniques for composition classes include looking for specific vocabulary or language problems, providing comments on effectiveness, and suggesting improvements in rhetoric, etc.

This is not appropriate or effective for freewriting. Matsuda notes "After all, the great purpose of the technique is ... to discover the great, yet fragile ideas students may have been hiding in the bottom of their consciousness" (Email). This kind of criticism may have a negative effect on students' confidence and willingness to express themselves on paper, particularly undesirable given freewriting's main purpose.

However, one of the most frequent suggestions that students make is that freewriting mistakes should not go uncorrected. Despite Matsuda's real concerns, effective feedback can be provided simply. One method is to collate the most common mistakes in a separate notebook and provide follow-up remedial work on the problem areas at a more appropriate time. You would not need to identify the source of the incorrect forms. Another method allows for a separate space in each student's notebook (at the back) where similar comments can be collated and commented on. Remedial work can be targeted more to the individual student. Either of these methods would address the concerns of students more than adequately.

Conclusion

Freewriting is a beneficial technique for students of English, despite some of the obvious difficulties for learners of English. This writer's experience of using freewriting in the classroom highlights the potential of the technique. These variations provide a rich source from which students will benefit greatly in their writing and in the enrichment of their ideas and language usage through the feedback from fellow students and the class teacher. Once teachers have used these variations, inventing new methods for prompts and feedback should become second nature.

Works Cited

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