

Applying Brainstorming Techniques to EFL Classroom

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[abstract]

This paper focuses on brainstorming techniques for English language learners. From the author's teaching experiences at Shohoku College during the academic year 2014-2015, the importance of brainstorming techniques was made evident. The author explored three elements of brainstorming techniques for writing using literature reviews: lack of awareness, connecting to prior knowledge, and creativity. The literature reviews showed the advantage of using brainstorming techniques in an English composition classroom. In addition to the advantages demonstrated, the techniques are helpful for the development of students' writing and the facilitation of their creativity. The author concluded that brainstorming techniques should be introduced at the beginning of the semester to help improve writing skills over time.

[key words]

Brainstorming, Second Language Writing, Second Language Instruction

1. General Background on Purpose

This paper explores basic principles of brainstorming techniques in writing and their application at a beginner junior college English classroom in Japan. During the author's teaching experience at Shohoku College, a junior college in Japan, during academic year 2014-2015, it was re-recognized that the basic element of language competence is not only grammatical competence. English learners at a junior college in Japan have difficulty when they write about a topic in English that is related to their daily life or themselves. Their writing products tend to be vague and unclear in relation to the topics that are given in class. This indicates that to be a competent second language speaker or writer requires not only acquiring grammatical knowledge. The students' grammar competence may be limited. In addition to lack of grammatical knowledge, the author's experience shows that their discourse competence is limited too. One of the reasons why their writing is not well is because writing styles are different in Western countries and Eastern countries. Directness and indirectness of expressions may be influenced too. Language is a tool for

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communication but all language communicates ideas in the same way. Because of this, the ways of writing and communication might be different. When Japanese English language learners produce their ideas, the English writing process might not fit their writing style.

2. Brief Introduction of Content

In this paper the author will first discuss the effectiveness of brainstorming in an English composition class including *lack of awareness* adding to students' weaknesses in writing and flow of ideas (Baroudy, 2008). Second, *connecting to prior knowledge* will be explained, which contains information on the effectiveness or efficiency of the mapping and freewriting strategy for writing. In the *creativity* section, the author will identify what facilitating thinking and mental blocking in group brainstorming is all about. The last section will be the conclusion of the paper. A summary of the main ideas of brainstorming will be provided and also, general suggestions for training in brainstorming techniques in EFL classrooms in Japan will be summarized.

3. Effectiveness of Brainstorming

“Behold the turtle. He makes progress only when his neck is out. This is a basic reason for brainstorming, dramatically expressed.” (Clark, 1958, p.51). This is an old quotation but shows that brainstorming encourages people to constantly be able to produce new ideas using its technique (Clark, 1958). An English learner might be able to come up with a lot of different ideas in his or her mind when they are given a topic to write. However, how are they going to organize these various thoughts? Brainstorming allows the main points to be clarified and determines ways to support these main ideas. Just like a snowball (Clark, 1958), which gathers snow as it rolls in a snowy field, brainstorming is one of the methods for generating ideas. The more that brainstorming occurs, the more creative ideas can be reflected in a English language learner's paper. In the same way, it clears one's mind and enables the organization of one's thoughts. Also this skill is effective for encouraging a creative mind to come up with new ideas. It can be used not only for creating ideas in writing, but also in a variety of areas, such as business, politics, teaching, and so on. In teaching and learning English, the teaching of brainstorming is an important skill to build up ideas for better writing. However, English language learners have several challenges they have to overcome for writing a paper, because, they need many difficult-to-acquire linguistic abilities in the writing process. Especially in an EFL class, a lack of ideas and interesting topics may make students feel like they are not able to write (Rau, 2007). There is a lack of imagination related to the topic and at the same time they are facing a huge challenge of simply producing English, which means these students feel unready to write. Rau (2007) concluded that in order to improve students' writing performance, brainstorming strategies should be introduced in the writing process for English language learners. The mapping activities and exchange of

related ideas may activate prior knowledge and facilitate linkages with new knowledge. The original ideas presented by students beyond those that are presented in their writing suggest that the learner is actively involved in the process (Bernudes & Prater 1990).

4. Lack of Awareness

How do the English language learners begin to express themselves on paper? Zamel (1982) cites Brostoff et al. and described the lack of awareness of the students who begin writing based on a processed writing approach. This is a step-by-step approach with steps for deciding topics, making an outline, writing a draft, self-revision, peer review, and finally tutoring students to complete a final draft: “Since students may lack systematic strategies necessary for finding a focus and beginning, they need to be taught how to explore topics, develop ideas, and discover relationships by making use of kinds of invention techniques” (p. 204). Zamel’s argument is that there are techniques that the students should utilize to understand how to initiate writing a paper in English. When students write a paper, they should first understand how to expand topics so they can explore their ideas more on paper. Brainstorming increases students’ performance and needs to be introduced before they even think about touching the pen to the paper. Englert and Raphael (1988) also illustrate with statements by Hillocks that poor writers do not have any techniques to improve writing plans or generate information: for instance, note taking, idea generation, and re-reading or revising in planning activities which can be taught and used for the English language learners. In addition, he argues that there is a gap between skilled and unskilled writers and whether they can find ideas through the processes of writing (Englert & Raphael, 1988). In order to avoid a lack of ideas, brainstorming is a priceless way to expand thoughts and should be introduced early on in the composition class.

Baroudy (2008) cites Shoemaker: Brainstorming is the best tool used to start ideas flowing in the brain. In order to motivate the students to start writing, the brainstorming strategy allows for facilitation of the ideas students have into utilizable forms.

The purpose of brainstorming is to help student-writers free their thoughts, breakdown mental block; the feeling one gets when he/she does not know what to write about, opening students’ mind to other possible ways to looking and evaluating things. (Baroudy, 2008, p. 8)

Before students write a paper, brainstorming clarifies their ideas at the beginning and prepares students to write further (Scott, 2006). Students can then distinguish issues in writing they have and learn how to isolate them so that they can improve these areas.

5. Connecting to Prior Knowledge

Besides brainstorming being successful in conveying a wide-range of ideas in composing papers, how do students expand or draw out their ideas from their mind more easily and over a wider scope? In learning

the writing process, Rao (2007) claims that the beginning phase is used to find out what information the students already know and what they need to learn in order to efficiently write, and is a necessary stage. Students can activate their prior knowledge with the skills that are necessary to write papers. By utilizing the writer's prior knowledge, the effectiveness of brainstorming is enhanced.

Bermudez and Prater (1990) explained that mapping strategies are able to help students establish their priorities and focus their writing. According to Bermudez and Prater, mapping strategies have been defined in the research that show one's knowledge base of concepts and the relationships between them. In addition, mapping can help to unify ideas clearly and allow for the content to be expanded. This idea gives evidence that connecting to information and topics from one's prior knowledge makes writing more creative and expands thoughts in the writers' mind. But at the same time, Englert and Raphael (1988) mentioned that planning and organizing writing depends on the ability to access prior background knowledge. However, connecting to prior knowledge is not only done individually but also through group brainstorming, informal conversation, and guided group activities which help the writers in providing more ideas and making the topic meaningful (Gunnery, 2007). In an ESL learning setting, sharing experience in a small group allows for students to support each other. Students that have different interests and abilities are able to work successfully in group brainstorming situations (Gunnery, 2007).

Another example of a technique useful for connecting to prior knowledge is the freewriting strategy. Elbow (1981) recommends that writers should simply write while staying on topic for ten minutes straight. The quality of writing is not important because the purpose of freewriting strategy is not the result but in the process of simply putting down one's thoughts on paper. According to Camacho (1995), ideas can be expressed from in one's mind by freewriting, quantity being important without any criticism of these ideas. Even if the brainstormer writes several drafts that result in ideas which are good and bad, the writer can eliminate those ideas which are not useful and keep only the most important ones based upon the needs of the audience by using the freewriting strategy (Reid, 1984). There is a difference between the two strategies compared with the outliners who find out what they want to write beforehand. Reid (1984) explains that in her own experience, radical outliners are inflexible, even if the writer already knows what he or she wants to write when starting to write. This means the quality of the writing will be decided by how much the writer exposes their own knowledge of the topic. The information related to prior knowledge reflects on the outcome of their writing efforts (Rao, 2007).

6. Creativity

A clustering technique is one of the methods of developing and improving writing skills and also facilitating thinking in the classroom (Ventis, 1990). English language learners tend to be afraid of making mistakes in organization, and moreover, grammar, when they start writing. However, brainstorming helps them to think of as many ideas as they can (Baroudy, 2008). Anything that comes to the students' mind can

be written down. This allows students to map out their idea and to connect other ideas more efficiently. The ideas on the note or piece of paper can be shown as an organized visual map that helps the student think creatively. At the same time, starting with a main idea to next idea is seen as a route. The students can use the route that helps them continue to write the next idea. By mapping out the students' thoughts into a visual map, their products become more coherent with many ideas.

Group brainstorming is more effective than individual brainstorming. Rao (2007) cites Richards: the essences of interaction with peer and teacher are able to be facilitated using brainstorming skills. In addition, group brainstorming is important in order to activate their thinking and create ideas which are able to overcome the difficulty of foreign language learning. The brainstorming strategy can gather many more ideas in a group setting than in an individual one. Dugosh et al. (2000) demonstrates the benefits of exposing students' ideas in group situations by brainstorming. It is concluded that this display to peers facilitates creating ideas which are more secure. Identified by the author were two factors that influence productivity: ideas that a writer can be exposed to increase in a group situation, and the amount of talking in a group provides more ideas to be formed.

At the same time, one of the interferences of creativity in writing is mental blocking. Mental blocking occasionally occurred in group brainstorming because of social anxiety. Social anxiety in brainstorming groups affects the other's ideas (Camacho, 1995) and therefore leads students to feel uncomfortable in exposing their thoughts. According to the study by Camacho (1995), these effects include group members seemingly unable to communicate efficiently with each other. When this happens, the student's amount of creativity is reduced due not sharing their own ideas with others. This makes the session seem pointless; the students might have just brainstormed on their own, because they do not influence each other's thought process.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion section, the author will summarize the three elements of brainstorming for English language learners. These are the following; lack of awareness, connecting to prior knowledge, and creativity. Also, general suggestions for brainstorming training for EFL classrooms will be provided.

In the fourth section, the author pointed out that writing is a difficult process for everyone, especially for foreign language learners in their home countries. English language learners need to be provided with a variety of techniques to improve writing skills in second language acquisition. The students should be taught the process of writing and how to explore their ideas for writing in English. English language learners have two major difficulties: learning a foreign language in their home countries with limited exposure to the target language, and difference of rhetorical process in writing. Even in these learning settings, brainstorming is a fundamental skill to develop the English writer's skills and writing in the second language composition class.

In the fifth section, the importance of access to prior knowledge was explained. In writing classes, the

EFL teachers need to confirm what their students know prior to their writing the paper. Brainstorming is used to activate students' thinking in writing processes. Therefore, if students cannot recognize the process of writing, brainstorming strategies should be introduced at the beginning of the class. Once students' brains are activated, students need to be able to expose as much information as they know related to the topic. When brainstorming is developed, the ideas from students' prior knowledge are brought forth. The mapping and freewriting strategies are valuable without concern for quality.

In the sixth section, improving productivity with creative ideas was discussed. In order to develop writing and facilitate thinking in classroom settings, teacher should reduce students' anxiety of making mistakes by using graphic organizers and group brainstorming. However, group brainstorming may influence low productivity because of individual mental blocking led by social anxiety. A teacher needs to be careful when group brainstorming strategy is introduced in class.

In final conclusion, throughout this paper, the author attempted to point out the advantage of introducing brainstorming strategies into the EFL classroom. Three elements of brainstorming impact English language learners' writing process. More importantly, ways of expanding thinking should be introduced at the beginning of the semester so that the students can use brainstorming skills throughout the semester and learn how the English language is used. The skills can also be applied to speaking, listening, and reading activity. However, it is not easy to be a competent writer in English. By knowing the method of expressing thoughts effectively and efficiently, the writing of students will become more creative. Productivity of writing is influenced, when a quantity of ideas is created in a group with interaction between peers and teachers. Brainstorming is a valuable skill for any field in a problem-solving situation. This is also an effective way to expose students' thoughts on a topic. Through peer or group activities in class, ideas are produced that can be mapped out clearly. Learning the writing process in English should be introduced at an early stage in college for improving the students' language competencies. It allows development of composition skills and helps them to produce a more polished paper.

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