

Enhancing Students' Motivation to Write Essays through Brainstorming: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate the exploitation of brainstorming, the first step in the writing process as a means to enhance students' motivation to write essays. The article starts with a background of different approaches to the writing process and writing product. It also provides an overview of the main brainstorming types: free and guided focusing on the journalistic guided brainstorming. An experiment involving 12 students from the post Foundation Program at Qatar University was conducted to compare between free brainstorming and guided brainstorming. They were given tasks to complete, and the analysis of data was based on teachers' observations and students' feedback. The results indicated that both types of brainstorming were motivating to students with more preference given to guide brainstorming. Based on results of the experiment some conclusions have been drawn.

1. Introduction

Brainstorming and writing motivation are two major areas in second language learning and teaching. This paper brings the two areas together as it is thought that brainstorming activity is a key factor that can have impact on students' writing motivation. In fact, the issue of teaching writing in EFL/ESL by starting with brainstorming and its relation to students' motivation has become increasingly important to educators, EFL/ESL teachers, as well as to students. However, having been EFL teachers of English for a long time, we have had the chance to notice that many EFL teachers use different methods for brainstorming without examining how they influence students' writing motivation. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on one stage of essay writing process, i.e. brainstorming and its relation to students' motivation by comparing two of its approaches.

2. Background

2.1. The Process Approach

One approach that has had a major impact on second language writing instruction is the process approach. This approach has now become commonly used in ESL textbooks, curriculum and teaching practice. The process approach came as a reaction to the product approach which lays heavy emphasis on the final product and on the students' knowledge of lexical items and grammatical rules.

2.2. Writing Motivation

Writing motivation, like reading motivation, can be intrinsic or extrinsic. The first comes from inside the student when he/she has the desire to develop the skill of writing, and the second is to satisfy others; in other words, to be recognized by others as a good writer. (*Writing motivation 2011*).

2.3. The Process Approach & Writing Motivation

In the process approach the focus is on the writer's cognitive view of writing and on writing stages such as brainstorming, planning, revising, editing and rewriting. It is widely believed that this approach treats the skill of writing as a creative act which requires time, thinking, interaction and positive feedback to be done in a good way.

All these practices, for sure will motivate the students to put more effort on the writing activity (*Approaches to process writing 2011*).

2.4. What is Brainstorming?

Brainstorming is a technique in which the students compile a list of potential ideas and examples for a given topic. It is a powerful practice that creates new ideas, and motivates students to carry out writing tasks (*Brainstorming process 2011*). According to Isaksen (1998) brainstorming is one of the most well-known tools for effective thinking. However, he pointed out that some previous studies have led to many misconceptions on brainstorming. In his article, he reviewed 50 studies done during the period 1958 to 1988 aiming at taking "...stock of what we know and pointing out productive pathways for future research" (p 2)

2.5. Brainstorming and Motivation

Brainstorming motivates writers because it usually involves members of a team working together which helps the students discuss, solve problems, think creatively, and collaborate to achieve the task. In relation to this, Offner et al(1996) investigated the effect of a facilitator's use of a flip chart recorder and periodic pauses to overcome production blocking in interacting brainstorming groups. They found that interacting groups with a group facilitator outperformed groups without a facilitator and did about as well as nominal groups. On the other hand flip chart recording had no effect, possibly because it blocks production. Pauses had no important effect on brainstorming. This study may indicate that writers can be motivated to do brainstorming prior to writing.

2.6. Types of Group Brainstorming

Generally speaking, brainstorming activities usually help students generate and refine ideas, and help them develop their topic by reminding them of what they already know, and by clarifying what they have yet to learn. There is a wide variety of group brainstorming activities that can help students move forward from their first-impulse writing ideas to a well-defined topic that addresses the requirements of the assignment. The following group brainstorming types are the most common.

A. Free brainstorming

It usually takes one shape in which the students would discuss ideas related to the topic without guidance from the teacher.

B. Guided Brainstorming

This type can take several shapes: journalistic questions, cubing, cluster mapping, and double/triple entry, etc.

2.7 Types of Guided Brainstorming

The most common group brainstorming activities are tabulated as follows (*Approaches to process writing 2011*).

- a. Cubing
- b. Three perspectives
- c. Looping
- d. Clustering
- e. Double/Triple entry
- f. Journalistic Questions

I. Cubing (DCAAAA)

Cubing enables the students to consider their topic from six different directions; just as a cube is six-sided, the students' cubing brainstorming will result in six "sides" or approaches to the topic. The students should take a sheet of paper, and should respond to these six commands.

- a. Describe it.
- b. Compare it.

- c. Associate it.
- d. Analyze it.
- e. Apply it.
- d. Argue for and against it.

II. Three Perspectives: Describe, Trace, Map (DTM)

The students should answer the questions for **each** of the three perspectives, and then they should look for interesting relationships or mismatches they can explore. The students have to:

- a. Describe it:** What is the topic? What are its components? What are its interesting and distinctive features? What are its puzzles? How is the student's subject different from others?
- b. Trace it:** What is the history of the subject? How has it changed over time? Why? What are the significant events that have influenced the subject?
- c. Map it:** What is the subject related to? What is it influenced by? How? What does it influence? How? Who has a stake in this topic? Why? How has this subject been approached by others? How is their work related to yours?

III. Looping

The students should be asked to free write for a few minutes.

- a.** After they are finished, they should review the writing, stop periodically to circle or highlight words, phrases, and concepts that interest the students.
- b.** The students should be allowed to free write again, this time restricting the topic to the circled ideas.
- c.** The students should continue this process until they have narrowed their ideas down to what they want to write about.

IV. Clustering/Mapping/Webbing

The students will write a lot of different terms and phrases onto a sheet of paper in a random fashion and later go back to link the words together into a sort of "map" or "web" that forms groups from the separate parts. A large piece of paper or two pieces taped together can be used.

V. Double/Triple Entry

Double or Triple Entry is another focused brainstorming activity. It is specifically useful when comparing and contrasting two or three topics. This prewriting method requires the students to have two or three columns on their paper. Each column should have a topic. If the students were going to compare love and hatred, then they should have two columns in which they should jot down similarities and differences between the two concepts.

VI. Journalistic Questions

As known, journalists have six important questions they need to answer about any story they report: **who, what, when, where, why, and how**. By answering these questions, journalists can be certain that they have provided the most important information about an event, issue, or problem to their readers. These questions are also useful to the students when they write different types of essays (How to teach writing)

2.8 Importance of the Journalistic Questions

- Journalistic questions approach a topic in a more structured method than others since the ultimate task is to explain thoroughly a thing, or issue, or person, or event, or problem.
- This technique allows students to make sure they have provided all of the important and specific details of a situation.

- Journalistic questions help the students find answers that currently may not be on hand about the student’s subject.
- Generating and then answering these questions will ensure that the student’s final paper anticipates questions that the teacher is likely to have about the subject.
- It will also help the students to focus their research and save time in the library and on the Web.

3. Focus

In this paper the focus is on comparing free group brainstorming with one kind of guided brainstorming, i.e. journalistic questions in order to examine their impact on students’ writing motivation. In this regard, class observation method and the students’ feedback will be used to find out the outcomes of the two brainstorming techniques.

4. The Experiment

4.1 Participants

Twelve female students were chosen randomly from a population of students who were doing an advanced writing course in the Spring Semester (2012) at the Post Foundation level, Qatar University.

4.2 Procedure

Participants were divided into four small groups (3-4) and each group was given two sheets one for Journalistic Guided Brainstorming and one for the Free Brainstorming. Each group was requested to choose a topic and complete the brainstorming in each sheet.

5. Brainstorming Sheets

A. Free Brainstorming Sheet Instructions

In groups of 3 - 4 complete the brainstorming sheet provided on a topic of your choice.

B. Guided Journalistic Brainstorming Sheet Instructions

In groups of 3 - 4 complete the following brainstorming sheet on a topic of your choice.

1. Who? (Audience)

Who are you writing this topic for?

2. What?

What is your topic about?

.What do you know about this topic?

3. When?

When did you first think about this topic?

4. Where?

Where were you when you first became aware of this topic? In the school, in the university, at home, outside your country....etc.

5. Why?

Why are you interested in writing about it?

6. How?

How do you feel about your topic?

6. Topics Selected

Participants selected the following topics:

- Fast Food (2 groups)
- Makeup (1 group)
- Teachers (1 group)

7. Description of Data

A summary of the collected Data

| Topic | ✓ =(answered) Guided Journalistic Brainstorming | | | | | | Free Brainstorming | Comments |
|-----------|--|-------|-------|--------|------|------|---|--|
| | Who? | What? | When? | Where? | Why? | How? | Examples | |
| Fast Food | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Lots of alcohol, diseases, obesity | Much fewer ideas |
| Makeup | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Skin, eye pencil, powder ,mirror | Just a few words, but good for free brainstorming |
| Teachers | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Subjects, behavior, school, students, method of teaching, personalities, testing, classroom, management | For this particular topic participants seemed to prefer the free brainstorming over guided |

8. Analysis and Comments

The analysis and interpretation of results were based on two items: teachers’ observations during the process of brainstorming; and students’ reflections on the process.

8.1. Teachers’ observations

While conducting the brainstorming process the following observations were made:

- Participants completed the process in both guided and free brainstorming.
- The ideas that they came up with were generally richer in the guided than in the free brainstorming.
- Participants gave very interesting answers to the Wh& H questions in the guided brainstorming.

8.2. Participants' Reflections

After completing the experiment the students were asked to reflect on each type of brainstorming. Below is the summary of their reflections.

- Reflections received from the participants showed that both types of brainstorming were motivating for them to write essays.
- Most of them, however, indicated a preference of Guided Brainstorming over Free Brainstorming as this kind of Brainstorming enabled them to focus more on each aspect of the topic at a time.
- The free brainstorming, on the other hand, gave them the freedom to conduct their brainstorming, yet they tended to lose focus during the process and so they felt a bit disorganized

9. Conclusions

Although the experiment was conducted on a relatively small group of participants, yet the analysis revealed very important and interesting trends among students' reflections on the use of brainstorming as a motivating step in the writing process. The following conclusions can be drawn from this experiment:

- a.** Teachers' observations indicated that both types of group brainstorming, Guided Journalistic and Free, constituted a motivating and engaging phase in the writing process.
- b.** In this small –scale study participants' reports indicated a preference of the Guided Journalistic Brainstorming as it helped them focus better on the various aspects of the topic and produce richer and more penetrating ideas
- c.** The nature of the topic could affect which type of brainstorming is more motivating than the other. For example in this study participants preferred the Guided Journalistic for the Fast Food and Makeup topics, whereas the participants who worked on the topic of Teachers preferred the Free Brainstorming.

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