Brainstorming for Ideas

1 author:

Mogahed Mogahed
Mustaqbal University, Saudi Arabia
15 PUBLICATIONS   **40** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

Translation Techniques View project

Translating proverbs View project

Brainstorming for Ideas

Mogahed M. Mogahed

2011

ABSTRACT

Learners occasionally complain that they lack ideas when sitting down to write a composition. Teachers complain that they do not want to spend half the class time telling students what to write. There is an answer. Teachers brainstorm words connected with the topic in class before setting the composition for homework. The question remains: how to brainstorm for writing. This article answers this question.

Mogahed M. Mogahed*
mogahed72@windowslive.com

Key words: writing, prewriting, brainstorming, writer's block

Introduction

   Learners occasionally complain that they lack ideas when sitting down to write a composition. Teachers complain that they do not want to spend half the class time telling students what to write. There is an answer. Teachers brainstorm words connected with the topic in class before setting the composition for homework. The question remains: how to brainstorm for writing.

   Most problems are not solved automatically by the first idea that comes to mind. To get to the best solution it is important to consider many possible solutions. One of the best ways to do this is called brainstorming. Brainstorming is a useful way of getting started or generating new ideas. Once students are familiar with the process, they can use this activity on their own when they are stuck, revising their work, or moving on to a new phase. Bobb-Wolff (1996) argues that brainstorming can be a useful and enriching tool in the EFL classroom and a means of showing students that they are collectively capable of generating far more ideas to improve their learning process than they believed possible. This in turn, leads to an increase in their autonomy of learning and self-responsibility. But most importantly, it improves the quality of student participation and student production in class.

   Brainstorming is the act of spontaneously jotting down ideas in preparation for various aspects of writing. Some prove to be useful; others can be discarded. (Ledbetter, 2010: 18). In addition, McDowell (1999:5) defines brainstorming as " the act of defining a problem or idea and coming up with anything related to the topic – no matter how remote a suggestion may sound. All of these ideas are recorded and evaluated only after the brainstorming is completed." Tomlinson (1998) agrees with McDowell that brainstorming is a pre-writing activity in which a writer jots down everything he can think of on a set subject without judging the ideas; after that the writer looks at the result for patterns or other useful information about the subject. The important point about brainstorming is that there should be no pressure on the writer whatsoever. Students should simply open their minds to whatever pops into them.
   There are a number of ways to organize brainstorming for ideas.

A. Individual brainstorming:

   Manktelow (2000) mentions that when the learner brainstorms on his own, he will tend to produce a wider range of ideas than with group brainstorming – he/she does not have to worry about other people's egos or opinions and can therefore be more freely creative. He may not, however, develop ideas effectively as he does not have the experience of a group to help him. Individual brainstorming is best for generating many ideas, but tends to be less effective at developing them.

   • **Step by step brainstorming**

Step by step brainstorming goes as follows:

   1. Define the problem.

2. Give a time limit; but experience will show how much time is required.

3. Write solutions to the problem. There must be absolutely no criticizing of ideas. No matter how daft, how impossible or how silly an idea is, it must be written down.

4. Once your time is up, select the five ideas which you like best. Make sure everyone involved in the brainstorming session is in agreement.

5. Write down about five criteria for judging which ideas best solve the problem.

6. Give each idea a score of 0 to 5 points depending on how well it meets each criterion.

7. The idea with the highest score will best solve the problem. But you should keep a record of all of your best ideas and their scores in case your best idea turns out not to be workable.

• **From individual to whole class**

Step 1 State the topic: The teacher states the topic or writes it on the blackboard. The topic to brainstorm can also come from a single student or from a student group.

Step 2 Generating ideas: Give each student three-to-six minutes to write his ideas on the selected topic.

B. Group brainstorming

Step 3 Selecting ideas: Form pairs and ask each pair to make a list of their individual ideas. Set a time limit. Have the pairs form groups of four, again sharing and combining their ideas into one list of a limited number of items. Ask each group either to read the list of ideas or write the list on the blackboard.

Step 4 Choosing ideas: Ask everyone to copy the entire list to keep as a reference (Bobb-Wolff, 1996).

Group brainstorming on a given topic means that students work cooperatively and write down all the ideas that come to mind in connection with a topic. The class as a whole generates more ideas than an individual could manage alone (Simpson, 2004). Equally important, group brainstorming can be very effective as it uses the experience and creativity of all members of the group. When individual members reach their limit on an idea, another member's creativity and experience can take the idea to the next stage. Group brainstorming therefore tends to develop ideas in more depth than individual brainstorming.

To run a group brainstorming session effectively, Manktelow (2000,50) suggests the following:

- Define the problem you want to solve clearly, and lay out any criteria to be met.
- Keep the session focused on the problem.
- Ensure that no-one criticizes or evaluates ideas during the session. Criticism introduces an element of risk for group members when putting forward an idea. This stifles creativity and cripples the free running nature of a group brainstorming session.
- Encourage an enthusiastic, uncritical attitude among members of the group. Try to get everyone to contribute and develop ideas, including the quietest members of the group.
- Let people have fun brainstorming. Encourage them to come up with as many ideas as possible, from solidly practical ones to wildly impractical ones. Welcome creativity.
- Ensure that no train of thought is followed for too long.

- Encourage people to develop other people's ideas, or to use other ideas to create new ones.
- Appoint one person to note down ideas that come out of the session. A good way of doing this is to use a flip chart. This should be studied and evaluated after the session.

- **Pyramid brainstorming-from small group to whole class**

Step 1 State the topic: The teacher states the topic or writes it on the blackboard. The topic to brainstorm can also come from a single student or from a student group.

Step 2 Generating ideas: The students form groups of three or four. They can make their own suggestions by collaborating with each other. Ask the small groups to talk and write down their ideas. You can set a time limit or simply walk around the class. When you see that a group has two or three ideas written down, ask them to write them on the board. Then ask the other groups, to add on the board any thoughts or ideas that they may have. No attempt should be made to put things in any kind of order or make corrections or comments.

Step 3 Clearing up ideas: When it appears that no new ideas are forthcoming, you ask the whole class or small groups to discuss the relevancy and the clarity of the ideas on the board. Some ideas will most certainly be eliminated.

Step 4 Choosing ideas: Ask everyone to copy the entire list to keep as a reference, or follow one of these four steps. Each student or small group chooses some items on the board for writing a composition (Bobb-Wolff, 1996).

- **Make the most of what learners already know**

Some learners already know a lot of simple words but are not aware of what those words can do for them because they have not noticed their common collocations. The instructor brainstorm adjectives and verbs which learners think go with certain nouns. Very often, these collocations are already half-known by learners - they sense they have met them before - but they have not yet internalized them. Time spent on half-known language is more likely to encourage input to become intake than time spent on completely new input (Lewis, 2000).

Which Type of Brainstorming to Use

Bobb-Wolff (1996) responds that from individual to whole class brainstorming is most suitable when we want students to clear up ideas individually before sharing or comparing them with others. On the other hand, from the small group to the whole class brainstorming is most useful when small group discussions will help students generate more ideas. Unfortunately, in whole-group brainstorming, the tendency is for contributions from only a few with the majority sitting passively. To encourage greater participation, switching to one or the other of the two alternatives can well be a solution.

References

- Bobb-Wolff, L. (1996). Brainstorming to Autonomy. *Forum, vol. 34, no. 3*, July – September.

- Ledbetter, M. E. (2010). *The writing teacher's activity-a-day*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Lewis, M. (2000). *Teaching collocation: Further developments in the lexical approach.* New York: Thomson Heinle.

- Manktelow, J. (2000). *Brainstorming: Generating Many Radical Ideas.* Mind Tools Ltd of Signal House, Station Road, Burgess Hill, West Sussex, RH15 8DY, United Kingdom

- McDowell, D. (1999). *Process Guide:Brainstorming.* The Triton and Patterns Projects of San Diego Unified School District.

- Simpson, A. (2004). A Process Approach to Writing. CALL Centers, Istanbul. Bilgi University. *Online available at: http://www.developingteachers.com*

- Tomlinson, S. (1998). English on the Internet. *Online available at: http://www.delmar.edu*

*Mogahed M. Mogahed
Faculty of Education
University of Mansoura
Egypt