

Helping Students Write Anything Quickly and Fluently

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Teaching context

Location: University English writing classes in Japan

Class size: 15 to 20 students

Class time: 90 minutes, once a week

Students: Second-year students majoring in English who may be expected to write a senior thesis in English in their senior year

Problem

When I worked with preschool students, I received some good advice for how to encourage small children to speak more: count their words. For example, if a 3 year old says, “Hello, Mr. Adam,” I can stop and say “HELLO: One, MR: Two, ADAM: Three. That’s three words, Taro. Great job! And by the way, hello to you too, Mr. Taro (10 words).” The next day, Taro may indeed want to say hello to me in more words. Now that I am teaching adults, I share Herder and Clements’s (2012) observation that encouraging students to write freely and creatively is neglected in Japan. This is because students must learn structural knowledge to pass standardized tests, and receptive learning about the theory of what makes good writing tends to be more prevalent in Japanese writing classes than active learning and actually writing. So I thought of my technique with the pre-school students. Of course, encouraging adults to communicate in this way with each other would be ridiculous, so I needed a way to adapt this technique for adult learners.

Solution

In the same article by Herder and Clements (2012) mentioned above, they also suggested encouraging Japanese students to write for fluency. Teachers should “use every opportunity in class to have [...] students write as much as possible” (p. 235). I agree with Herder and Clement’s approach, and, in adapting it for my own classes, I decided to start all of my writing classes with my own version of 5 minutes of “Speed Writing.” It is basically an automation task allowing students to get used to the physical element of writing in their second language. The differences between my activity and the usual speed writing are that I emphasize creating a habit out of speed writing, and I try to make a game out of encouraging the students to simply produce or output more words.



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Here is how it works:

1. I tell the students that this is like stretching before practicing a sport.
2. I usually write a topic on the board (see Appendix), but I also tell students if they go off topic during speed writing, it does not matter. Spelling, grammar, good or bad handwriting also do not matter for the purposes of this exercise.
3. I tell them the only goal is to try to put as many words on their paper as they can in 5 minutes. I give them a loose goal of 100 words in 5 minutes, but I tell the students there is no grade for this assignment.
4. I also tell my students that if a teacher gave me this exercise, I might simply try to write the word “I” as many times as I could. In fact, I timed myself doing this, and it turns out, I could write more words faster when I tried to express myself with language than I could by simply writing one word over and over again.
5. After the clock stops, I tell the students to count their words—like counting the spoken words of small children to encourage them to speak more.
6. Last, I collect their writing, and I record the number of words that each student wrote on the student’s daily schedule. If they write 1 word, it is the same as if they write 150 words—although if a student writes 150 words, I would probably comment on their paper with something like “Wow! Great job!” I try to encourage the students to write without thinking during speed writing. Sometimes I comment on what some students write. For example, I might underline a sentence and write something like “This would be a good topic sentence” or I might share my own experience of something he or she wrote about. Usually I just draw a star, acknowledging that I have read it.

To be effective, this activity should be done at regular intervals over a set amount of time, like 15 weeks over a semester. This activity is also useful for recording attendance.

Conclusion

Paul Nation, in his chapter on fluency in *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking* (2009), also noted how expressing words fluently changes how well we know these words. In my experience, how well I know something may indeed affect how quickly I can write it down on paper. So, although I give the students complete freedom to do what they want to do in this exercise, I tell them that they can probably write quicker by writing in sentences. Furthermore, I notice that if the topic I choose is something everybody is passionate about, I get a lot more words. So although this activity can start out as a “write anything” activity, it can naturally build up to self-expression. At the end of the year, students often comment to me about how this exercise makes writing in English faster and easier for them.

References

- Herder, S. & Clements, P. (2012) Extensive Writing: A Fluency-first Approach to EFL Writing. In T. Muller, S. Herder, J. Adamson, & P. Shigeo Brown (Eds.) *Innovating ELF Teaching in Asia*. Palgrave Macmillian. Kindle Edition.
- Nation, P. (2009) *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking*. Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

Appendix

Topics for Speed Writing that have worked well in my classes:

1. How do you feel about being back at school?
2. Why do you like to travel or why do you not like to travel?
3. What do you think about the fickle weather of Spring (三寒四温)?
4. What do you think about Japanese food (和食)?
5. Describe something in your room that is special to you.
6. Should children be able to use smart phones in elementary school? Why or why not?
7. Which is better, cats or dogs? Why?
8. Do 知らぬが仏 and “ignorance is bliss” mean the same thing? Why or why not?
9. In my opinion....I think this because....Therefore.....
10. Do you think “might makes right?” (弱肉強食)
11. Tell me about a good book. What makes it good?
12. What is something interesting somebody else said or wrote? Why is it interesting?
13. Do you like what you wrote in this class? Why or why not?
14. What is something you know about that most people don't know?
15. Write about anything you want to write.

About the Author

Adam Brod holds an MA TESOL degree from Hawaii Pacific University and is currently teaching English at the university level as a part time instructor in Kagawa and Okayama, Japan. His research interests include corpus linguistics, bilingualism, and EFL writing instruction.