

FROM WORD TO IDEA: FREEWRITING

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Abstract: *The aim of the article is to offer a variety of simple resources to foreign language teachers who consider their students' creativity very important. The activities that we propose apply to all levels of the students and can be adapted to different grammatical structures and vocabulary according to the target students. We undertook research on freewriting in a foreign language class in sophomore cadet groups. At the center of this research, there are students' products (free texts) and methods used in carrying out the writing activity (writing strategies and solutions for linguistic problems). Since writing has always been a difficult skill and an unpleasant task for most of the students, with this new approach they have found a way of enjoying their own pieces of writing.*

Key words: freewriting, creativity, foreign language class, linguistic problems

1. Introduction

Writing is a very important means of communication for human interaction. Every day we exchange written information. In the private sector, there are letters, notes, diary entries, greeting cards or recipes to send to family and friends. In the public domain, we write messages, application, complaint and other different types of letters or notices. Writing activities in class are not just for communication purposes. In addition to briefing notes, students are also required to write reports, summaries, and compositions or to answer open questions based on literary or specialized texts. Newer teaching approaches consider both creative writing and freewriting as a subject of foreign language teaching.

According to Hanns-Josef Ortheil, “creative writing is poetological questioning and

written answer under the teacher's guidance” so that it “must become part of a general course of studies and be incorporated into the school curriculum” [1]. Freewriting is a preview technique of creative writing in which the student writes continuously for a set period of time (5-15 minutes). It produces raw material and helps students overcome the fear of the blank page.

2. An overview of freewriting evolution

Freewriting is found very early in the history of writing. In ancient times, people already used acrostic and various forms of language games. Writers of all times have tried out traditional creative techniques or have even invented new ones to overcome the fear of the blank page. However, in schools freewriting appears later.

With the beginning of the 20th century, educators add a new goal to writing. It aims at contributing to students' personal development, too, due to the important influence of art within the education process. At the center of the new education process there is "the artistic productivity of non-artists, especially children and adolescents" [2]. Thus, students' pieces of writing such as essays or short compositions are regarded as "creative expressions of individual experiences, thoughts and feelings" and, therefore, as real "works of art" [3].

In 1923, Peter Elbow developed a writing strategy that was similar to brainstorming which he called *freewriting*, designed to generate not only ideas but also a topic [4]. Since the 1970s, such concepts as expressive writing, personal writing or freewriting continue to develop. The writing process gets increased attention and the new curriculum highlights this evolution. Beginning with the first year of study, students are encouraged to use freewriting in order to boost their motivation for this task, often considered rather difficult and unpleasant.

Why has freewriting become so important? What does it bring to students? Therese Chromik formulated in an article [5] the tasks and goals of freewriting, which we would like to present in the lines below. Educators should develop students' awareness of their environment and their own inner processes and teach them to avoid self-criticism. Furthermore, freewriting helps to identify and understand problems, tasks or questions. In addition, it makes one's imagination be experienced as an inner reality. It can help students to empathize with themselves and with others; they get to understand literary products of their classmates and others more complex, written by poets and authors from different epochs, too. They learn new linguistic means and are able to understand and appreciate literary achievements of the present and the

past; It is from these tasks of freewriting that the didactic goals arise.

Students should be motivated to express personal opinions and ideas when writing about different events in their life or in the world. They should find their own style and use new possibilities of expression. Playing with language introduces new linguistic forms that students can use in their own creations. Students also learn metalanguage, which is to interpret and talk in groups about the peculiarities of the studied texts. They learn to describe and explain the effect a text has on them, without giving a value judgment. In addition, students listen to classmates' critical and constructive comments about their productions and, consequently, correct possible mistakes.

When freewriting takes place in a playful atmosphere, when students let their thoughts run free and are motivated to write, they can make their creativity blossom. To this effect, teachers use various methods to introduce, practice, and improve freewriting. According to Kaspar H. Spinnar [6], the activation of the imaginative power is the most important feature of freewriting.

In Peter Elbow's opinion, "the consequence [of writing] is that you must start by writing the wrong meanings in the wrong words; but keep writing until you get to the right meanings in the right words. Only in the end will you know what you are saying" [7]. The students write for a couple of minutes, choose an idea, then write freely about the topic for a few minutes, and afterwards repeat that process, redefining the topic. Like in brainstorming, students write down their ideas regarding the topic, without taking into consideration correct grammar or spelling. Unlike brainstorming, freewriting is written in sentence and paragraph form. It increases both the flow of ideas and the fluency in writing, so that the foreign language learners are able to produce written language without thinking of accuracy of the language structures, which is obviously important, but that they will take into consideration later in the writing process. In other words, you should not think, just

write because, paraphrasing Ray Bradbury's piece of advice, thinking is the enemy of creativity [8].

3. Research methods and goals

This paper is the result of a research related to freewriting conducted during a semester, involving four groups of about 40 second year army cadets. The main goal was to improve students' writing and language skills. Our research is based on student productions (free texts) and the methods and solutions to students' linguistic problems.

At the beginning of the academic year, the students in each group received notebooks where they were supposed to write their free texts for the whole semester, similar to a diary. The only condition regarding these texts was that the coordinating teacher regularly checked them, without grading them. The teacher only corrected the language mistakes trying not to change the meaning of the text, and added encouraging comments. In order to stimulate students to write and express their thoughts in a foreign language we practiced and experimented different techniques of creative writing. Some of these types of exercises are described in the present paper.

As argued previously, freewriting in the language class aims not only to be a variant of language exercises, but also to give students the opportunity to write about their interests, work, hobbies, etc. This makes them consider the foreign language a means of communication rather than a difficult school constraint. In order to have students write personalized texts, both the teacher and the students should take into consideration certain principles, such as mutual trust, students' confidence that their classmates will not make fun of intimate details they might reveal, of the tone and the form of their productions.

Students should have confidence that their texts will be seriously treated and discussed and will help them in the process of learning the language.

4. Support activities for the freewriting task

If we want to help learners write good texts in a foreign language, we need to make some kind of diagnosis. To learn more, we asked students to write texts and, at the same time, to express aloud all the thoughts that went through their minds. This type of experience is mentioned in the field of psychology under different names such as, for example, *verbal data*, and provides information about mental processes.

As an example, look at the following sentence, written by a student, with asterisks indicating faults. *He is the best man I know*. What was the student thinking of when he wrote this? First, he started from a sentence formulated in Romanian: *El este cel mai bun om pe care îl cunosc* and looked for the translation of the superlative adjective *cel mai bun* in English. He translated the superlative of the adjective *good* with *the best*. It sounds familiar, it is correct, thus he mentally ensures that the association of the superlative adjective *the best* with the noun *man* is the most appropriate in his context, just like in the Romanian language. However, he does not realize that in English *best man*, designates a male friend or relative chosen by a bridegroom to assist him at his wedding, therefore his sentence does not convey the meaning that he initially wanted to express. A correct approach would have been *the greatest man or the kindest man*. Another piece of writing is the following one:

I am student at the academy, I have participated here in a lot of military competitions like military orientation, running and others. I also like hang out with open mind persons.

Here there is the statement *I am student at the academy*, which in Romanian is *Sunt student la academie*. Thus, the noun *student* in Romanian does not need the determiner *a* as opposed to the English language. Obviously, the sentence is built in his native

language so we are close to the field of translation. This observation, which is confirmed by the other experiences we had in class, shows that students pay more attention to the meaning, and the language norm occupies only the second place. The motivation to convey messages in a foreign language is important from the very beginning of the language course. Teachers should not insist on boring structural exercises, on paying exaggerated attention to mistakes, and on correcting them without the necessary explanations.

Below we mention three types of the various exercises we use in the language class, namely anagrams, the odd man out, and mind maps:

- Anagrams

Using all the letters contained in their first and last names, the students try to find a maximum of words in the foreign language studied and they combine them to build up sentences or texts. Here are some examples of students' productions:

- Student 1 succeeded in building up the following words using all the letters contained in his first and last names: *man, rice, and, sat, cat, den, me, sat, ran, sad, tan, rid, sit, tin, cast, recast, steam, ten, train, cease, nerd, rest*. Then, he made up this short story in which he used all the words mentioned above:

Me, a man, and a cat were sitting in a train station. We were sad because a nerd was trying to follow us, in order to steal our rice. There was so much steam, I couldn't see anything. We had ten pieces of rice cake as well. After a long run, we were finally able to have some rest in a den. We shouted at him as we tried to cease and we got rid of him. The nerd had a really nice tan, but we heard that he is eating from a tin can. We ran, we sat, we ate some left rice cake and finally got into the train station. We are thinking to make a TV show with story. We'll have to cast only 3 actors. If we don't find good actors in the first try, we'll have to recast. But until then, we'll continue to

sit in the train station and keep contemplating to that idea.

- Student 2 applied the same procedure and wrote the text below with the following words:

mind, or, nor, air, ring, door, and, floor, go, good, morning, roof, rang, in

In this morning, the bell rang. I go to the roof and try to smell a good air. In my mind are a lot of ideas about that boy. On the floor is sugar. The door or the window, nor both, have a colour which is interesting. My husband give me a ring which has big diamond.

- The odd man out

The students are given a list of words belonging to the same semantic field, except for one word, which has nothing to do with the others. For example, *captain, second lieutenant, drill, uniform, gun, push ups, military unit, platoon, cabbage rolls*. Then the student is asked to imagine a more or less coherent story where all these words should be used. As an example, students received the following words: *post office, parcel/package, clerk, desk/counter, envelope, letter/note, send, cabbage rolls*

Student 1 wrote:

My name is David. I am a second lieutenant in the army. In my military unit I command a platoon composed on 20 young soldiers. Every day I train with my guys doing thousands of push-ups. In addition, our specialty is guns. We are the best. In the armt the food is really bad. For example, we eat at dinner cabbage rolls. In conclusion, I love what I am doing and in special* my uniform, because it gives me a superior look.*

- Student 2 wrote:

My uncle living in Spain. He is the best man I know and I'll send him a parcel with some cabbage rolls (He like verry much the traditional food.). With the parcel I will send a letter with some thigs. So I will put the letter in to a envelope, I will go to the post office.

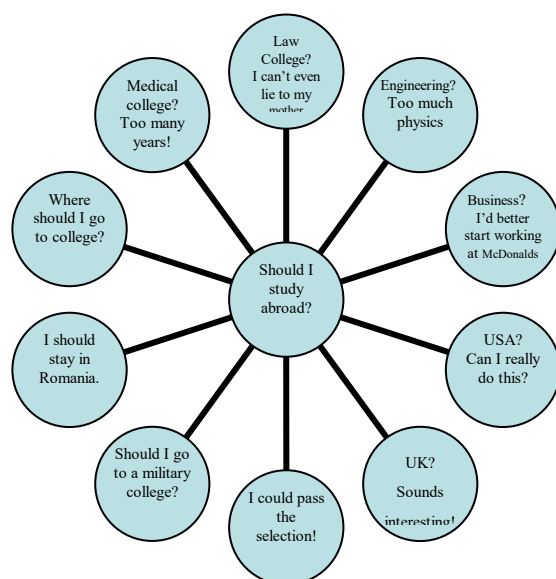
When I was arrived, the clerk put the parcel to the desk and ask me "Please could you

give me some cabbage rolls? It is smell [sic!] so nice!"

So today, sitting at home and doing absolutely nothing, I started to feel the absence of my mother who is working in Austria as a nurse. So, as a consequence I decided to write her a letter and send it to Austria as a surprise. When I arrived at the post office, I smelled something really strange for a post office but I didn't ask anyone about anything and I went on finishing my mission, left the package on the desk and went home. In the next morning, my mother called me as I expected, but instead of joy and happiness, she was really angry because she wanted very much to eat cabbage rolls, and the sauce from the envelope only made it worse. I started laughing because now I know what the smell in the post office was and probably the clerk dropped the letter in the cabbage rolls pot.

• Mind maps

Starting from a word, students brainstorm different words belonging to the semantic field of the given word, i.e. *sports/ holiday/ traveling/studying abroad*. Then, they have to use them in a text of their own. Here is an example of a mind map made by a student:



Other types of exercises can be used to develop students' language, such as

rewriting, changing or imagining the end of a given story, iconographic stimulus, stimulus on a given pattern, global stimulation and clustering.

• Rewriting, changing, or imagining the end of a given story

Starting from a short text written by a student in class, or given by the teacher, students are asked to improve the text, to make it more interesting by adding details, by making changes or by imagining a different ending.

• Iconographic stimulus

Students imagine a story, a dialogue, a description of a situation, place, person, object etc., starting from a picture that is open to interpretation. Pictures stimulating students' imagination can be chosen from different specialized magazines, avoiding those that are too explicit and do not provoke students' curiosity.

• Stimulus by a pattern or a given topic

Inspired by a text or a poem given as an example, students write a new one maintaining the form and structure of the original text. Creative writing can also be stimulated by given topics such as: *Inversed classroom*, *Real vs ideal school*, *I am afraid of ...*, *My dreams of my future career*

• Global stimulations

Each student chooses a new identity. They all become the inhabitants of a village, of an island or of a block of flats. This activity can go from written compositions to role-plays. Students interpret roles in different situations, such as: meeting in the stairs, at dinner, small talks, news in brief, and other different daily contexts.

• Clustering is a well-known associative writing method used more and more frequently in the language class. This brainstorming exercise promotes an intensive and rapid networking of topics and ideas and, at the same time, offers the opportunity for different associations to be developed [9].

In general, it is through these activities that students are given the opportunity to play

with words. Freewriting is less constraining in terms of linguistic accuracy and language correction is relieved, and shows how the manipulation of words can produce emotions, messages, sounds, rhythms.

5. Conclusion

One of the most obvious results of our study is the perception by the students themselves of the language problems they have. Most of the problem are related to vocabulary and semantics, then there are syntactic and structural problems as well as spelling ones, others being either pragmatic or unclassifiable matters. This shows that the students do not care much about grammar and spelling when they want to express an idea, but lexical and semantic gaps are perceived as real obstacles. The will to express themselves being more powerful than the difficulty to do it, students use strategies to find solutions. The bilingual dictionary is used in most of cases to find a solution to the lexico-semantic issues, while textbooks, notebook and other means of information are hardly used.

The above analysis leads to the conclusion that freewriting develops students' capability to express themselves. When creating free texts, students bring something

new by activating their imagination and this improves their writing skills. At the same time, the heuristic function of writing also develops the students' social competence. Writing free texts enriches both their vocabulary and their grammatical knowledge.

Starting from the fact that motivation is one of the most important aspects in learning to write in a foreign language, we used in our classes a great variety of exercises meant to stimulate students' participation in the activities. In conclusion, free written production is not a simple transcription, it does not consist in the juxtaposition of well-formed sentences because even if "the text materializes by the set of sentences that compose it [...] it always exceeds them" [10]. Freewriting is a relatively complex activity as "the mental processes implemented in written production (in both mother tongue and foreign language) are extremely complex" [11]. According to Vygotsky [12], written language is "a higher psychic function", a "passage to the abstract language that uses not words but representations of words". For Malmquist freewriting involves both "thinking skills and language skills"[13].

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