
BRAINSTORMING AS A WAY OF INCREASING VOCABULARY AND DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract: Students learning English as a foreign language encounter difficulties in getting involved during classes due to many factors such as lack of vocabulary, lack of ideas, lack of confidence, boredom etc. As an English teacher I have tried to study and come up with strategies to motivate students and make them more involved especially with regard to writing. This study explores the possibility of using brainstorming as a method to incite students to write better and look upon writing and their own skills with more confidence with the goal of getting them more involved and proactive in the learning process. It presents data from research carried out with university students. It also studies the effects of brainstorming as a classroom activity which stimulates students collaboration and ingenuity, increases their vocabulary and make them more aware of writing strategies.

Keywords: writing, brainstorming, vocabulary

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a language is always a fun and difficult activity. The student has a difficult time at the start when he is getting acquainted to the new elements of a language and a fun time after he reaches a certain level and after he has received the main elements of knowledge and is able to speak, write and generally understand different language contexts. Most students studying have a hard time expressing their ideas either orally or in a written form. They tend to make mistakes while expressing their ideas, stray off the topic etc. In time teachers have developed different strategies to help students focus and rationalize their thoughts and ideas. One of the most used strategies in many levels of teaching and elsewhere is brainstorming. Brainstorming is a problem solving method used to promote ideas created in groups rather than individually. Whenever a topic is hard to develop individually teachers use brainstorming to allow the class to create ideas as a group. Brainstorming has been successful when applied in different environment in business, industries, by the government and in education. "A camel is an animal which looks like it was made by a committee."³ is an expression by Clark to describe group work while coming up for new ideas and creative thought while brainstorming. And as he goes on he explains "...Committee meetings in almost every case are the place for compromise, diplomacy, or careful one-upmanship. The members spend ten minutes analyzing the problem, fifty minutes arguing about it."⁴ But brainstorming is more than that. "Behold the turtle. He makes progress only when his neck is out."⁵ is the expression Clark uses for describing brainstorming. It is an activity which he defines as "... a technique which encourages people to stick their necks out so that radically new ideas will constantly be produced."⁶ Whereas Wise (1991) suggests when referring to creative thinking : "You have to go beyond the top-of mind reflex solutions and let your imagination roam"⁷ because coming up with a good logical idea or a solution to a problem cannot be an immediate result of thinking. It is more than often an outcome of jotting down many ideas. According to the context and to the views circulating the definition of brainstorming it takes different meanings. For some it is an activity which is used to generate ideas, for others it is a creative process and there are views which consider it a complete waste of time. The problem with students, in my experience, is not lack of ideas but rather focusing them on the solution or when it comes to writing at the topic at hand. As Osborn's metaphor when describing the process of giving opinions in corporations' orientation due to company's policies students "drive with their brakes on". He developed four main principles or guidelines with regard to brainstorming:

³ Clark, C. H. (1958). Brainstorming: The dynamic new way to create successful ideas. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc.

⁴ Clark, C. H. (1958). Brainstorming: The dynamic new way to create successful ideas. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc.

⁵ Clark, C. H. (1958). Brainstorming: The dynamic new way to create successful ideas. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc.

⁶ Clark, C. H. (1958). Brainstorming: The dynamic new way to create successful ideas. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc.

⁷ WISE, R. (1991). The Boom in Creativity Training. Across The Board. 28, 38-40.42. 65.

⁸1- Criticism is ruled out. Adverse judgment of ideas must be withheld until later. The purpose of the brainstorming session is the generation of many, varied and unusual options.

⁹2- Freewheeling is welcomed. The wilder the idea, the better; it is easier to tame down than to think up. Since criticism is temporarily ruled out, it's acceptable and desired that really wild and unusual ideas are shared.

¹⁰3- Quantity is wanted. The greater the number of ideas, the greater the likelihood of useful ideas.

¹¹4-Combination and improvement are sought. In addition to contributing ideas of their own, participants should suggest how the ideas of others can be turned into better ideas.¹²

As stated above lack of criticism and judgment is a very deliberating way to motivate imagination and a very effective tool to stimulate students to come up with ideas. Other studies show the effectiveness of such activity which is both liberating and creative. Paulus and Brown conclude in their study ¹³“that the brainstorming performance of groups is often hindered by various social and cognitive influences, but under the appropriate conditions, group idea exchange can be quite effective.” Osborn (1942) states that: “Everybody loves to be a critic or a judge. Judicial judgment calls for no great mental sweat¹⁴.” and “If you can't originate an idea, think up how someone else's good idea can be turned into a better idea¹⁵” emphasizing the freedom and ingenuity that is included in brainstorming. In classes of students learning English as a second language especially in beginner or pre-intermediate level there are difficulties in getting students involved in class activities due to lack of vocabulary and general background. This occurs even in higher level students but in more rare occasions since they acquire a certain level of independence which is a result of a more perfected set of skills. Brainstorming helps students in learning a foreign language because it makes them share their thoughts, ask questions and give answers without being afraid of being judged, take risks. This is an activity which is driven by the students and facilitated by the teachers (Bell, 2010). Most difficulties are seen in written work. That is why it is widely used in pre writing stage. Cullen (1998) lists different types of brainstorming activities that include the use of a lists, songs, word-mapping, rewording of sentences, predictions, story-telling, free associations and group story telling. In this context I have carried out a study with a group of students to understand the effects of brainstorming as an activity which motivates and gets them more involved in classroom activities and helps their skill acquisition process.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A set of questions and questionnaires were devised to probe into the role of brainstorming in students skills and vocabulary. The study included the students' view on a practical level. The questions raised were the following:

- 1- Does brainstorming help? If so please specify.
- 2 - Does brainstorming help in writing? How?
- 3 - Is brainstorming helpful to vocabulary?
- 4- Does brainstorming help you focus or you are not affected by it?
- 5- When is it easier for you to write individually or in a group?

3. METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

⁸ Osborn, A.F. (1953) Applied Imagination: Principles and procedures of creative thinking. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.

⁹ Osborn, A.F. (1953) Applied Imagination: Principles and procedures of creative thinking. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.

¹⁰ Osborn, A.F. (1953) Applied Imagination: Principles and procedures of creative thinking. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.

¹¹ Osborn, A.F. (1953) Applied Imagination: Principles and procedures of creative thinking. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.

¹² Osborn, A.F. (1953) Applied Imagination: Principles and procedures of creative thinking. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.

¹³ Paul B. Paulus, Vincent R. Brown. Toward More Creative and Innovative Group Idea Generation: A Cognitive-Social-Motivational Perspective of Brainstorming” Social and Personality Psychology Compass Volume 1, Issue 1, November 2007, Pages 248–265

¹⁴ Osborn, A.F. (1942). How to think up. NY: McGraw-Hill.

¹⁵ Osborn, A.F. (1942). How to think up. NY: McGraw-Hill.

The study was conducted in a group of students from the Faculty of Technical Medical Sciences, Physiotherapy branch, University of Medicine in Tirana, Albania. The study was carried out dividing the two groups in two different learning environments. Both groups were given written assignments to write topics on any of the four types of essays: argumentative, narrative, descriptive and expository essays. One group was given the assignment to write the essays individually. Whereas the other group was set in a brainstorming environment to write as a group. The survey with the questions was conducted after the assignment was finished. The group working individually was given the topics to write and to this group were explained the rules on writing each type of essay and were handed out some templates of each essay. Whereas to the other group the teacher described how they should proceed. One of the students from the group was appointed as *the speaker* of the group and he would be responsible for gathering the essays for each type at the end of the activity. To both groups were handed out templates for all types of essays and were explained the main rules governing essay writing.

4. PARTICIPANTS

The students involved in the study were first year bachelor students in the Faculty of Technical Medical Sciences, University of Medicine of Tirana, Albania. They included 2 groups with a total of 67 students. 44 students were females and 23 were males ranging from the age of 18-22 years. The students of both branches had a previous preparation for English language in high school. All of them had a placement test to choose the most appropriate method according to the branches. The students belonged to different levels ranging A1-B2.

5. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to enquire and study the effects of brainstorming during English classes in the writing of essays of student's assignments. The usage of it as a means of improving student's mistakes and improving the teacher's day-to-day work. The study had two main goals : First to look upon the student's feedback for brainstorming as a classroom activity. Second to understand the effect of brainstorming in the students' skills and their results.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study was carried out at the beginning of the school year in in the Faculty of Technical Medical Sciences, University of Medicine of Tirana. From the start the students were explained the rules and templates were handed out so they could start practicing. The first group received the basic rules on how to draft and write an essay and during the 4-weeks of the survey they were given no other feedback of any kind. The only feedback they received were the graded essays at the end of each week. Whereas the second group had to get together and discuss the topics at hand and after each session they had to come up with the draft essays they had to present. The draft essays were gathered by the speaker and one day before the final drafts of the essays were handed to the teacher the group reviewed their essays with a final brainstorming session. Both groups delivered one essay per each student at the end of each week. The groups had 6 – hour classes each week. The results from the questionnaires and interviews were different according to the each of the groups but also within each group. To the first questions (1- Does brainstorming help? If so please specify.) Students replied differently according to their own experiences and views. Their answers referred to different parts of learning but their answers concentrated mainly on writing area. Sabina answered "*Brainstorming helps especially when I write about a topic. It also helps me remember things I have forgotten*". Fatjona said "*Brainstorming helps me bring up words and expressions I didn't know*" whereas Klevis states: "*Brainstorming helps me think of new ideas about what I will write.*", Artan said "*It helps me to get started. Even when I don't have the right words to start describing my topic*". Alesia stated : "*Yes it does. It helps to express you opinion in different situations*", Kiara said: "*Brainstorming helps because it helps my knowledge in English and it helps me speaking out my ideas without pressure of being wrong because in the end the group is going to decide which ideas are right*" Irida stated : "*Yes it is helpful. It helps me to be more active and in my writing* "

The second question (2 - Does brainstorming help in writing? How?) was more specific with regard to writing. The students answered as follows: Megi said "*Yes. Brainstorming helps me with my writing because it gives me new ideas and also helps me find the proper words to use.*" Jusilda stated "*Brainstorming helps me arrange my thoughts. It is also helpful with my vocabulary because during brainstorming sessions I learn useful expressions I need for my topic*" Xhejni says "*Yes brainstorming helps me in many ways but mostly it helps me focus on the topic I am writing. I get the right phrases and the right words for my essay as well as new ideas*", Irida says: "*Yes it helps with vocabulary*" whereas Megi thinks : "*It helps. We express in a short form what we think. We become more concentrated at the general idea and avoid unnecessary details*". The third question (3 - Is brainstorming helpful to

vocabulary?) most student agreed that it helped with their vocabulary and phrases. To the fourth question (4- Does brainstorming help you focus or you are not affected by it?)most students agreed that it helped them stay focused and write better whereas a small percentage of the interviewees were not affected about brainstorming. They could stay focused even without brainstorming. To the fifth question (5- When is it easier for you to write individually or in a group?) the answered differed greatly. A part of the students had a more productive time when they wrote by themselves their answered: “*For me it’s easier to write individually because this form of writing i can give all my ideas*” or “*for me it’s easier to write individually because not many people understand me or the way I think. I feel very constricted when I’m in a group*” Others stated that : “*It easier for me to write when I am in a group but I don’t have problems when i write individually*“ or “*I prefer to write in a group because you have a lot of ideas to use*”, and for other students either method of writing used was the same, they could write well in each form. At the end of each week after all the essays were gathered from both groups i noticed different results from both groups as well as different results even within each group.

First, the results between the group which used brainstorming to write about their topic had a certain improvement with regard to the themes used and the arguments given to each essay. Group 1 (the group which used brainstorming) had a wider variety of arguments for almost all types of essays they wrote. They explained, supported or described the topics for each type of essay using more paragraphs and more in-detail arguments. And such improvement was more prominent in students with a lower level. In group 2 (The group which worked individually without brainstorming) they were students with very good argumentative skill in their writing and who developed their essays thoroughly but they were mostly students with a higher level of English.

Secondly, a majority of the students in Gr.1 were more motivated and active during class activities and were more apt to ask questions mostly with regard to vocabulary or the right phrases they could use and could fit better in their essays.

Third, students in group 1 had an improvement in their vocabulary in general. This cam as a result of copying or memorizing one-another’s words or phrases and using them in their writing. Gr.2 had a slower absorption of new vocabulary and phrases.

Fourth, there was a trend in students to participate and get more involved in classroom activities or in English class in general (even if sometimes was just ask about new vocabulary)

7. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion this study and literature review has shown that brainstorming is an activity which, in the least, stimulates the student to become more proactive during classroom activities as Wood (2001) states “*Small group interaction has long been cited as an effective teaching technique. This interaction is of importance because the pupil has the opportunity to become actively involved in the process of learning*”¹⁶. In writing this activity helps the students to get more involved due to the learning process which occurs naturally because of the self-motivation of the students from its peers and consequently to the self-confidence that the student acquires during such process. It induces willingly of instinctually to the student the need to learn more to achieve a common goal he/she exercises even further in the attempt to fulfill adequately the given assignment and thus resulting in the acquisition of new vocabulary as well new perspective about writing and his own skills.

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