

The effects of freewriting on students' attitudes towards writing and the use of ideas in their compositions

Jaisree Appoo

East Spring Primary School,
Singapore

Shakila Vasu
Peter Chutatape

English Language Institute of Singapore,
Singapore

Abstract

To address a common complaint that primary school students lacked ideas in their writing, freewriting was taught to a class of Primary 5 students. Using a mixed methods approach, the outcomes in this study showed encouraging results not only in the students' ability to generate more and better ideas but also in their more positive attitude towards writing.

Introduction

This inquiry looked into training students in using freewriting as a key strategy to generate and develop ideas for writing and explored its effects on students' attitudes towards writing and performance in writing compositions as measured by the 'Content' aspect of the composition marking rubric (see Appendix A for rubric). The motivation to embark on this inquiry was the teacher's observation that students lacked sufficient ideas in their writing. Students in this project also expressed a similar sentiment, sharing that the lack of interesting ideas also contributed to their lack of enthusiasm for writing. This group of students was taught to do focussed freewriting based on a visual stimulus and a theme (this will be further explained in the 'Method' section); an adaptation of Elbow's (1998) use of freewriting.

Literature Review

Elbow (1998) described freewriting as an uninhibited method to improve writing by encouraging the free flow of thought without penalty. It focused on continuous writing on any given topic without stopping, editing, simultaneous sharing, or worrying about grammar, how to approach the topic, and how meaningful one's writing was. He asserted that freewriting had the advantages of increasing creative expression, and generating ideas in a flexible, fast, free and effortless way. If a writer were to only begin writing after the ideas had been formed, the writing might be compromised in terms of ideas and quality. Freewriting served as a source of ideas which could be further developed (Langer & Applebee, 1983). With freewriting used as a pre-

writing strategy, the writer was able to see growth in the development of ideas as it allowed the ideas to be generated throughout the freewriting process.

Hammond (1991), focusing on the thinking processes of freewriting, reported that freewriting helped students organize their mental structures and complexities, while Wallack and Chang (2009) added that freewriting was reflective, speculative yet focused, and explored a topic open-endedly. Rule (2013), however, problematized the purported ease of freewriting by arguing that the link between thinking and writing had to be made explicit through training, conversation and reorientation between teacher and students in order for students to engage in focused and directed freewriting.

Elbow (1998) believed that freewriting represented a highly motivating instructional strategy for writing. In Lannin's (2007) study examining the experience of her under-performing students in regular freewriting sessions, she found that her usually noisy and unmotivated students were deeply engaged when it came to freewriting sessions. She also found that teacher modelling of freewriting also resulted in increases in student motivation to write.

Moffet (1983) attributed the creation of learner engagement and motivation to the authentic and naturalistic aspects of freewriting. Hence, writing tasks that had authentic purposes served to help writers stay focussed and interested in the writing when they used freewriting to generate ideas for the writing task.

It is with this background in the literature that the following research questions were chosen:

Our research questions were:

1. What are the effects of freewriting on students' attitudes towards writing?
2. What are the effects of freewriting on students' content scores in their compositions?

Methodology

Samples

One high progress Primary 5 English class taught by the first author (henceforth referred to as 'the teacher') in a neighbourhood school in Singapore formed the intervention group. The class comprised the top students at the level, banded according to their English language scores from the previous year's final assessment.

Intervention

Term 1: Pre-intervention

In early January 2015, the teacher administered a composition test and then marked some scripts in a way that mirrored the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) format to show what was expected to the intervention class. Twenty percent of the written essays were marked by the second author using the same rubrics to check for inter-rater reliability. The teacher then gathered samples of students' writing to form a collection of representative scripts which were indicative of their abilities to elaborate on ideas.

In mid-January 2015, a survey was given to the class to measure the students' attitudes towards writing compositions. This was followed up with semi-structured interviews with students who expressed disinterest towards writing in order to solicit greater information on their survey responses.

A qualitative analysis was done through studying video-recordings that were completed on two

separate occasions. Students' dispositions towards using freewriting were observed.

Term 2: During-intervention

In February 2015, the intervention group was taught freewriting within a writing programme focussing on the writing of narratives. There was no comparison group as the entire Primary 5 level was involved in the same writing programme as well.

Lesson 1 (1 hour)

1. The teacher explained the strategy of freewriting.
2. Students were shown a video on freewriting.
3. The teacher modelled freewriting twice (or more) using a given theme.
4. Students did some freewriting using that same theme for four minutes.
5. Students shared their writing pieces in groups, and then on the visualizer with the rest of the class.
6. Students copied down the ideas that they liked.
7. Students filed their writing and ideas in the ring files provided for them.

This freewriting was carried out three times in the week according to the same theme. Each time, students were shown a different picture. However, the same pictures could be used in future, for a different theme.

Lesson 2 (1.5 hours)

1. At the beginning of the following week, the teacher used a freewriting worksheet and modelled how to select ideas from freewriting and transfer them into a narrative structure template (graphic organiser).
2. The teacher then showed how those ideas could be expanded using 5W 1H (who, what, where, when, why, how).
3. The teacher modelled how to brainstorm vocabulary (based on the theme) on the back of the narrative structure template.
4. The students then did the same, selecting and organising the ideas on the template and brainstorming vocabulary.

Lesson 3 (1.5 hours)

1. The teacher modelled how to write a narrative based on the ideas that had been mapped out on the narrative template. She co-constructed one paragraph with the students.
2. The teacher then gave out a pre-written composition to the students for their reference.
3. The teacher led the students through the process of de-constructing the narrative to show how the ideas from the freewriting had been included.
4. Seated in groups of four, the students chose one freewriting piece from their writing file.
5. They shared the ideas in their groups.
6. The group co-constructed a narrative, beginning with the selection and organization of ideas.

Lesson 4 (1.5 hours)

1. The teacher shared the assessment criteria for assessing the content in the essays (see Appendix A for the rubric).
2. The teacher modelled the assessment of three types of essays (good, fair and poor) with three pieces that had been selected and pre-marked using the assessment criteria.
3. Students assessed their group writing.

Lesson 5 (1 hour)

1. Students carried out their individual writing in class. This writing was done with another picture but the same theme.

Lesson 6 (1 hour)

1. In groups of four, students conducted peer assessments using the earlier shared assessment criteria.

During the intervention, the teacher collected qualitative data through observations of students engaged in the freewriting process to form a description of students' attitudes towards writing. Two instances of video recording were done of students' carrying out freewriting.

End of Term 2

In May 2015, students sat for their first semestral exam. The compositions were marked by teachers assigned to mark them using the same rubrics to check for inter-rater reliability. To determine if there was a significant increase in scores, a t-test was used to compare the changes in scores from the pre-intervention compositions to the post-intervention compositions. The effect size was also calculated. Samples of the students' writing from this exam also formed a subjective representation of the effects of the intervention on their abilities to elaborate on ideas.

A qualitative analysis in terms of content and ideas developed was done on the writing pieces of some students whose first piece of writing (pre-intervention stage) had also been similarly analysed.

End of Term 4

In October 2015, students sat for their second semestral exam. The marked scripts formed an additional set of data in the study to ascertain maintenance effects. A qualitative analysis was again carried out in terms of content and ideas developed with writing pieces belonging to the same group of students as mentioned above for Term 2.

In November 2015, following the exam, a post-intervention survey to solicit students' attitudes towards writing in general and free writing as a strategy was carried out.

Data sources

The table below summarizes the data sources collected pre-, during, and post-intervention, and the corresponding research question.

Table 1
Overview of Data Sources

Research Question	Pre-intervention		During-intervention		Post-intervention	
	QUAL	QUAN	QUAL	QUAN	QUAL	QUAN
1	Survey on students' attitudes towards writing		Teacher observations		Survey on students' attitudes towards writing	
	Interviews					
2	Samples of students' writing	Composition test	Samples of students' writing	Semestral Exam 1	Samples of students' writing	Semestral Exam 2

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question was:

What are the effects of freewriting on students' attitudes towards writing?

To answer this question, pre- and post-intervention surveys and classroom observations were conducted. The results of these data sources are as follows.

Pre-intervention survey (Term 1)

A survey on students' perceptions towards writing was administered a week prior to the intervention (see Appendix B for the survey). Question 1 was crafted to elicit directly students' attitudes towards writing compositions:

1. *Do you like writing compositions? Why/Why not?*

Of the 37 students who responded, 78% (N = 29) of them reported that they liked writing compositions, while a sizeable 22% (N = 8) of them reported that they did not. Of those who said that they liked writing compositions, 22 cited the use of their imagination, creativity, expressive feeling and authorial voice as reasons behind liking compositions. Sample student responses from these 22 are as follows:

I like to write compositions because it is very fun to imagine my own story. I like to brainstorm ideas and can express my feelings or the characters' feelings well.

It allows me to use my imagination and creativity to write how the story begins and ends.

I get to make my own name for the character and make a story out of it. It is also fun to me because half of the story is about my imagination.

The eight students who said that they did not like writing compositions cited a lack of ideas and vocabulary as the main reasons, with a few stating that writing compositions simply took too long. Sample responses from the eight students are as follows:

Compositions are difficult and sometimes I do not have any ideas on what to write.

I do not like it because my use of words is very limited and I am very bad in putting the story together.

I take a long time to write it.

Questions 2 and 3 were crafted to elicit the areas which students felt they were good or weak at. These responses would subsequently inform various aspects of the framework for teaching writing. The questions were as follows:

2. *Do you face difficulties when writing compositions? If you do, what are they?*
3. *Look at the statements below. Tick (✓) the ones that you are usually good at.*

Put a cross (✖) against the ones that are usually difficult for you.

- | | |
|---|---------|
| a) <i>Coming up with ideas for the composition</i> | () |
| b) <i>Writing interesting introductions to compositions</i> | () |

- c) *Developing the ideas in an appropriate manner* ()
- d) *Using attractive words and phrases in compositions* ()
- e) *Ending compositions with suitable conclusions* ()
- f) *Knowing how to make my compositions better* ()

For Question 2, 51% of the students cited the lack of ideas as a difficulty that they faced in writing. Some sample responses are as follows:

They are when you think, the ideas are very complicated and hard and sometimes the pictures have small parts that is going to be written very long.

Thinking of how to describe the picture is a problem to me as I feel that it's a bit difficult thinking of a back story to the picture.

Sometimes, when I feel stressed, my mind gets muddled up and I feel its hard to come up with ideas.

Questions 3a and 3c were especially pertinent to the two aspects of composition writing that the study was looking at, namely coming up with relevant ideas and developing them. For Question 3a, 24% of students reported that they faced difficulty in coming up with ideas while, for Question 3c, 41% of students reported that they faced difficulty in developing the ideas appropriately.

Pre-intervention interview (Term 1)

An open-ended interview was conducted with the eight students who cited in Question 1 of the pre-intervention survey that they did not like writing. Some of the issues raised as to why they did not like writing included the 'long time' it took to come up with ideas, the fact that they did not do well in it for the exams, and the discomforting nature of not having words to use or ideas to write about. The excerpt below exemplifies the content of the interviews:

- Interviewer: *Do you like writing compos?*
- Student 1: *I hate it!*
- Interviewer: *Why?*
- Student 1: *It's my worst scoring subject. The worst scoring component of English.*
- Interviewer: *What is the hardest part of it?*
- Student 1: *Coming up with ideas. I'm good at phrases and vocab though.*
- Interviewer: *What do you do to overcome this lack of ideas?*
- Student 1: *I take about 10 minutes to think of ideas. I like drawings and stuff, because I read picture books.*
- Interviewer 1: *Would getting higher scores make you like writing even more?*
- Student 1: *Yes, definitely.*

Ongoing classroom observations, with video recording on (Term 2)

The ongoing classroom observations during Term 2 (April 2015 to June 2015) sought to help the authors gain insight into perceptible behaviours that might shed light on students' attitudes towards writing especially during the intervention period. In general, students displayed on task behaviour and carried out the freewriting activities diligently. There was greater engagement in the task among many students. The number of ideas generated over the time given of four minutes also showed an increase. Students also volunteered to share their ideas more readily with the class. They showed greater interest in listening and borrowing ideas from those who shared. It was evident in their freewriting that the relevance and quantity of ideas increased over the weeks. These findings corroborate Lannin's (2007) findings as reviewed in the earlier section.

Post-intervention survey (Term 4)

A post-intervention survey was conducted with the following eight statements given to the 38 students to rate according to the extent that they agreed with them (with '4' being definitely agree, '3' being somewhat agree, '2' being somewhat disagree and '1' being definitely disagree):

Table 2
Scores for Each Statement

	Statement	Mean score (SD in parentheses)	% of students who rated '4' or '3' (number of students in parentheses)
1	I like freewriting.	3.00 (0.52)	82.5% (33)
2	Freewriting has made me like writing more than before.	2.76 (0.75)	65.0% (26)
3	I get more ideas when I do freewriting.	3.21 (0.81)	77.5% (31)
4	I always do freewriting before I write a composition.	3.66 (0.53)	92.5% (37)
5	Freewriting gives me useful ideas which I use in the composition.	3.18 (0.69)	80.0% (32)
6	I try my best to use my freewriting ideas in each composition.	3.47 (0.56)	92.5% (37)
7	I find that I write better if I use freewriting.	2.87 (0.74)	62.5% (25)
8	When I write better, it encourages me to try even harder.	3.29 (0.84)	77.5% (31)

The result for Statement 2 most directly answered the first research question. The mean score of 2.76 tended towards the sentiment that students agreed somewhat with the statement. Twenty-six per cent of the students (N = 10) disagreed somewhat, and 5% of students (N = 2) disagreed definitely.

Research Question 2

The second research question was as follows:

What are the effects of freewriting on students' content scores in their compositions?

Quantitative analysis

To answer this question, marks from the content aspect of the 38 students' compositions from the pre-test and the first semestral exam (SA1) scores were compared. The mean score for the pre-test, out of a possible 20 marks, was 10.31 (SD = 1.21) and, for the SA1, it was 13.28 (SD = 2.48). The mean difference between the SA1 and the pre-test was 2.97 with a standardised mean difference effect size of 1.61, which was very large by Cohen's (1988) criterion. The paired t-test p value was <0.001, indicating that the difference was significant.

Marks for the content aspect of the students' compositions from the second semestral exam (SA2) scores were also compared with the pre-test. The mean score for the SA2 was 13.87 (SD = 1.50), with the mean difference between the SA2 and the pre-test being 3.56 with a very large effect size of 2.6 (Cohen, 1988). The paired t-test p value was <0.001, indicating a statistically significant difference.

Table 3
Mean Content Scores for Pre-test, SA1 and SA2 (SD in Parentheses)

	Pre-test (20 marks)	SA1 (20 marks)	SA2 (20 marks)
Mean (SD)	10.31 (1.21)	13.28 (2.48)	13.87 (1.50)
Cohen's <i>d</i> compared with pre-test	NA	1.61	2.60

Discussion

In addressing the first research question, responses to Question 2 of the post intervention survey clearly indicated that freewriting had a positive impact on the students' attitude towards writing, as 65% of them reported that freewriting made them like writing more. Of the students who responded to an open-ended question in the same survey, many stated that they liked freewriting and writing in general. Examples of their responses are, 'freewriting is interesting', 'it makes me more motivated to try even harder' and 'freewriting has made me like writing even more'. However, a few students shared that they did not enjoy or like freewriting but acknowledged the usefulness of freewriting as a tool to generate ideas. Some typical responses are, 'despite not really liking it, because I think of it as time-consuming, I think it is very useful', 'I do not really enjoy it but since it will help me, I always do it' and 'it was fun and tiring, though I hate writing, I still tried and found that freewriting made me better'.

With regard to the second research question, the results indicated that the impact of freewriting had benefitted the students to a very large extent in the SA1. The benefits were sustained and there was an even greater improvement for the SA2. The authors acknowledge, however, the single group threats in this pre-/post-test design, that is, there was no control group to compare these results with and, thus, it is not possible to completely rule other areas that may have affected the scores.

As seen in the responses to Questions 2, 3a and 3b of the pre-intervention survey, 55%, 24% and 41% of the students, respectively, reported that they lacked ideas for writing and faced difficulty in developing ideas. After the intervention, 77.5% attributed having more ideas to freewriting and 80% shared that they had more useful ideas because of freewriting. The increase in ideas that resulted mainly from freewriting was further evidenced in the analysis of their compositions from the pre-test, SA1 and SA2 examinations (with the caveat mentioned above of the single group threat).

From the pre-test to SA1 and then to SA2, there was a general increase in the number of relevant ideas in the scripts that were chosen for analysis. Similarly, there was an increase in the number of developed and interesting ideas. Students were diligent in doing the freewriting on the question paper, and almost all of the ideas contained in the freewriting were used in the actual compositions. These observations corroborated the results for the post-intervention survey's Questions 4 and 6, where 92.5% of students reported that they always did their freewriting before writing a composition, and the same percentage of students reported that they tried their best to use their freewriting ideas in the composition. As a result, the increase in relevant as well as developed and interesting ideas contributed to an increase in the length of writing. Some students had generated a vocabulary bank (possibly from the freewriting) which was used in the large number of developed ideas.

A process that could have been improved on was the standardisation between markers of what constituted one idea and what a relevant and/or interesting idea looked like.

Conclusion

Following the positive impact of freewriting on the generation of ideas, the plan is to use it in a modified form at Primary 3 and 4. Students at those levels require a lot more scaffolding with the writing process, particularly at Primary 3. With the introduction of the strategy, all students from Primary 3 to 6 in the school will use it at the start of the writing process to generate ideas. The intent is to create in students the habit of freewriting at the start of every piece of writing. Freewriting is a strategy that will, therefore, be enforced. While saying this, the role of the teacher factor has to be acknowledged. The success of using freewriting will be fairly dependent on how comfortable the teachers are with it. For those who are not familiar with it, freewriting is something to grapple with. There is a delayed gratification in using freewriting to generate ideas and teachers must be able to see it as a first step as opposed to another strategy which could be used at a stage closer to the end product of writing. Ultimately, it would be rewarding to see students using freewriting in their question papers as part of the planning process before the actual writing as that would indicate that freewriting had indeed become a habit.

This study was undertaken with support from the ELIS Research Fund (Grant number ERF-2015-03-JMA).

References

- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Elbow, P. (1998). *Writing without teachers*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hammond, L. (1991). Using focused freewriting to promote critical thinking. In P. Belanof, P. Elbow, & S. L. Fontaine (Eds.), *Nothing begins with N: New investigations of freewriting* (pp. 71-92). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Langer, J. A., & Applebee, A. N. (1983). *Learning to manage the writing process: Tasks and strategies*. Article based on a background paper prepared for the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED234420.pdf>
- Lannin, A. A. (2007). *Freewriting for fluency and flow in eighth and ninth grade reading classes* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10355/4762/public.pdf?sequence=1>
- Moffett, J. (1983). *Teaching the universe of discourse*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rule, H. (2013). The difficulties of thinking through freewriting. *Composition Forum*, 27. Retrieved from <http://compositionforum.com/issue/27/freewriting.php>
- Wallack, N. B., & Chang, M. (2009). Focused freewriting: How to do things with writing prompts. In T. Vilardi & M. Chang. (Eds.), *Writing-based teaching: Essential practices and enduring questions*. (pp. 25-52) Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Marking Scheme for English Language Paper 1

Continuous Writing

Mark Range	Content (20 marks)	Language and Organisation (20 marks)
18-20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fully relevant ideas ▪ Highly interesting and thoroughly developed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Language is accurate with hardly any errors in grammar, expression spelling and punctuation ▪ Wide and appropriate use of vocabulary ▪ Very good sequencing, paragraphing and linking of ideas and facts
15-17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Relevant ideas ▪ Interesting and well- developed composition. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Language is largely accurate with a few errors in grammar, expression, spelling and punctuation ▪ Adequate and mostly appropriate use of vocabulary ▪ Good sequencing, paragraphing and linking of ideas and facts
12-14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Generally relevant ideas ▪ Fairly interesting and sufficiently developed composition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Language is fairly accurate with some errors in grammar, expression, spelling and punctuation ▪ Fairly adequate use of vocabulary; some words may not be used appropriately ▪ Fairly good sequencing, paragraphing and linking of ideas and facts
9-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some relevant ideas ▪ Composition is of some interest but is minimally developed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Many errors in grammar, expression, spelling and punctuation but communication is not affected ▪ Use of vocabulary tends to be restricted to mundane words ▪ Satisfactory sequencing, paragraphing and linking of ideas and facts
5-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A few relevant ideas ▪ Mundane composition that is mostly undeveloped 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Numerous errors in grammar, expression, spelling and punctuation that slow down reading and may affect communication at times ▪ Limited vocabulary ▪ Poor sequencing, paragraphing and linking of ideas and facts
1-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ideas largely irrelevant ▪ Composition is vague and confusing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Full of errors in grammar, expression, spelling and punctuation such that communication is affected. ▪ Very limited vocabulary ▪ Very poor sequencing, paragraphing and linking of ideas and facts

Survey on Feelings and Attitudes towards Writing Compositions

Name: _____ () Class: _____ Date: _____

1. Do you like writing compositions? Why/Why not?

2. Do you face difficulties when writing compositions? If you do, what are they?

3. Look at the statements below. Tick (✓) the ones that you are usually good at. Put a cross (✗) against the ones that are usually difficult for you.

- a) Coming up with ideas for the composition ()
- b) Writing interesting introductions to compositions ()
- c) Developing the ideas in an appropriate manner ()
- d) Using attractive words and phrases in compositions ()
- e) Ending compositions with suitable conclusions ()
- f) Knowing how to make my compositions better ()

Survey on Writing

Name: _____ () Date: _____

For each row, put an 'X' in the box that relates to how you feel about each statement.

	Statement	4 (Definitely Agree)	3 (Somewhat Agree)	2 (Somewhat Disagree)	1 (Definitely Disagree)
1	I like freewriting.				
2	Freewriting has made me like writing more than before.				
3	I get more ideas when I do freewriting.				
4	I always do freewriting before I write a composition.				
5	Freewriting gives me useful ideas which I use in the composition.				
6	I try my best to use my freewriting ideas in each composition.				
7	I find that I write better if I use freewriting.				
8	When I write better, it encourages me to try even harder.				

Do you have anything you would like to say about your freewriting experience?

~Thank you!~