



CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.

Freewriting

Richard R. Day

Introduction

In this article, I present and discuss one of my favorite writing activities, freewriting. First I explain how to do the activity. Then I discuss why it is such an excellent activity.

The Activity

This is a simple activity. It involves your students writing for a set period of time on any topic or subject that they select themselves. Here are the step-by-step procedures that I use with my students.

1. I tell them to write without being concerned about grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.
2. I let them write on any topic for five minutes. So if there are 25 students in the class, each student could write about a different topic.
3. If a student cannot think of anything to write, I tell him or her to write, "I can't think of anything to write." over and over, for the entire five minutes. (However, students soon get tired of this, and actually begin writing on a topic.)
4. At the end of five minutes, I tell them to stop writing.

The purpose of freewriting is to help students get started, to generate ideas, often considered one of the most difficult steps in writing. If you do this activity on a regular basis, it does work, even with low-level students. I recommend that you do this activity at the beginning of every class.

Generally, I do not correct or otherwise evaluate my students' freewritings. Remember the purpose of the activity: To help students get started writing, to allow them to come up with ideas for writing. The focus of the students' attention, then, should be on the process of writing; at this first step of writing, they should not be concerned with grammar, spelling, punctuation, cohesion or coherence.

Every now and then, I collect my students' freewritings. I read them, and make positive comments in green ink. I avoid using red ink because it is too closely connected with correction and evaluation. Then I return them to the students. However, some believe that students' freewriting should be private—no one but the writer reads what has been written.

This activity can be used with students at all levels, from beginning to advanced.

Focused Freewriting

From time to time, I tell my students to write on a certain topic. If, for example, we have read about the benefits on a vegetarian diet (of not eating meat), I might ask them to write about that. This is called *focused freewriting*. Students can write about any aspect of the topic.



I use focused freewriting late in the school year (or semester), after I believe my students are rather good at the process of getting started writing.

Why I Like It

I find that this activity helps students become confident in their ability to write. If our students don't write, and write frequently, they cannot learn to write. The more students engage in freewriting, the easier it is for them to generate ideas, to get started on writing assignments.

I enjoy reading what my students having written, especially since I do not have to correct them or give them detailed feedback. I learn about their lives, their interests, and what they do outside of the classroom.

I also like the activity because it does not involve any teacher preparation time. It is what I call a *five-star* activity – no teacher preparation is involved.

Conclusion

Freewriting is an effective writing activity. If used regularly, it will help your students improve their writing ability.

Teachers often ask what they should do when their students are engaged in freewriting. My answer: Freewrite! Our students will remember our behavior, what we did as teachers, long after they have forgotten what we taught. So be a role model! If you are not a native writer of English, then freewrite in English. If you are a native writer of English, then freewrite in the language of your students.

Please take the time to give us the addresses of anyone else you think might be interested in receiving this newsletter of the CAPE Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk. And don't forget to write us with any comments you might have. Mahalo!

Contributor: Dr. Richard Day, Professor of ESL, University of Hawaii
Jai-Ho Yoo, CAPE President