Overcoming writer's block: Principles and practices for language classrooms

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Introduction

Betty Flowers asks on the first day of class: "What's the hardest part of writing?"

"Getting started," someone groans.

"No, it's not getting started... It's keeping on once you do get started. I can always write a sentence or two – but then I get stuck... I'm writing along, and all of a sudden I realize how awful it is, and I tear it up. Then I start over again, and after two sentences, the same thing happens," another student from the back of the classroom replies (Flowers, 1981).

This conversation is familiar to language teachers. Temporary writer's block is what the students described above are experiencing. Getting students to begin writing and then keeping up the energy and flow are challenges in language classrooms. Three questions arise from this situation: Why do students experience writer's block? Why is it so difficult for many to write at length in continuous prose, letting ideas flow in abundance as they write? Is there something that can be done to help develop ease and fluency in writing?

Theoretical studies have some answers to the first two questions. Classroom practice, in line with ideas proposed byintrospective research, has some answers to the third question. Knowing underlying reasons for temporary writer's block, and developing strategies to help nurture fluency and ease in writing are steps to successful teaching of writing. This paper first examines some theoretical perspectives and then discusses practices that have been used successfully to address writer's block.
Reasons for Writer's Block

Two underlying reasons contribute to temporary writer's block: First, being overly critical or overly conscious about the correctness of one's writing while in the process of producing ideas, and second, writing about something one is uneasy about, has little experience or knowledge of.

When students expect good, if not perfect, writing with a clean paper free from errors even while ideas are in the initial stages of emerging, they unwittingly place obstacles in the path of idea development. Every time they stop to edit, they put a block to the free flow of ideas. The problem is compounded if students are required to write on subjects or topics that are not within their realm of experience, that they are not interested in, that they are not personally involved in, or that they are uneasy about.

Elbow (1973) points out that editing one's writing to correct mistakes, awkwardness, and wordiness, and to modify inappropriate ideas and expressions is, in itself, not a problem. Editing is, in fact, usually necessary to produce writings that are finally satisfactory. "The problem is that editing goes on at the same time as producing" (p. 5). In doing this, the editor (the critic in the writer) and the producer (the creator in the writer) are at odds with each other – the editor constantly interferes with the producer, resulting in the latter becoming inhibited about the writing.

Flowers (1981, p. 835) uses metaphorical terms to describe the opposing forces of producer and editor working simultaneously, blocking the free flow of ideas. She calls the former "madman," and the latter "judge." Even while the madman is "full of ideas, writes crazily and perhaps rather sloppily," the judge is constantly peering over the madman's shoulders, criticizing and pointing out errors and shortcomings – "So you're stuck. Everytime your madman starts to write, your judge pounces on him," thereby arresting the flow of creative energies. "No wonder the producer gets jumpy, inhibited, and finally can't be coherent" (Elbow, 1973).

Murray (1985) discusses anxiety produced by topics or subjects that are assigned to students. Students are often required to
write on topics chosen by someone else, topics over which they have little control or ownership. Murray suggests that to reduce apprehension, students need to be, as a first step, encouraged to find topics on which they are an authority, beginning with ones that are personal and important to them. When students have successfully experienced fluency and ease in writing, they can go on to write on increasingly objective topics, using processes of idea development, clarification, revising and editing, in a variety of writing activities.

Strategies to Overcome Writer's Block

In concert with theoretical perspectives discussed in the section above, researchers have suggested strategies to overcome writer's block. At the core of these strategies is freewriting, an approach that classroom teachers have used, with various modifications. In freewriting, students write on call, continuously and consistently, for a specific period of time, never stopping for anything, on "topics" (any content) of their own choice.

The following will first discuss strategies for freewriting as suggested by Elbow (1973), one of the pioneers in the field, and then modifications that can be made to suit particular students and curriculum requirements.

Elbow's Strategies

Elbow's ideas for freewriting are as follows:

- Freewrite regularly, at least three times a week, for ten minutes at a stretch (later on, up to twenty minutes).

- Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what thought or word to use, or to think about what you are doing.
- If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, "I can't think of it." Just put down something. The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind.

- Freewriting must never be evaluated in any way

- Teachers can invite writers to let them read the writings. The writers have the option, however, to keep their writings to themselves if they so prefer.

**Teachers' Modified Strategies**

This section discusses modified freewriting strategies that two teachers, V. Yan and M. Hoffman, used successfully in the United States. The modifications were made to meet the specific needs of the student population, to give them structure and guidance, and to fulfill requirements in school to assign credit (or grades) for work done in class. Particulars of the modified freewriting program are as follows:

- Students write three times a week for ten minutes each time at the beginning of a period. They each have a notebook (exercise book) specifically for the purpose of freewriting.

- At the beginning of the program, explain the need for freewriting, its objectives, what the teacher will do, and what the students will do. The teacher does all these in a warm, non-threatening atmosphere to encourage interest in, and eventually love for, writing.

- Instruct students, especially in the initial stages, prior to each writing, and until students can do it voluntarily: "Let your ideas flow, don't stop to reread, keep your pen moving, don't worry about the paragraphs and spelling and grammar, repeat your words or record what you see going on around you when you are stuck – most important – keep your pen moving and keep writing."
- Encourage students to aim for a minimum of one page at each ten-minute sitting and to go beyond the minimum.

- Students can write on any topic of personal interest or concern in any genre – prose, poetry, short story, drama (longer pieces can stretch over several writing sessions). To ensure that students do not run short of ideas for writing, compile a long list of class-generated topics for easy reference (details of how class-generated topics can be compiled will be discussed in the section below).

- Teacher models freewriting by writing together with the students.

- Periodically, set aside a time for students to share their writings. Sharing is done on a voluntary basis. Teachers can also share their writings if they choose to.

- Notebooks (exercise books) are collected for teacher response and for assigning credit every four weeks. Assure students that points (marks) are assigned only for the amount of writing that they produce and not for the "quality" and that all their writings are confidential. Five points can be given for each page completed at one sitting. If there are writings that students do not want the teacher to read, students can fold those pages or indicate that they are too personal to be read by the teacher.

- Do not make comments on errors and inaccuracies. Write all feedback and comments in green ink or in pencil to circumvent the perception of critical evaluation associated with red ink. Make positive and supportive comments, usually indicating only the teacher’s response to the writings.

- Writings done in freewriting sessions can be developed into more polished pieces. Students can select the writings they want to develop, work on these in finer detail, and revise and edit them. These more finished pieces can be evaluated.
Compiling Class-Generated Topics

In freewriting, students write on topics or concerns that vary with their day-to-day experience. It is useful, however, to compile copious lists of topics that they can use when they need guidance or when they are short of things to write about. The topics need to be ones that appeal to their interests and that are relevant to their experience. An effective way to obtain topics that fulfil these conditions is to compile class-generated lists. The following discusses some ways to do this:

- To generate ideas for writing, give students lists of questions for discussion that center around themselves and their experience-questions such as: What do I know really well? What do I do really well? What are some things that are most interesting to me? What would I like to do? What are my funniest (or happiest, saddest, most unforgettable) experiences? Who do I like (or not like) to know? What bothers me most in people. People I would like most to meet.

After discussing these questions, each student contributes a topic by turns until everyone has made one contribution. Examples of student-generated topics are - "Losing your boy friend/girl friend," "Why I love to eat junk food," "How much I want to meet —," "Feelings about —," "A messed-up haircut," "If I were —," "Homework blues," "How I feel today," "What is bothering me today." Have a class secretary record down these topics, type them, and make copies for every student to keep in their freewriting notebooks for easy reference.

- Update and add to the previous lists in these ways:

  - Teacher combines topics generated by different classes
  - Teacher notes down interesting topics when reading the students' writings to include in the lists
  - Students generate a second and third round of topics by referring to their previous writings and adding new ones to the lists.
Freewriting at Home

Freewriting can be done in class as well as at home. Freewriting at home is usually done after students have learned the skills and strategies of freewriting under the teacher's guidance. When they have successfully experienced several sessions of freewriting in class, students can freewrite at home to reinforce and extend their classroom experience.

Freewriting at home follows the principles and practices of freewriting in class. Students use the same notebook for freewriting. They write consistently at least three times a week, recording the date, time, and duration of each writing. More flexibility can be built in by allowing students to write longer than ten minutes during each session if they want to. The minimum of ten minutes and one page each session, however, needs to be observed. The notebook is periodically turned in to the teacher for feedback and assigning of credit.

Teachers can also complete a term or a semester of freewriting in class, and then assign freewriting at home on an extended basis. This ensures continuity and continuing development of freewriting skills.

Conclusion

Freewriting is a means to an end. It is a means to overcome writer's block and, thereby, to help students achieve fluency in writing. It is also a means to help students produce idea-rich first-draft writings that can be scrutinized later and developed into more polished pieces. In freewriting, choice and ownership are key's to the process. Students can come to see themselves as independent writers with potentials for creativity, in addition to being students whose writings are usually subjected to the scrutiny of evaluators.
References

