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Combining Movie Viewing and Guided Freewriting to Enhance Student Attitudes in a University Academic Writing Class

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This study describes a combination movie watching and free-writing task used to supplement the regular materials being used in two freshman university writing classes with the aim of creating an enjoyable writing environment in which to build student confidence and skills. The study aimed to explore (1) the benefits of the task as perceived by the student participants, and (2) the benefits with regard to general writing skills as perceived by the instructor. Results showed a positive student reaction, with the majority citing both affective benefits and the improvement of various skills. In addition, teacher analysis of freewriting journals showed improvements in both speed and form over 11 weeks. The instructor also observed that students were able to apply the increased confidence and speed attained by freewriting to their academic assignments, and, at the same time, to apply some of the academic writing skills learned in the class to their freewriting.

本論では、学習者の作文技術の向上と作文に対する自信強化を図るための環境づくりを目的に、大学1年生を対象とする2つの作文クラスで通常の教材を補足する形で行われた、映画鑑賞と自由作文を組み合わせた活動に関する分析結果を報告する。第1の分析は、学生のコメントから得られたこの活動における効果に関するものである。第2の分析は、学習者の課題成果物から教師が得た効果に関するものである。学習者の大部分が課題への積極的な取り組みを見せ、この活動の情意的効果と、自身の作文技術向上を指摘した。さらに、11週にわたり行った自由作文課題の分析からは、作文のスピードや作文構成における向上が確認された。また、ウォームアップ活動としての自由作文と、同じ授業内で課されたアカデミックライティング課題それぞれから習得された作文能力・技術が、相互に効果的な影響を与えていることが認められた。

As Nunan (1999) notes, producing coherent and fluent extended writing texts is a challenge, even for those working in their native language (p. 271). It is unsurprising then that a recent pre-semester survey of my freshmen students enrolled in compulsory English academic writing classes revealed that while 89% felt that writing competence would be useful during their university career and possibly beyond, only 10% claimed to enjoy it, and 6% felt confident in their ability to successfully complete assignments. The survey results were similar to those of previous classes. In an effort

to enhance student attitudes with regard to writing I have been experimenting for several years with a combination English movie viewing and freewriting task (henceforth referred to as *the task*). Over the course of a semester, students watch one complete movie in short weekly segments followed by 10 minutes of freewriting about it in a journal. Used as a 25-30 minute warm-up to the class, the task aims to tap the interest and excitement which can be generated among students by movies and transform it into motivation and energy for extended writing practice. This paper describes an exploratory action research study for which students in two English academic writing courses were asked to try the task for one semester and then evaluate its benefits and drawbacks. The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of its efficacy and to raise issues for future study.

Literature Review Freewriting

Peter Elbow (1998b) describes freewriting as writing for 10 minutes or more about whatever comes into mind without stopping and without worrying about spelling or grammar (p.3) as a way to relieve “the root psychological and existential difficulty in writing: finding words in your head and putting them down on a blank piece of paper” (p. 14), encourage fluency and creativity, and promote the exploration of ideas or points of view (Elbow, 1998a; Mullin, 1991). Freewriting may be used as an exercise to build speed and confidence in general writing skills (Elbow, 1998a, p. 17), or as a starting point for writing assignments whereby initial ideas are generated to be later expanded and edited to create a finished product (Elbow, 1998a; Elbow, 1998b). Guided freewriting, also called modified or focused freewriting, limits freedom to a certain extent by, for example, asking students to explore particular themes or adhere to certain forms or structures. Guided freewriting has been shown to help stu-

dents develop or retain fluency and improve critical thinking and organizational skills (George & Young, 1991; Haswell, 1991).

The Use of Movies in Language Classrooms

By telling a story, movies can capture and maintain interest and stimulate imagination as students identify with situations or characters. Movies can also provide linguistic information for language learners through opportunities for listening to discussions or extended discourse in context. The visual component, especially when action closely matches dialogue, can act as an aid to comprehension (Smith, 2011). In addition, films capture cultural aspects of a society, reflecting traditions, customs, and values, or by exploring social issues. However, since they focus on certain events or characters, teachers should be aware that stereotypes may be created or reinforced in the minds of student viewers (Sherman, 2003; Smith, 2011; Davies & Smith, 1997).

Research Questions

In order to gain an understanding of student perceptions of the task, this study explored two main research questions:

1. What benefits were perceived by the student participants?
2. What drawbacks were perceived by the student participants?

The Participants

The participants were two classes of freshmen university students, A class (22 students) and B class (19 students), taking an advanced English academic writing and presentation class. As four students from B class were eliminated from the study due to lack of attendance, data was collected from a total of 37 participants. The materials and methods were the same for both classes.

Task Explanation and Procedure

Before-viewing support: Handouts provided useful vocabulary and snippets of key dialogue from the scenes to be watched. Occasional short readings or mini-lectures (2-3 minutes) by the instructor provided a means to encourage critical thinking about the content. Students were able to ask questions about the support materials.

The movie: The movie was *Freedom Writers* (2007), the true story of a group of American high school students and their teacher who use journal writ-

ing to gain self-knowledge and learn tolerance of others. It was chosen because of its focus on youth, education, and writing, and because of the similarity of the issues it raises (family, gender, and crime) to those in the class textbook. Also, the fact that the movie was new to these students created a feeling of excitement and anticipation.

Viewing: Each week the class watched a 10-15 minute segment of the movie with English subtitles, starting where viewing left off the previous week. No exercises were assigned nor memos taken; rather, students focused on accessible spoken or written dialogue, visual cues, and action to understand or imagine the story.

Discussion: After viewing, students had several minutes of discussion in pairs or small groups to check their understanding of and hear various reactions to the story. They were also able to check dictionaries or ask the instructor questions.

Writing: As a guided freewriting exercise, students were expected to write nonstop for 10 minutes without concern for spelling or grammar, but also to follow certain guidelines: using the support vocabulary where possible, summarize and react to the movie content, and write in complete sentences. When finished, students drew a line under the last sentence of their entry to indicate how much they had written in that 10 minute period. They were encouraged to complete or expand their entries at home for extra writing practice.

Task assessment: Journals were assessed a total of three times during the term, approximately once every three or four weeks until the movie was completed in week 11. Teacher comments and a letter grade were provided based on the total number of entries, use of key vocabulary, and effort to summarize the movie and express a substantial reaction to it.

Research Methodology

To investigate the research questions, at the end of the semester participants were asked to write an informal essay in English of between 300 to 500 words outlining their perceptions of both the benefits and drawbacks of the task. In keeping with the exploratory nature of the study, no specific prompts or questions were supplied. Students were also asked to answer the following questions: (1) Did you like watching *Freedom Writers* as a prompt for freewriting and why? and (2) Would you like to watch and write about another movie next term? To assure students that their remarks would not affect their grades, the journals were submitted for final assessment and returned to students before the essays were due.

Grounded analysis was used to examine student essays with categories created to group similar observations as they emerged from the data, and the results were reviewed and revised. Email interviews were then conducted with ten randomly selected participants, five from each class. They were asked to confirm, expand, or provide reasons for some of the comments in their essays.

Results

Student Assessment of Benefits

A total of 151 written comments concerning the benefits and drawbacks of the task were retrieved from the essay data, and, as shown by Table 1, 127 (84.1%) were positive. Although A class students provided over twice as many comments as students in B class, the proportion of positive comments was roughly the same at 84.3% and 83.7% respectively.

Table 1. Positive Comments by Students (n=127)

Comments	A class (n=22)	B class (n=15)	Total (n=37)
Could express personal feelings	15	6	21
Enjoyment/pleasure	14	5	19
Improved listening skills	9	10	19
Improved writing skills	10	4	14
Could think about various issues	7	5	12
Aided speaking and reading skills	7	5	12
Acquired vocabulary	7	4	11
Felt involved in the story	7	1	8
Useful exercise for self-study at home	5	1	6
Developed academic writing skills	4	0	4
Could practice cursive writing	1	0	1
Total comments	86	41	127

Student Assessment of Drawbacks

Comments expressing drawbacks accounted for 24 of the 151 total comments (about 16%).

Table 2. Negative Comments by Students (n=24)

Comments	A class (n=22)	B class (n=15)	Total (n=37)
Not useful for learning grammar	6	5	11
Hard to understand the movie dialogue	6	2	8
Difficult to follow the story in weekly sections	3	1	4
Difficult to write with time pressure	1	0	1
Total comments	16	8	24

Discussion

As the principal data was collected from open-ended essays to allow participants free choice as to what to write and to encourage in-depth comments, many students focused their essays on a few key ideas, possibly at the expense of other useful information. For example, although only 19 of 37 students referred specifically to enjoyment of the task in their essays, all but one said they enjoyed it when asked expressly in class evaluations. This limitation was, however, partially offset by data from semi-structured interviews of ten participants.

Benefits as Perceived by Students

Participants showed an overall positive reaction to freewriting about movies. This concurs with very positive evaluations of the task provided in informal written and oral comments from students in previous years.

Enjoyment and Increased Confidence

Studies show that the affective states of students can impact language learning and effort (Ellis, 1994, p. 479), and enjoyment of the task does appear to have enhanced student attitudes with regard to writing. First, the data suggests that the use of movie viewing as a freewriting prompt had a motivational impact. Of the 19 students who mentioned enjoyment as a benefit, 14 specifically attributed this to the movie. Also, in answer to the question, Did you like watching Freedom Writers as a prompt for freewriting and why?, 34 out of 37 students said they loved or liked it (while only one did not and two were neutral), citing enjoyment, interest in the story, a ready supply of freewriting topics, a break in routine, extra listening and writing practice, and the excitement and anticipation of waiting for the

next viewing. All but one student wished to repeat the task with another movie in the second term. In addition, all interviewees confirmed a willingness to tackle difficulties with vocabulary, listening, and writing because they were excited by the movie and wished to communicate their feelings about the story. The freewriting aspect of the task also appears to have had a positive effect on attitudes toward and confidence in writing. Comments such as 'I was happy my writing become faster and smooth' or 'I could write one page quickly so I could feel confident' often emerged from the data. Interestingly, the top mentioned benefit was the opportunity to convey feelings and ideas, reflected in student comments such as "I could write my own opinions more freely with enjoying so I tried harder" and "I could feel confident filling in the full page every time". This suggests that the chance to attend to personal and expressive aspects of written communication was a welcome addition to the usual academic writing exercises.

Positive Impact on Writing Skills

Essay data showed that 14 students felt that the task helped them to improve writing skills while another four students specifically mentioned improvement of academic writing skills. When asked to elaborate on these findings, eight of the 10 students interviewed stated that making a summary and reacting to the movie content provided practice for paraphrasing and summarizing exercises assigned in the course as well as with the writing of papers. In addition, 12 students were positive about the opportunity to reflect on themes and issues related to the movie (which mirrored those in the textbook). In fact, six of the students interviewed said the topic they chose for their final paper was one that they had first explored in their freewriting journal. As Elbow (1998b) suggests, the task can serve as a rough draft of formal assignments. Lastly, seven of the ten students interviewed confirmed that they employed freewriting techniques when working on drafts of academic papers in order to get their ideas and words flowing more quickly. As one student commented, it was, "a change of pace of writing practice [where] I enjoyed and felt confident about writing my ideas [and] I need this skill for my essay".

Impact on Other Skills

Improved listening comprehension was regarded as one of the top rated benefits, an unexpected result considering the listening aspect of the task was downplayed and subtitles were used. However, since extended listening practice is embedded in

the task, it creates an opportunity to familiarize students with techniques for active listening, (combining bottom up processing [decoding sounds] with top down processing [using prior knowledge to construct meaning]), and to encourage them to accept the inevitable non-understandings that occur in authentic listening situations (Nunan, 1999; Rost, 1990). As one student noted, "It was too difficult to listen everything in just one time listening. So, instead of that, I always imagined the story and the character's feelings from the scene". Also highly rated were vocabulary development (mainly from the support materials), reading practice (short readings; subtitles), and speaking opportunities (short discussions following the movie). One interviewee was particularly articulate in recognizing that various skills were employed in the task saying, "The most important benefit for me? Can I just say all of them? I think being able to express opinions well is most important though if I want to be able to do that, I need to be able to listen and discuss and understand the DVD. Thus, I also need to build vocab at first."

Drawbacks

A lack of grammar instruction was rated as the main drawback of the task, with 11 of 37 students mentioning it in their essays. This may reflect a general belief among students that explicit grammar instruction is fundamental for language learning and it may be useful to remind students that the task does offer an opportunity to practice and reinforce grammar already learned. In addition, eight out of 37 students regarded non-comprehension of the movie dialogue as a drawback. Some may have agreed with one interviewee who said, "I wanted to understand the dialogue perfectly", underlining the fact that students should be reminded to rely on support materials, visual cues, and imagination to supplement listening comprehension and accept non-understandings. Finally, although four students found it difficult to follow an ongoing movie in weekly segments, many more students said they enjoyed the anticipation of waiting for the next viewing. A short review of the scenes shown in the previous week may prove useful to refresh student memories.

Conclusion

The data provided by the 37 student participants in this study suggests that the movie viewing/freewriting task had an overall positive impact on their attitudes, confidence, and effort with regard to writing. However, considering the exploratory nature

of this study, further inquiry should be pursued. For example, while using a movie prompt for freewriting appears to have interested and engaged students, it would be useful to know what other types of prompts would work equally well. In addition, informal analysis of the freewriting journals showed an overall increase in writing speed, use of paragraphing, and use of cohesive expressions, suggesting that further study into how effectively the task reinforces writing skills being learned in the class may also be useful. Lastly, a study using a larger sample of participants representing varied levels of language ability could provide insight as to how this task might impact a wider range of students.

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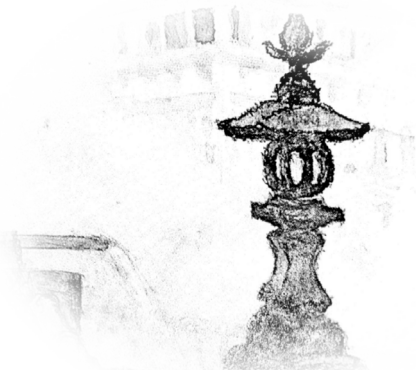


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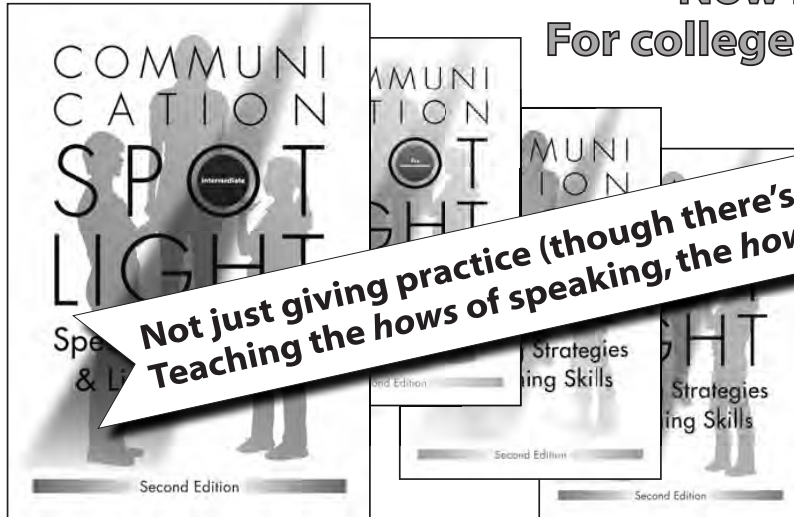
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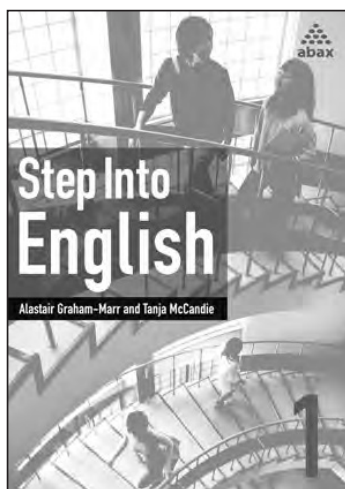


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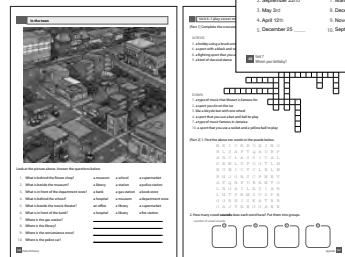
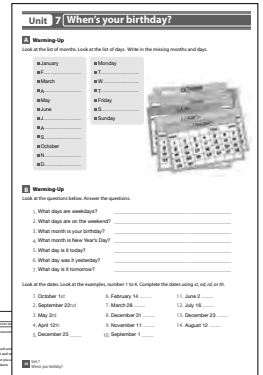


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