

Applying Freewriting as a Technique for Developing Kazakhstani University Students' Writing Skills in English

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Abstract: This study addresses the efficiency of freewriting for teaching English to students of non-linguistic specialties in Kazakhstani Universities. Both quantitative experimental data and qualitative observations are presented. They support the point of view that freewriting is a useful technique for developing writing skills in particular for beginners.

Key words: Freewriting, curriculum, writing skills, non-linguistic specialties, English

INTRODUCTION

As highlighted by Nursultan Nazarbayev, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "English is desirable in modern life and it is necessary tomorrow. It will be difficult to speak about real competitiveness of nations if their people don't know English" (Nazarbayev, 2006). Here, "competitiveness of nations" addresses in particular, the competitiveness of the universities with their publications by faculty and students, academic mobility programs, student olympiads, etc. which enter their ranking. Hence, insufficient command of English represents a barrier for students with poor language skills to write proposals, cover or motivation letters. A good command of written English thus plays a vital role for now a days Kazakhstani students. For this, we have selected freewriting (Li, 2007; Hillocks, 1986; Elbow, 1973) for this study.

The standard curriculum of English for non-linguistic specialties at Kazakhstani universities is targeted at students with pre-intermediate level of English. Students with a lower level of proficiency have to keep pace. This issue has become crucial in recent years and led to the key objectives of our research about the efficiency of freewriting for the development of the students' writing skills.

In this study, the researchers report experimental results in particular, about that freewriting can be a highly efficient method for improving the writing skills, indeed.

Since, English tests are not part of the university entrance exams for nonlinguistic specialties, first-year students are grouped according to their command of English: elementary and intermediate. Our results support

Hartwell and Olson (1984) conclusion that freewriting is more effective for weak students. We propose the following four-stage process: process introduction, process development, qualitative analysis and collaborative freewriting.

Our results suggest that freewriting not only represents an effective method for enriching the writing style but also helps the students to enhance their critical thinking.

Literature review: For several decades, great effort has been devoted to the study of freewriting as a tool to improve writing skills. Students are requested to write an essay within a rather short period of time, without caring for orthography and grammar. Eventually, freewriting has become a standard method. Major and Kemp (1994) stresses the fact that the students eventually realize that there are no rules per se to worry about such as style, grammar, specific organization, etc. And exactly that impression helps them to overcome the barrier of the traditional formal structure of essays that includes introduction, body and conclusion parts.

As a matter of fact, there are various interpretations of freewriting. Our study concentrates on the "developmental function to help the writer to discover the reactions and questions of an external or internal topic which is leading the student to use critical thinking skills" (Connors, 1988) investigations have obtained similar positive results (Elbow, 1973; Emig, 1977). The results obtained by Bello (1977) suggest that it enhances the acquisition of the language, in particular, the use of words and expressions in written assignments. Raimes (1983) claims that the pupils reinforce grammatical structures and

vocabulary involve into new language and succeed to put their thoughts on paper. Thomas (1989) notes that “ideas emerge and invention takes place”. He also states that the students eventually like the process of writing, what lessens the pressure of formal assignments.

All types of writing require motivation. “The uncensored way helps many students to overcome their initial difficulties, the ongoing string of language and syntax itself becomes a lovely and surprising force for generation. Words call up words, ideas call up more ideas” (Hartwell and Olson, 1984).

Hammond (1991) stresses that freewriting can help students to develop their thinking skills. He suggests three ways. The students:

- Can discover all the aspects of a topic which are relevant for further examination
- Become able to examine new words in detail
- Become able to draw conclusions based on these patterns

Other researchers have criticized freewriting, e.g that “pupils do not know what they are writing.” Murray *et al.* (1978). Hillocks (1986) mentions that the research is not graded. Cumming (1997) considers freewriting to be “unfinished writing”. Similarly, Belanoff *et al.* (1991) miss requirements for considering grammar and structure, clarity and restrictions on the topic.

Despite that over the last decades, many researchers have developed different aspects of freewriting. It has been explored in the classroom as a mean of teaching critical thinking to college freshmen to assess reading comprehension (Bintz, 2000) and to increase writing fluency (Hwang, 2010). Our study is concerned with the improvement of English writing skills of students of non-linguistic specialties. Our test group comprises 10 students with mediocre language skills (elementary level).

Our results confirm that freewriting helps students to overcome fears of making mistakes, to express their ideas openly, to release inner tensions and to improve writing skills. Many students seem to have a difficult time getting started on paper but after they begin in an uncensored way, “the ongoing string of language and syntax itself becomes a lovely and surprising force for generation. Words call up words, ideas call up more ideas” (Hartwell and Olson, 1984). After determining a topic of interest, students try to find all vocabulary associated with it and then, compose sentences. The students are free in writing; they write down their point of view on the topic, they develop this topic through their arguments. Freewriting encourages critical thinking by offering a

broad view on a given topic as mentioned above. As Li (2007) reports, “freewriting examines the benefits of using focused freewriting as a powerful tool to engage students in continual writing practice through which they enhanced their understanding of the nature and process of academic writing at the university became more aware of personal strengths and difficulties in writing and thus developed more confidence in academic writing.”

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to investigate the efficiency of freewriting in teaching English. It focuses on four points (Fig. 1):

- Process approach
- Process development
- Qualitative analyses
- Collaborative process

The process approach is important to generate and organize ideas according to the plan or topics. The stage of process development is required to do the draft of freewriting as well as determine keywords and amount of consecutive sentences. Qualitative analysis means to collect data for our research and to evaluate the efficiency of freewriting using graphs, tables and a questionnaire. The final stage is the collaborative process of freewriting. Teacher and students read another group’s work and give feedback in order to break the isolation of writing and to learn from others.

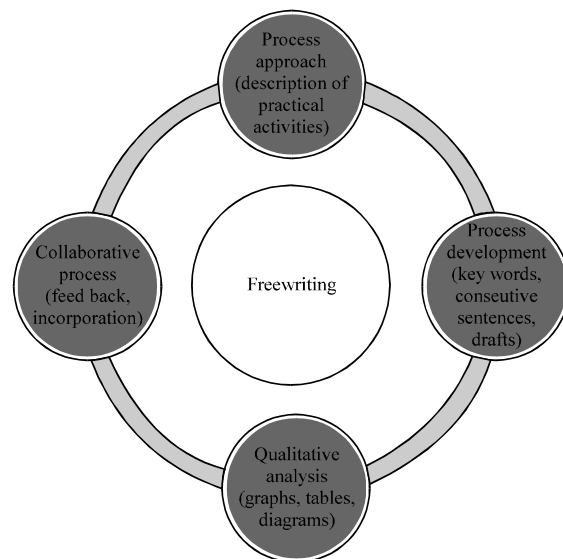


Fig. 1: Research model

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The process approach: The process approach of our study aims at the students to focus on certain activities and is broken down into 10 steps:

- Step 1: Generating ideas by discussing the topic under consideration within the group
- Step 2: Extending the ideas into notes
- Step 3: Organizing ideas in the form of keywords
- Step 4: Composing consecutive sentences using the keywords
- Step 5: Writing the first draft, without caring for spelling and grammar
- Step 6: Exchanging the drafts, reading the texts of the other students and giving feedback to them
- Step 7: Drafts are returned and students improve their freewriting according to this feedback
- Step 8: Writing the final draft of their texts
- Step 9: Giving their texts to a teacher for a last feedback
- Step 10: Exchanging the freewriting essays for proofreading and giving comments

In the process approach, considerable freedom is given for freewriting as there is not the usual need to strictly follow lexical and grammar rules. This considerably facilitates to begin with the writing.

Process development: In order to determine is the efficiency of freewriting to develop writing skills our research was conducted over a period of 15 weeks.

Before starting, a teacher has explained the freewriting process. In our research, the prompts are focused topics, keywords and consecutive sentences. These prompts enable the students to concentrate on writing in definite time. The next step of the process development includes writing activities in which the students work in groups to generate ideas about the focused topic. Next, each student works on its own to create the first draft, concentrating on the focused topic and not worrying about spelling or grammar. Then, the students share their ideas with groupmates, like peer review. This encourages the students to edit their groupmates' writings based on their own language skills and, to some extent, generate new ideas.

Here we refer to the research done by Jacobs (1986), who suggests 9 basic freewriting criteria:

- 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 word or thought to use or to think about what you are doing
- If you can't think of a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write
- Just put down something
- The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind
- If you get stuck it's fine to write "I" can't think of anything to say, I can't think of anything to say' as many times as you want
- Repeat the last word you wrote over and over again or anything else
- The only requirement is that you never stop

Qualitative analysis: The qualitative analysis is based on students' freewriting notes. Within 15 weeks students are required to write weekly only on the focused topic assigned by the university curriculum (Table 1). Every week, students' papers are proofread by the teacher, who provides the students with feedback. Finally, the texts are collected and saved for analysis.

In order to analyze the results of the writings skills, the numbers of keywords and consecutive sentences are counted (Table 2 and 3). The majority of students were able to use approximately 20 keywords in 15 sentences in their freewriting.

Of the course, the number of keywords and sentences varies (Fig. 2-6).

A certain correlation between the numbers of keywords and of sentences is obvious. It is strongest in the topics 'Personal information', 'Family in modern society', 'Relationship of generations within the family', 'Describing people', 'Types of houses', 'The problems of ecology', 'Shopping to excess' and 'Are you a shopaholic?'

Table 1: Focused topics

Weeks	Topics
1	Personal information (e.g., profession)
2	Who knows you better either colleagues or friends?
3	Family in modern society
4	Relationship of generations within the family
5	Describing people in economic spheres
6	Modern dwelling
7	Types of houses
8	Social and economical issues
9	The problems of ecology
10	Health and healthy lifestyle
11	Diagnosing and treatment
12	Cuisine in English speaking countries
13	National foods of Kazakh people
14	Shopping to excess
15	Are you a shopaholic?

Table 2: The number of keywords

Topic	Number of key words formulated by the students 1-10									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Personal information (e.g., I am an economist)	15	12	10	12	18	9	11	13	9	12
Who knows you better, colleagues or friends?	16	11	12	11	17	11	9	12	12	14
Family in modern society	18	13	9	10	20	10	12	11	14	11
Relationship of generations within the family	17	16	17	11	14	10	14	10	13	12
Describing people in economic spheres	14	16	13	8	16	14	12	19	18	11
Modern dwelling	16	17	12	15	15	6	7	12	14	16
Types of houses	17	12	13	14	19	11	10	11	15	15
Social and economic issues	14	7	11	10	13	8	9	8	10	12
The problems of ecology	12	15	9	9	13	11	11	11	9	12
Health and healthy lifestyle	14	12	11	13	16	13	12	9	12	15
Diagnosing and treatment	16	14	13	13	15	8	12	16	9	7
Cuisine in English speaking countries	18	16	14	12	20	13	17	12	10	13
National foods of Kazakh people	20	17	18	14	20	16	14	13	19	15
Shopping to excess	18	13	16	14	11	17	12	15	17	17
Are you a shopaholic?	17	12	15	10	10	16	9	14	12	13

Table 3: The number of consecutive sentences:

Topic	No. of key words formulated by the students 1-10									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Personal information (I am an economist)	13	9	7	8	12	7	9	11	9	8
Who knows you better either colleagues or friends?	12	9	10	8	12	10	7	8	9	9
Family in modern society	13	8	7	9	14	5	8	7	11	11
Relationship of generations within the family	12	10	11	8	14	8	12	8	11	9
Describing people in economic spheres	14	14	11	6	14	12	10	13	14	7
Modern dwelling	12	11	7	6	9	7	8	8	11	10
Types of houses	14	13	9	8	11	11	10	9	12	13
Social and economic issues	9	11	7	5	10	9	6	5	8	6
The problems of ecology	12	9	10	6	13	6	9	10	9	12
Health and healthy lifestyle	12	8	9	12	6	12	5	11	10	7
Diagnosing and treatment	14	10	7	6	12	5	9	10	6	4
Cuisine in English speaking countries	13	10	12	9	16	11	13	10	7	8
National foods of Kazakh people	15	12	13	12	13	10	10	9	13	11
Shopping to excess	14	11	10	11	12	15	12	13	12	10
Are you a shopaholic?	12	10	9	10	12	14	9	10	8	6

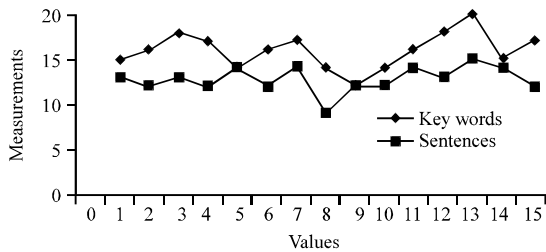


Fig. 2: Numbers of key words and sentences by student 1

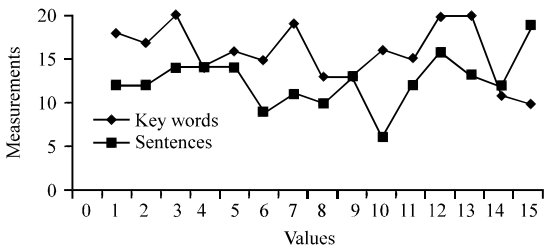


Fig. 3: Numbers of key words and sentences by student 5

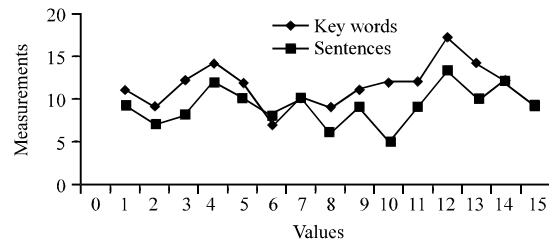


Fig. 4: Numbers of key words and sentences by student 7

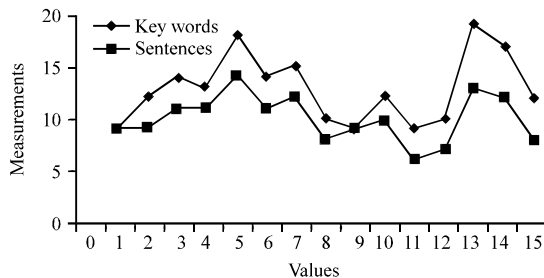


Fig. 5: Numbers of key words and sentences by student 9

In order to quantify these more qualitative observations for each student i , $i = 1-10$, we have calculated Pearson's correlation coefficient, $r^{(i)}$ (Cohen, 1988) for the numbers of keywords and sentences over the 15 themes (Table 4):

$$r^{(i)} = \frac{\sum_{t=1}^{15} (K_t^{(i)} - \bar{K}^{(i)}) (S_t^{(i)} - \bar{S}^{(i)})}{\sqrt{\sum_{t=1}^{15} (K_t^{(i)} - \bar{K}^{(i)})^2} \sqrt{\sum_{t=1}^{15} (S_t^{(i)} - \bar{S}^{(i)})^2}}$$

Here, $K_t^{(i)}$ is the number of key words formulated by student i on theme t , $t = 1-15$ (columns 'ik' in Table 4); $S_t^{(i)}$ is the corresponding number of sentences (columns 1-10s in Table 4). The overbar denotes the mean value.

$$\bar{K}^{(i)} = \frac{1}{15} \sum_{t=1}^{15} K_t^{(i)}; \quad \bar{S}^{(i)} = \frac{1}{15} \sum_{t=1}^{15} S_t^{(i)}$$

The values of the correlation coefficient r , confirm our observations above. The $r > 0$ means that the number of sentences increases with the number of key words. The strength of this 'positive correlation' ($r > 0$) varies from student to student. However for 70% of the students $r > 0.5$. This indicates a rather strong correlation in general.

After 15 weeks, we have observed an increase in our students' freewriting in terms of using keywords and compose sentences. The use of focused topics proved to be helpful for getting started on freewriting, to have deeper insights by means of keywords, to think inductively and to strengthen thoughts. Three questions have been addressed during our study.

Do the students choose useful keywords: The students are instructed to write about the focused topic according to the academic curriculum. After introducing the theme, they write down as many keywords as they know about

the given theme. All keywords are of great importance and useful not only in the process of freewriting but also in their professional life.

Do the students compose correct sentences: The students receive detailed explanations about the freewriting technique. Then, using a specific grammar tense assigned by a teacher, they compose consecutive sentences. At first, this is not easy for them (making mistakes in sentence structure) but gradually they develop these skills of freewriting.

Is there a connection between keywords and sentences: According to our correlation analysis (for most students, the Pearson correlation coefficient exceeds 0.5), there is a significant connection between keywords and consecutive sentences.

Collaborative process: Sharing the freewriting texts with their groupmates and a teacher leads to a peculiar process of collaborative work. The students write down comments. It is also worth mentioning that the collaborative process yields a real product of our study. The texts works are shared and discussed in a manner that is not typical for the teaching at schools or universities. The mutual peer-reviewing have clarified the ideas and the best works have encouraged further freewriting. The

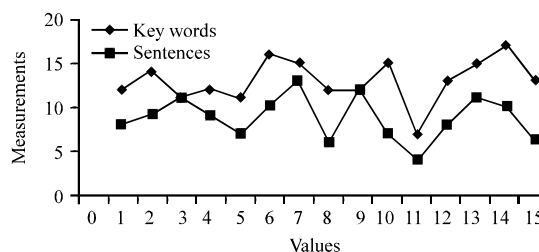


Fig. 6: Numbers of key words and sentences by student 10

Table 4: Numbers of keywords (1-10k) and sentences (1-10s) in the texts of the students 1-10 on the themes 1-15; r is the correlation coefficient

Themes	1k	1s	2k	2s	3k	3s	4k	4s	5k	5s	6k	6s	7k	7s	8k	8s	9k	9s	10k	10s
1	15	13	12	9	10	7	12	8	18	12	9	7	11	9	13	11	9	9	12	8
2	16	12	11	9	12	10	11	8	17	12	11	10	9	7	12	8	12	9	14	9
3	18	13	13	8	9	7	10	9	20	14	10	5	12	8	11	7	14	11	11	11
4	17	12	16	10	17	11	11	8	14	14	10	8	14	12	10	8	13	11	12	9
5	14	14	16	14	13	11	8	6	16	14	14	12	12	10	19	13	18	14	11	7
6	16	12	17	11	12	7	15	6	15	9	6	7	7	8	12	8	14	11	16	10
7	17	14	12	13	13	9	14	8	19	11	11	11	10	10	11	9	15	12	15	13
8	14	9	7	11	11	7	10	5	13	10	8	9	9	6	8	5	10	8	12	6
9	12	12	15	9	9	10	9	6	13	13	11	6	11	9	11	10	9	9	12	12
10	14	12	12	8	11	9	13	12	16	6	13	12	12	5	9	11	12	10	15	7
11	16	14	14	10	13	7	13	6	15	12	8	5	12	9	16	10	9	6	7	4
12	18	13	16	10	14	12	12	9	20	16	13	11	17	13	12	10	10	7	13	8
13	20	15	17	12	18	13	14	12	20	13	16	10	14	10	13	9	19	13	15	11
14	18	14	13	11	16	10	14	11	11	12	17	15	12	12	15	13	17	12	17	10
15	17	12	12	10	15	9	10	10	10	12	16	14	9	9	14	10	12	8	13	6
r	0.518		0.234		0.65		0.381		0.249		0.793		0.62		0.696		0.899		0.532	

Table 5: Students' satisfaction with freewriting

Question to the students	Yes (%)	No (%)
Do you like freewriting?	85	15
Is freewriting useful to improve your writing skill?	87	13
Does freewriting help to enrich your vocabulary?	90	10
Does freewriting need much time?	89	11
Is freewriting easy?	85	15
Have you increased your English writing skills?	92	8
Have you increased your confidence in English writing?	90	10
Is freewriting helpful in learning English?	91	9

students get the feeling that their freewriting has value. The atmosphere were friendly and collegial. The feedback is recognized as a powerful aid. Finally, the speaking skill of the students are improved too.

We have investigated the applicability of freewriting to teaching students with low proficiency in English in Kazakhstani universities. Within 15 weeks the students competed each with another, where they applied more and more keywords and compose consecutive sentences in their papers. Following the freewriting process outlined by the teacher and the 15-week curriculum, the students were involved in a new experience of writing regarding relevant topics or issues. It is important to note that all the students worked hard to express their ideas, since they were highly motivated. This activity benefited the students to get a better command of English at the end of the semester. They have learnt to cover all the focused themes by means of keywords and consecutive sentences.

There is a strong correlation between the numbers of keywords and of consecutive sentences. Indeed, the students tried to use all key words on a given theme. Hence, most students were able to be involved in the 4-stage process of freewriting (Fig. 1) where the very good results of the students 1, 5, 7, 9 and 10 advocate the most significant indicator of the success in freewriting. Freewriting proved to be an efficient method of improvement students writing skills. In turn, a vast majority of the students were satisfied with this method as well as with their results (Table 5).

Most of the students enjoyed the freewriting assignments and appreciated their own success. During the freewriting, they wrote their own ideas about the given theme and knew what to speak about. Most students said that freewriting was very helpful in both improving their writing skills and enriching their vocabulary.

CONCLUSION

Our study has reached its main goal, viz to considerably improve the students' command of English.

The efficiency of freewriting can be checked during the collaborative process. The latter represents an important part of freewriting since the students act both as writers and as readers. The teachers play a crucial role for the motivation of the students.

Thus, freewriting is one of the most effective ways toward clear and correct writing. Due to freewriting, our students have significantly advanced their level of writing. There should be no less than one freewriting lesson per week in order to go through all ten steps of the process.

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