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Enhancing High School Students' Essay Structure Through Brainstorming—A Multiple Case Study in Chinese EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This study, employing a multiple case study approach, explores how brainstorming as a pre-writing strategy enhances essay-structure competence among Chinese high school EFL students. It addresses the observed over-reliance on memorized templates among students, which often leads to mechanical writing and a lack of independent structuring ability. Grounded in the process approach to writing instruction, the study investigates how brainstorming activates students' background knowledge and facilitates the transition from idea generation to textual organization. Through four classroom cases focused on writing a recipe, a movie review, an application letter, and a continuation task, the study illustrates specific brainstorming techniques such as collaborative categorization, consolidation of linking words, role-play, and sequential story-chaining. Findings from student writings and reflections indicate evident improvements in structuring paragraphs, enhancing logical connectivity, designing decent openings and closings, and constructing coherent and creative plots. The study concludes that applying brainstorming in high school English writing lessons effectively strengthens students' ability in essay planning and structuring, achieving effective progress beyond the limitations of template dependency.

Keywords

Case study; brainstorming; essay structure; Chinese EFL; high school English

1. Introduction

During my teaching internship in a high school, where I taught English to two first-year high school classes, I observed a common reliance on memorized writing templates among students. This approach resulted in a mechanical writing process and hindered their ability to construct independent essay structures, resulting in inadequate wording, poor organization, and a lack of intellectual depth in the writing (Li, 2021).

To address this issue, the process approach to writing instruction was adopted, which emphasizes developmental stages of writing rather than the final product. According to Zhang Ying (2006), this approach encourages students to engage in reflective writing activities and helps students consciously monitor and regulate their writing behavior. Effective pre-writing preparation has been identified as crucial to writing quality (Wang, 2008). Among pre-writing strategies, brainstorming is widely recognized for stimulating creative thinking by gathering students' sparkling ideas. First proposed by Alex F. Osborn in 1939, brainstorming is a type of conference technique by which a group gets together to find a solution to a specific problem by amassing all sorts of ideas spontaneously from its members. Researchers such as Isaksen and Gaulin (2005) have affirmed its value in helping students produce diverse and

original ideas. Yuan Xiaojun (2008) further highlighted its role in improving students' textual organization by integrating thinking with writing processes. Through brainstorming, students can learn to independently collect materials, organize their thoughts, gradually reduce their dependence on teachers, and develop the habit of independent learning (Sun, 2025).

A review of these theories suggests the feasibility of employing brainstorming in high school English writing instruction to enhance students' abilities in essay planning and structuring. To substantiate this, this paper adopts a multiple case study approach, detailing four classroom implementations from my teaching internship, examining their application across four key dimensions: arrangements of each paragraph, logical connections between sentences, beginning and ending focus, and plot design.

2. Case One: Structuring a Recipe through Collaborative Brainstorming and Categorization

2.1 Application of Brainstorming

This case was focused on applying brainstorming to activate students' background knowledge of a recipe that can help students organize the contents of every paragraph. After establishing the topic of writing a recipe, students were instructed to recall cooking videos as a shared source for brainstorming key points about a recipe. Students were formed into small groups to discuss freely and list all words and phrases associated. The teacher provided vocabulary support as needed. This activity quickly yielded a fruitful bank of vocabulary, including ingredients (e.g., tomato, salt), cooking instruments (e.g., pot, knife), cooking operations (e.g., cut, fry), and sensory descriptors (e.g., delicious, spicy). Group representatives then reported their results, forming raw material for writing. The teacher subsequently guided the students into categorizing these terms into four types, which formed the systematic structure of the subsequent structural planning.

2.2 Arrangement of Paragraphs

After the words were categorized, the challenge was to place this result into paragraph form. Students were asked to put the four categories into a logical three-paragraph recipe format. The majority of groups proposed the following sequence: ingredients, cooking process with tools, and sensory descriptions. Then, the teacher used a short cooking instructional video to show how an introductory paragraph was important. From the analysis of the video, students concluded that the name of the dish, its origin background, its taste, and the popularity would be included in the introduction section in order to attract the reader. Through collaborative discussion and guided brainstorming, students independently developed the typical three-part structure of a recipe: introduction, ingredients and tools, and the cooking procedure.

2.3 Teaching Reflection

The application of brainstorming was very helpful in building the students' writing ability in planning each paragraph. The analysis of the students' written assignments indicated that nearly all were capable of applying the three-paragraph structure in their recipes appropriately, which is an indication of successful transfer of the intended format from the pre-writing to the actual writing. This finding demonstrates how brainstorming effectively enabled students to make progress from organizational planning.

3. Case Two: Enhancing Logical Connection in Movie Reviews through Multi-level Brainstorming

3.1 Application of Brainstorming

The lesson focused on writing a movie review. Brainstorming helped students think and organize the logical connections between sentences. After a short introduction, the rules of the brainstorming activity were given by the teacher. Key elements of a movie review were divided into three categories: basic information, plot, and comments. For each category, the teacher listed the elements on the blackboard and requested students to brainstorm words or phrases associated with it. Starting with basic information, students initially suggested the main actor or actress and director. After a brief hesitation, a student added background information, resulting in further engagement. Another student linked the main actor or actress to the character, demonstrating good association between two phrases. For the plot,

students excellently offered a beginning, climax, and ending. For comments, students provided adjectives like touching and thrilling, and nouns illustrating themes like friendship and love. This outcome formed a basic framework for their writing.

3.2 Logical Connections between Sentences

After forming a basic framework, students discussed and brainstormed categorized ideas to this structure freely within their groups. Representatives of the groups then came to the blackboard to add their results, connecting related ideas with lines. This collective effort developed an explicit mind map. In order to help students develop logical connections between these isolated words, the teacher highlighted how to apply linking words in writing. For instance, when writing about contrasting character traits (for instance, brave and evil), the students were asked to use contrasting connectors like while, on the other hand, or on the contrary. Students then worked in pairs to brainstorm and create a list of the connecting words and phrases to represent different logical relationships.

3.3 Teaching Reflection

Student assignment analysis indicated that they could effectively summarize a wide list of connecting words and phrases and categorize them into logical function categories. Their movie reviews showed clearly organized frameworks and a remarkable improvement in the correct application of linking words in sentence structure. This was a clear contrast from their previous tendency of generating unrelated simple sentences, which is an indication that brainstorming helped students strengthen logical connectivity in their writing.

The lesson employed brainstorming on different levels, from individual, group, to class, and demonstrated how productive it is on different student grouping scales in content generation and structural planning. From this case of writing a movie review, the application of brainstorming was largely successful and provided practical evidence that it can enhance students' ability in constructing logical connections between sentences.

4. Case Three: Fostering Reader Awareness in Application Letters through Role-play Brainstorming

4.1 Application of Brainstorming

This case began with a review of the application letters students had completed as homework. While most students adequately described the advantages of their application for the position in the middle paragraph, according to the requirements, many neglected to introduce themselves at the beginning or failed to state their purpose and express courtesy in the closing section, which plays a significant role in determining the reader's first impression of writing.

To help students construct their understanding of the application letter's structure, brainstorming was applied with an emphasis on reader awareness. Students were divided into two groups: one group adopted the role of the recipient (a busy manager seeking suitable candidates), while the other group acted as the applicant. Each group brainstormed and noted phrases related to their role's expectations and attitudes. Several students who played the role of recipients gave sound reasons for their ideas, summarizing their ideas into key criteria: the letter should be brief (due to the manager's busy schedule), highlight the applicant's outstanding qualities (to stand out among many applications), and maintain a formal and polite tone (to demonstrate good manners). The students who played the role of the sender thought of their own attitudes, which were also very reasonable: optimistic, confident, polite, and thoughtful. In fact, whether they were playing the role of the recipient or the sender, the students did a good job of modeling the reader's thoughts. This role-based brainstorming enabled students to visualize both sides of the communication, helping them recognize the need to adjust tone, content, and structure according to the reader's perspective.

4.2 Beginning and Ending Focus

After the brainstorming session, several well-written opening and closing paragraphs from peer essays were displayed. Students were guided to appreciate the strong points in these examples. They noticed that successful introductions included a brief self-introduction and a clear statement of writing purpose, which helped capture the reader's interest efficiently. In the closing section, expressions of expectation and polite language were found to leave a positive impression. Rather than providing fixed templates, the teacher encouraged students to summarize the main points of the opening and closing paragraphs on their own. This process allowed students to summarize the key components

of effective beginnings and endings. Subsequently, students were asked to revise their own application letters and provide reasons for their edits. Most revisions demonstrated a clear understanding of how to frame the opening and closing paragraphs appropriately, with detailed and logical explanations for each change.

4.3 Teaching Reflection

This lesson demonstrated how brainstorming can effectively enhance students' ability to focus on the key points in the beginning and ending parts. By adopting different perspectives through role-playing, students developed empathy for the reader, which directly influenced how they organized content in the opening and closing sections. I realized that the existence of templates had both advantages and disadvantages for the students. Foreign language teachers should encourage students to write their own opinions bravely and show their confidence instead of instilling writing skills into students (Zhong, 2004).

The activity successfully guided students to generate and categorize ideas independently, leading to more reader-oriented and logically organized application letters. The improvements in students' revised drafts confirm that brainstorming not only enriched their ideas but also strengthened their structural planning skills.

5. Case Four: Co-constructing Plots for Continuation Writing through a Story-Chain Brainstorming Activity

5.1 Application of Brainstorming

This case focused on continuation writing, which is a newly introduced task in the College Entrance Examination's English writing section, integrating reading comprehension with written output. It assesses students' core competencies, including logical thinking, textual understanding, and language use. When grading the students' test papers, teachers focus on three key aspects: content completeness and coherence with the original text, accuracy and variety of language, and structural logic.

However, because this new writing type is too unfamiliar to students, the main challenges students encounter in continuation writing include: struggling to accurately comprehend texts and extract plot and emotional development (Ying, 2023), as well as creating illogical plot developments that lack factual coherence (Ma, 2021). To address this, a brainstorming activity could be designed to help students construct meaningful and coherent narratives collaboratively.

The writing task was based on a passage from an English weekly newspaper. The original text described a boy in the author's relay race team who was the slowest runner in the class, in the practice race the author was very upset that the boy was dragging their team down and making them last, but when the author got home he remembered that his father had said about the importance of teamwork, so he decided to stop blaming the boy and helped the boy improve with his friends, and they were no longer last in the practice race a few days later. The two opening sentences from the paragraphs that students need to continue are: Days passed until finally our Sports Day arrived; To our surprise, Eric managed to maintain that advantage. The original text provided a clear foundation for the continuation, established through its plot and characters' emotional conflicts. To help students develop logical and coherent plots, a collaborative story chain activity was implemented, with the application of brainstorming.

At the start of the lesson, the teacher briefly reviewed the original text. The teacher initially provided phrases such as "nervous," "because," and "our turn" as the story's starting points. Subsequently, each group took turns building upon the creation of the preceding group, employing newly brainstormed phrases (e.g., "fast," "likely to win"; "as fast as he could," "progress," "happy"; "proud," "thankful," "teamwork") to relay the story's development. In this collaborative process, the class engaged in a collective construction of a comprehensive plot, encompassing the sequence of events from the pre-race nervousness to the development of team cohesion, Eric's swift progress, and ultimately, the celebration of victory while emphasizing the significance of teamwork. The final story effectively established a clear chain of cause and effect.

5.2 Plot Structure

The story chain activity, based on brainstorming, helped students construct a story in a systematic manner by building upon the ideas of fellow students. The activity helped students identify and expand significant plot points, particularly plot and emotional conflicts of the original text. By continuous brainstorming and chain expansion, students gained

the ability to maintain consistency in tone and content while developing the story logically. The teacher facilitated the activity by providing initial signals and confirming students' contributions, maintaining the story cohesive with the given opening sentences. The guided student-centered approach allowed students to engage in developing a plot that was not only complete but also cohesive in content and plot. The final collaborative story had a clear cause-and-effect structure and satisfying conclusion, emphasizing themes such as teamwork and personal growth.

5.3 Teaching Reflection

The application of brainstorming in the form of a story chain significantly enhanced students' ability to design the plot in continuation writing. This activity encouraged active participation and collective problem-solving, enabling students to transform abstract plot ideas into a structured narrative. The process of step-by-step and phrase-by-phrase development reduced the cognitive barriers to independent writing and enabled students to focus on logical consistency and emotional changes of characters. Therefore, students could better transfer these skills to their independent writing, demonstrating greater coherence and creativity in developing stories. Such an instance confirms that using brainstorming in teaching high school English writing effectively improves students' skills in planning and organizing plots, particularly in challenging tasks such as continuation writing.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Enhancement in Organizing Paragraph and Essay

Brainstorming applied in four writing lessons significantly developed the paragraph and overall essay organization of students. In tasks such as recipe or application letter writing, students could categorize ideas and organize information into a coherent sequence. Through guided brainstorming and class discussion, they improved from generating disorganized ideas to creating well-organized writing outlines. Post-lesson examination of the students' writing showed a clear improvement in structural coherence, with most students managing to form focused formats such as the three-paragraph format successfully. This demonstrates that brainstorming does enable students to improve their planning and organization ability in writing.

6.2 Development of Logical Connectivity

Brainstorming also assisted the students in their ability to enhance logical connectivity among sentences and paragraphs. By co-constructing and categorizing linking words and phrases, the students became increasingly sensitive to how to connect ideas cohesively between and within paragraphs. In writing movie reviews, for instance, students moved from using simple, fragmented sentences to more cohesive texts with appropriate linking words. This ability to construct logical flow was also facilitated in continuation writing tasks, where learners utilized a story chain activity in order to maintain plot and character emotion consistency. These findings confirm again that brainstorming helps students to have a greater awareness of logical connectivity.

6.3 Improvement in Focus on Beginnings and Endings

Role-based brainstorming allowed students to assume different roles, such as recipient or applicant, which facilitated their ability to write effective opening and ending paragraphs through reader-oriented awareness. Students, through discussion based on empathy, realized the importance of introductions that capture interest and conclusions that leave a positive impression. Revised application letters reflected that students had integrated essential features such as self-introduction, statements of purpose, and polite closing sentences on their own. This shift from template dependency to autonomous organization illustrates how brainstorming encourages reader awareness and strategic planning in writing.

6.4 Facilitation of Plot Design in Narrative Writing

In continuation writing, the brainstorming-based story chain activity enabled students to construct logical and creative plots through cooperation. Through the expansion of phrases brainstormed by peers, students learned to create stories step-by-step, paying attention to cause-and-effect relationships and emotional consistency. The activity reduced the difficulty of individual plot creation and encouraged the students to think and create in sequence. Subsequent independent writing tasks reflected these gains as the students composed more coherent and engaging stories. This

confirms that brainstorming supports not only planning capacity but also creative and logical organization in the plot of narrative genres.

6.5 General Teaching Implications

This multiple case study, comprising four distinct writing lessons, demonstrates the effectiveness of using brainstorming in high school English writing lessons in enhancing students' essay planning and organization skills. By activating prior knowledge, encouraging collaborative idea generation, and supporting logical organization, brainstorming allows students to write more confidently and creatively, achieving effective progress beyond the limitations of template dependency.

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