

【論文】

Mind-Mapping as a Pre-Writing Tool in Teaching College-Level Writing Courses

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Abstract: Pre-writing exercises that incorporate the Mind Mapping concept can enhance a student's ability to integrate complex thoughts into a cohesive unit of text. The difficulty for most Japanese students who are learning English as a second language is not the language barrier itself, but the student's desire to maintain a comfort level that is most familiar to the learner. There is a natural reliance and tendency for students to write according to their first language structures. As an instructor, we must be cognizant of our student's learning behaviors, and in giving guided lessons that students can readily incorporate within the framework of formalized writing styles.

Tony Buzan, the inventor of the world-famous Mind Maps, provides an incredible advantage in activating our right-sided brain to map concepts or words that are linked by our natural association of assigned meanings and references. The linking of words with images for the pre-writing stages can be accessed as a viable goal for students while providing some relevant skill-building objectives to enhance and achieve the final stages of writing readable prose.

This article is dedicated to my mother, Sumiyo Ogawa.

The focus of this paper is to simply introduce the Mind Mapping concept as a tool for instructors in developing pre-writing skills for their Japanese students. While there are other methods that are available as new teaching trends are in constant motion for improvement and refinement, the Mind Mapping concept has great potential in providing Japanese students an enjoyable writing experience. In providing a bridge for students to crossover into developing language skills, this Mind Mapping concept can help to elevate the confidence level of students so that they may employ and develop their own writing skills.

Key words: Pre-Writing Stages, Listing, Clustering, Freewriting, Process Approach.

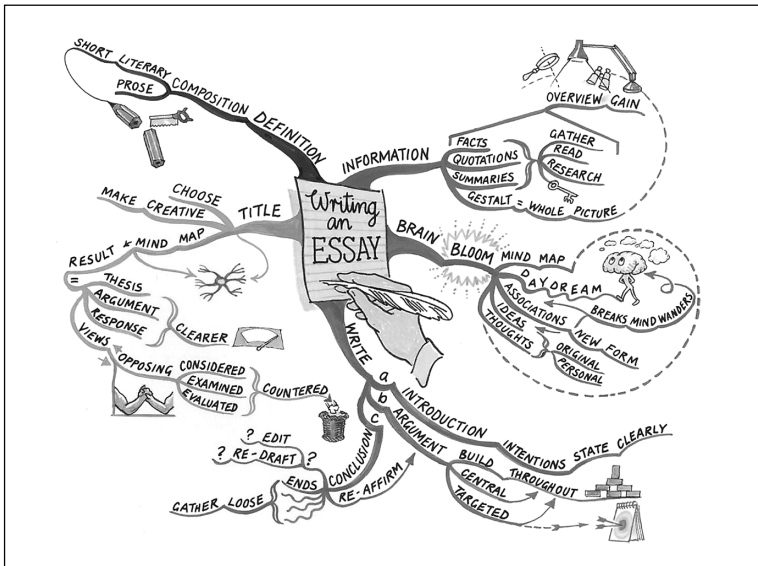
INTRODUCTION TO MIND MAPPING:

What is a Mind Map? Tony Buzan, in his book entitled, “The Ultimate Book of Mind Maps” (2005) asserts that mapping our ideas is the whole-brain alternative to linear thinking. One can compare a Mind Map to a map of a city where the core is like the center of activity. Most importantly, the creation of the map represents an “idea” that is placed in the center of the Mind Map. This main idea can radiate outwards by creating curved branches by forming linkages to other related thoughts or ideas. The student is allowed to freely access his/her own thinking processes in assigning a word to describe each branch that relates to the main idea.

Essentially, the use of such Mind Maps can provide the student with a visual connection to the subject area of interest. The key to understanding this concept relies on the guidance from an instructor through repeated and reinforced demonstrations. Once the graphic representation is made, planned routes connecting to the center allows the student to travel from one idea to the next in an unrestricted manner. By doing so, the student can gather large amounts of information and data in one place with such clarity for immediate viewing and further analysis. This first step is known as “note-taking”. By locating and isolating information related to the main idea, the student can start to engage in

the pre-writing stages of writing an essay topic or in developing a draft for a research paper.

Our brains have a natural aptitude for visual recognition and associations according to Buzan. He suggests that “there is a natural inclination for students to resort to the visual recognition of language that is based on their own frame of reference.” In view of this, it is vital to structure a lesson plan that allows the student to utilize the powerful language of images, drawings, diagrams, codes, symbols, and graphs. By doing so, this can be helpful in motivating students into the next stages for writing such as a story-writing exercise. A diagram of essay writing from Buzan’s book is featured for review.



Reprinted from Tony Buzan’s “The Ultimate Book of Mind Maps” (2005)

WRITING IS A BASIC TOOL OF CIVILIZATION:

The precursor of standardized writing forms was “picture writing” which used pictograms to represent objects directly and literally. In fact, the Japanese language consists of these pictorial units that are assigned meaning within a given context. An instructor may be able to reach Japanese students in teaching basic pre-writing skills in English as a common point of reference through Mind Mapping.

Teaching academic writing to non-native speakers of the English language can be quite an undertaking for second language students. With Mind Mapping as a teaching tool for an essay writing lesson, Buzan suggests that instructors can realize moderate to high achievements among students. The main goal is for the students to produce written text that exhibit comprehensive sentences for writing acceptable prose with little or no grammatical errors. These sentences are linked to an expressed idea within a given subject or thematic assignment. Without a doubt, the best way to teach writing is to provide students with a weekly writing exercise in a structured and guided syllabus with marked suggestions on error corrections.

The other most important part of the writing experience is the feedback from the instructor. These are the constants of any writing course such as: the weekly planned lessons, the presentation of writing assignments, the usage of Mind Mapping as a pre-writing tool, the review of students’ writings after class, and the feedback on their written text for the next class. How this works for a given course depends on the instructor’s interaction with each student. The instructor’s goal in improving a student’s writing proficiency is through weekly practice sessions with immediate feedback from the instructor.

A critical factor is the immediacy for the instructor’s feedback response, and the need to reinforce and highlight the grammatical points within the written text through commentaries and explanations by examples. It is also important to

engage in repetition as part of noting commonly made mistakes in writing. This allows the students to have the time to practice their writing skills with more accuracy.

The most common approach in teaching writing today is known as the “process approach” or a “classroom approach”. This is an umbrella term that encompasses multiple ways to teach writing that may focus on academic writing, or personal writings. Other forms of writing may include emails, academic book reports, nonfiction prose, and creative free-form poetry. Whatever emphasis an instructor decides for the course, the student is encouraged to write through a cyclical approach rather than writing perfectly executed sentences within a certain time frame. The instructor allows the students to produce completed and polished assignments after going through several drafts and revisions.

The next stage is the feedback from the instructor for students to improve on each successive draft. There is less pressure on the student to produce perfectly written sentences at a given time. This allows students to explore their own creativity while grammar and other mechanics are taught after this creation process. The important factor is to develop the student’s creative potential to express his/her thoughts with clarity and purpose.

Basically, the classes for second language learners can be described as writing workshops. It is pertinent for students to produce academic essays by mastering techniques such as the Mind Mapping tool at the onset in order to generate ideas. After several Mind Map attempts, the creative idea for the assignment can be isolated by a student, and this seed of thought can now emerge into a story or a book report. In this kind of open classroom environment, students are allowed to make the mistakes, while self-correction by the students themselves or teacher-assisted support for students are greatly encouraged.

Moreover, the cyclical process from draft to the finished product can be a realized goal within the time frame allowed for students to practice and remember

his/her grammatical mistakes for the next time around. It is important to provide each student with assignments that offer a challenge so that the student can feel that he/she is improving throughout the given course of instruction. Fundamentally, the ultimate goal for instructors is to provide the student with an environment that allows them to establish a strong foundation for writing well-formed sentences. While for students, the goal for them is to create a well-developed idea from start to finish.

A vital part of this process approach is the individualized progress that each student gains from their level of writing proficiency. Most importantly, the instructor should provide students with a curriculum that provides the time necessary for students to learn these new skills. Teaching writing through a step-by-step process allows students to understand that time is needed to create a written piece, and that such writing is not accomplished in one giant leap from an idea onto paper. It takes several attempts for the finalization of a given assignment to be in presentable form for grading.

The first step is to provide students several lessons to help them create their idea, then to review and reshape their stories or papers to meet the standards of acceptable writing levels. The next goal is to provide students with the learning tools in designing their writing assignment. This includes the three main parts: the introduction, the body of the text, and the conclusion. Employing proofreading skills to revise and re-write their text can be provided to students in the subsequent lessons as well as feedback on written text. For instructors, the main teaching point is for students to garner their idea, and to have this idea flow from one logical, connecting thought with examples, and other illustrations to highlight the points made from the initial introduction of the student's creative focus. This is where the Mind Map concept can be useful for students at the pre-writing stage.

SYLLABUS DESIGN:

Whether operating from a tightly organized or a fairly loose syllabus, the

writing instructor must organize the class so that the students can feel a level of competency as their skill levels grow. They need to feel that they are capable of learning the necessary steps toward good writing. Basically, what can be described as good writing entails the display of well-conceived ideas that express a point of view. This can be a time-consuming process for any student, but a good writing course will provide as many opportunities for students to become well informed through diligent readings of their subject, and of their own text. The final goal for any writing course is for the students to become independent readers of their own text, and to be able to create, review and reshape their writings to meet the needs of the assigned writing tasks.

TECHNIQUES IN GETTING STARTED:

The best place to begin in any writing course is to introduce the students to the pre-writing techniques. This is the most important stage for students to learn prior to the actual production of the working text such as a storybook. It is worthy to note that this stage must be fully explored for the students to grasp the various methods to start the flow of ideas. One of the struggles for most inexperienced writers is the “blank page syndrome” where they are wondering how to start.

There isn't one special way to start composing a written text, and an instructor should be familiar with these four basic types as part of the pre-writing exercises contained in several lesson plans (Reid 1995). Brainstorming, listing, clustering, and freewriting are the four pre-writing tools that may be useful for instructors. Some techniques may not be suitable for the learning preferences of certain students, but at the same time, it is generally useful for all students to know what is available to them. They will be able to choose and focus on the techniques they prefer at the pre-writing stage.

BRAINSTORMING:

This is often introduced as a group exercise on the classroom board, and all

students in class can participate by sharing their collective knowledge on a given subject matter. By doing this, the students will be able to see that a great amount of information can be amassed in a short span of time. Another way to do brainstorming is to divide the class into smaller groups where classmates can share their information together, and select what best suits their first draft.

LISTING:

Unlike brainstorming, students can do this exercise on their own. Listing can be an individualized activity. Each student can write out multiple, related ideas in relation to the subject area, and then, they can branch out into subcategories. One good thing about this exercise is that the students do not have to worry about creating grammatically correct sentences. This can be done at a later stage in the student's developmental process.

CLUSTERING:

By placing a key word or central idea right on the center of the page, the student can jot down as many free associations triggered by the subject matter. In this case, the student may utilize short phrases or words that can be linked with the central idea. Completed clusters can look like spokes on a wheel or any patterns of connecting lines. The students can connect these associations in any fashion where they see a relationship that makes sense to them. This process can generate a vast amount of ideas for writing on a certain topic.

FREEWRTING:

The main technique for this type of writing is for students to write for three minutes without taking their pen off the page for the first attempt. You can gradually build this up by having the students do this for five to eight minutes. The instructor can help the students start this process by writing an opening clause or sentence for them to start with, and then they can start the freewriting exercise on their own.

In view of these techniques, it is important to have the students experiment

with each one. By allowing the Japanese students a chance to start in this way, they are learning the various pre-writing methods that may be helpful to them. From this point onward, the students will be able to take the next stage of writing, and sequentially make the necessary revisions by utilizing their editing and proofreading skills. Finally, the students can reach their goal in producing a solid piece of written text that is polished, well-organized, and problem-free of grammar and spelling errors.

THE SEVEN STEPS IN MAKING A MIND-MAP:

As a starting point, the Mind Map incorporates the brainstorming, listing and clustering techniques. In Buzan 's "The Ultimate Book of Mind Maps", there are seven steps to start a Mind Map, and they have been listed below.

1. Start at the center of a blank page turned sideways. This will allow for the student's mind to spread out in all directions. The key is to allow students to express themselves more freely and naturally.
2. Create an image or picture in the middle of the Mind Map. The reason is that the central image makes the Mind Map more interesting, and keeps the student focused on making the necessary associations for viewing.
3. The use of colors is important for Mind Maps. The brain is stimulated by colors, and adds a vibrancy and life to the Mind Map. A Mind Map should be fun, and will add to a student's creative energy.
4. After creating a colorful image at the center of the Mind Map, it is time to connect the central image with second, third and even fourth level branches that move outward from the center. This is important to do because according to Buzan, a person's brain works by association. The mind likes to link two, three or four things together as a grouping. By connecting the branches, this will allow the

student to remember things better.

5. Create the branches to curve rather than making straight, outward arrows. This allows the student's brain to absorb the interesting patterns of associations.
6. Use one key word per line because a single word gives more power to a person's individualized associations. This will help spark more words, new ideas, and vivid thoughts. Phrases will dampen the triggering effect to create more connecting thoughts. One word is sufficient and can produce more branches from the core.
7. Continue to draw images when there is an urge to create one at a particular branch. The more images on one's Mind Map, the better it is for a student. According to Buzan, the mind will make the natural associations that are a part of our learning process as a grouping. This can provide a substantial amount of information to start the next phase of the writing process.

While the Mind Map concept has generated a worldwide interest, it is still a relatively new field of interest within the Japanese educational system for basic writing courses at the university levels. There may be a mild interest as to its usefulness for Japanese students, but a wider application for its usage still remains to be seen.

We can certainly benefit from Buzan's innovative concept to help us visualize our thoughts into organized patterns and associations. This clearly paves the way to a better method of teaching pre-writing skills for Japanese university students as they are more likely to identify more quickly with pictorials than students in America. Specifically, this paper only illuminates the pre-writing stages in a writing course. The reason is that the most important part of writing is the starting point for a student. The Mind Map can link the central idea to

supporting branches of thought, and thus, bring the student forward into the next stages of the writing process.

As mentioned before, there is merit into the cyclical process in teaching writing to university students. This process allows students more freedom to transfer their thoughts and ideas onto paper through Mind Mapping methodology. It is important to note that students can partake in these activities as an individual or as a group in a classroom setting under the brainstorming, listing, clustering and freewriting techniques in a workshop environment. In this type of classroom environment, it is important for the instructor to be available for feedback that is immediate for the students. The retention of the necessary grammatical corrections from previous writings will help students improve their writing proficiency levels for the next assignment.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

In reference to the pictorial content of the Japanese language, there is one character "kon", or in a word, "komaru" which specifically means "suffering". This character provides an instant view of what "suffering" might be like or experienced by an individual. Specifically, the Chinese character, "kon" is a boxed kanji with the "tree" character within its four walls. Thus, "kon" or the word, "suffering" is represented with two visuals whereby the "box" and the "tree" characters are combined into one pictorial form.

Without a chance to grow out of its box, the tree suffers. Like humans, the tree needs to grow out of its boxed existence in order to absorb the sunlight, or the light that sustains life itself. In thinking "outside of the box," the concept of Mind Mapping can free us from such restrictions into thinking at a boarder level, and to include new methods in teaching pre-writing skills. Most importantly, Mind Mapping is the means in which university students can grow and engage in meaningful communication through their expressive writings.

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