

Teaching Note

Boosting Mindful Observations and Writing Skills with Free Verse

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Introduction

ELLs often struggle in intensive English writing courses because they are not always given the needed scaffolding that nurtures a sense of comfort, control, and confidence. Four common obstacles that ELLs encounter are:

1. being asked to write in their non-native language;
2. being required to use styles different from what they are accustomed to;
3. being assigned topics with which they are unfamiliar; and
4. struggling with providing details and developing ideas in their writing (Randolph, 2012).

These issues invariably cause ELLs to be apprehensive about the writing process. Although there are no easy solutions to the above difficulties, employing creative writing activities can help (2) through (4) of the aforementioned issues. This teaching note will focus on how writing observation-based free verse inspires ELLs to develop some essential techniques to enrich their writing craft.

The Procedure

Writing observation-based free verse is comprised of five stages that can be covered over three instructional days: (1) making and discussing mindful observations; (2) writing about the observations; (3) creating free verse based on the observations; (4) peer editing; and (5) revising the poems (Randolph & Ruppert, 2020).

DAY 1

First, there is value in making mindful, daily observations. These are observations based on the three elements of mindfulness: (1) paying purposeful attention to one's immediate environment; (2) being in the moment; and (3) being nonjudgmental while observing (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). I ask my students what they observed on their way to class and why certain observations caused a "wow moment" and were thus remembered. After this, I introduce and discuss two particular types of observations: culture-based observations and

nature/environment-based observations (for a complete list of observation categories, see Randolph, 2018). We conclude by reflecting on the overall significance of making observations and how they help us in life, work, and school. As homework, I have my students make three mindful culture- or nature-based observations and write a detailed paragraph (8-10 sentences) about each one.

DAY 2

I present an observation-based free verse that one of my former students has written (for examples, see the Appendix). We discuss the general content, the observation, and the use of imagery, emotions, and the senses. After our discussion, I have the students pair up. Each one chooses their favorite observation from the homework. They read each other's paragraphs and discuss the imagery, why the observation interests them, and what emotions or sensory qualities are elicited.

The students then return to their seats and spend the remainder of the class writing a 7- to 10-line free verse poem. It should be noted that the students have written free verse in previous classes. It is, however, always a wise idea to orally review or write the main poetic devices on the board. These may include the use of:

- rich imagery,
- the emotions and senses,
- a personal/ genuine connection to the topic,
- alliteration, dialogue, metaphors, and similes.

Before the class finishes, students exchange their poems with a partner. For this homework assignment, each partner will read his/her partner's poem, comment on the images, use of emotions and the senses, and the general content. I request that they give each other positive feedback and honest critiques. This helps in the development of critical thinking and deepens their academic powers of observation.

DAY 3

The third day is used for peer discussion. The students pair up with the same partners and discuss the edits, comments, suggestions, and questions they wrote on their peer's work. I meet with the pairs and answer any questions and provide suggestions. The final homework is to revise the poems and submit them in the next class (Randolph & Ruppert, 2020).

Concluding Remarks

Studies in cognitive and educational psychology consistently show that finding a personal connection with the subject of study, creating an intrinsic interest in it, and employing the emotions and senses are surefire ways to help students encode, learn, and retain the material or develop a desired skill (Jensen, 2008). Using mindful observation-based free verse addresses each of these effectively and successfully. In addition, ELLs flourish in generating an acute ability to make various kinds of observations, from culture- and nature/environment-based ones to observations about their own evolution as writers.

Observation-based free verse helps ELLs understand the importance of employing details and description in the poems, which, in turn, helps them employ details and description in their academic writing. An equally significant point to note is that many of my former ELLs who have gone into civil engineering, education, plant biology, and psychology have reported that this activity and other poetry-based assignments helped them begin to understand the use of and need for rich description in their writing. This, they claim, allowed them to become better writers in their other classes. Effectively using details and description are crucial for solid academic writing – whether it be for the essays required in undergraduate courses or for the peer-reviewed articles that many will write with their graduate advisors. In short, making mindful observations leads to insightful poems, and writing these poems leads to a heightened ability to write creatively and critically with comfort and confidence.

References

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Author

Patrick T. Randolph specializes in vocabulary acquisition, creative and academic writing, speech, and debate. Patrick was awarded the “Best of the TESOL Affiliates” in 2018 for his 2016 presentation on plagiarism. He has also received two “Best of CoTESOL Awards” for his 2017 and 2018 presentations on observation journals and creative writing. Recently, Patrick received the “Best Session Award” from MinneTESOL (2019-2020), and he has published *New Ways in Teaching with Creative Writing* with Joseph Ruppert. Patrick lives with his wife, Gamze, daughter, Aylene, and cat, Gable, in Lincoln, Nebraska, USA.