

[Article]

## Mind Mapping for Writing Fluency

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### Abstract

This study describes and analyzes the use of mind maps in university writing classes. The work represents two years of teaching writing lessons at Sugiyama Women's University and Nagoya City University. The paper explains what a mind map is, how to teach mind mapping and why it has fundamental value when teaching from a process writing perspective. The article also examines the challenges faced when implementing such techniques and methodology with students who have little experience regarding writing fluency.

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**Key words:** Mind map, writing fluency, student directed learning, pre - writing skills.

### 1. Introduction

This aim of this paper is to describe how mind maps have effectively been utilized in my writing classes. Mind mapping is a method of brainstorming which involves writing down

a central idea and connected themes which radiate out from the centre. By focusing on the themes and then looking at the connections between these branches students can trigger a large range of vocabulary, write longer essays and structure their essays in a well organized manner. Mind mapping has come to form an integral part of my writing classes in order to fill the need for pre-writing exercises that are designed to improve the writing fluency of my students.

## 2. How my students have learned to write

Having spent ten years teaching English at the secondary level in Japan I have a certain amount of experience as to how my first year university students have previously learned writing in both their own language and in English. As Wachs maintains:

“It is no secret that most Japanese students spend six years in junior and senior high English classes hardly ever speaking English. What is commonly overlooked is that most of these students never write in English either.” (1993) What Wachs means is that many senior high students simply translate sentences and paragraphs from a text book or insert the correct vocabulary into the blank space in a sentence. They have little experience of essay writing which involves not just accuracy but fluency too. There seems to be two main reasons for this lack of extended writing practice:

1. The complexity of the Japanese language lends itself to rote memorization as a primary pedagogical approach to learning. Kanji, for example is usually mechanically written down until it has been memorized.
2. Writing accuracy trumps writing fluency. A core purpose of high school is to help students pass the grammatically grueling, standardized, university entrance exam. Most of the questions are in the form of multiple-choice and therefore only grammatical accuracy is tested not essay writing skills.

This lack of fluency practice leads, I believe, to a fear of writing. As an EFL teacher in Japan I sometimes wonder why is it so difficult for students with many years of English learning to write long sentences. Students write answers to textbook questions in the shortest

sentences possible, e.g.

Textbook question: "Is Sanae a member of the ESS club now?"

Student answer: "No, she isn't."

This is the correct answer to the text the student had studied yet it could be written by a 1st year junior high student. A more challenging and juicy construction would be:

"No, Sanae is not yet a member of the ESS club though she plans to join the club soon."

If the Japanese education system teaches learners to repeat back what the teacher tells them and measures students mainly in quantitative tests, such as multiple choice tests (Hino, N 1988) then it is no wonder my students hesitate to offer more than the bare minimum answer. They are afraid of being marked down if they write more. Students stay well within the boundaries of the "right" answer. It is because of this culture of accuracy and rote memorization, that risk taking and creativity are stifled. Unfortunately these are two key characteristics of fluent writing. What can be done about this?

### 3. What is a Mind Map?

Mind mapping is a type of brain storming which by definition falls into the pre-writing category of the writing process (see appendix 1). It is a note taking technique where a main topic is broken into sub topics and then written on a branch structure. Students write down the core topic at the centre of the page and then contemplate the subject for specific details. They write down key words or phrases as these come to mind and then draw lines connecting them. Students are encouraged to draw quickly, without pausing, judging or editing as these things promote linear thinking and the idea of mind mapping is to think creatively and in a non-linear manner. I tell students that there will be plenty of time for modifying the information later on but at this stage it is important to get every possibility on the mind map. I hope that by getting all their ideas down on this map structure they will be able to look for connections and themes they want to make a priority when they start writing. Students are encouraged to personalize mind maps with their own symbols and designs as they will aid recall and understanding of the topic we are studying. I suggest using capital letters for the key words in the main branches and lower cases letters for any phrases or descriptions in the smaller branches. As all the topics covered in the textbook are directly related to the students' lives e.g. family and hometown, hobbies, my college, weekends etc,

students should be able to retrieve an abundance of background information and feel confident about being able to fill out a mind map.

Although mind maps should be used in the pre writing stage they give an overall view of the topic being explored. In this way mind maps not only provide an outline for the essay to be written but also a summary of it. They are a beginning and an end to the essay writing process.

#### 4. Why do Mind Maps Work?

As previously stated Japanese learners are relatively preoccupied with making mistakes in form. This insecurity detracts from the interest in and flow of writing. It creates a mental block for the writer. The traditional rote memorization style stresses form over the communication of the message and objective knowledge over subjective answers (Guest, M. 2008). A major value of mind maps is that they provide a bridge between thought and writing. Learners can generate ideas and vocabulary separate from the production of grammatical structures, sentences and paragraphs. Mind mapping distracts students from this preoccupation by employing another medium to get the message across in the form of images and single, key words. It takes away the pressure of immediately being correct all the time. Mind mapping also offers learners the opportunity to write about personal experiences in a semi-scripted context in a classroom setting. Because of the mapping process, learners can exercise some degree of self-censorship, keeping private matters private, but focusing awareness on what details they are willing to reveal when encouraged to do so. As their stories become the focus of the lesson students in turn become intrinsically motivated.

As the teacher I can get a clear sense of the students' ideas just by looking at the mind map. I can preview some of the students' words and spelling before it is written in the story. I have quick access to very diverse noted experiences and can see what categories of words are present. I can even get hints about their language structure from the phrases and words used such as the use of tense. These hints in the form of key words and images are like a trailer for a movie which shows the essential plot of a film. Mind mapping also gives the teacher time to monitor the class and assist students individually so that they become better prepared for writing. As I monitor the class I realize these images can be used in place of

words unknown to the learner. It is a way for learners to generate material that they might not otherwise bring out, and that in later stages can be made into words.

Finally, mind maps can be used as a vehicle for community building in the classroom as class members undertake mutual disclosure of experiences, opinions and feelings. My students are in their 1st year at university and therefore are making new friends and acquaintances in every class. When they look at each other's mind maps they often do it quietly and respectfully and sometimes with a cry of interest or surprise as they discover new information about their peers. On the academic level this practice also introduces the students to the idea that reading and writing are recursive skills where one flows into the other. It is important for the writer to be aware of what kindles the curiosity and interest of the reader so that within the writer's allowance she can cater to that need. The procedure described in the mind map lesson suggests one way writers can be influenced by their readers' comments and observations.

## **5. How I teach Mind Mapping**

Among the structures that I bring to mind mapping are the variations in group work - moving back and forth between working solo, in pairs, and in the class as a whole. By making a series of such changes, the qualities that each way of working offers will be carried into the other ways. Initially the whole class looks at my mind map and listens to my story, then as individuals they create their own mind map. In pairs they look at and listen to a partner's mind map, then as a whole class a model student stands up and the group asks questions to elicit more information and finally they return to individual work as the mind map is transformed into speed writing and edited writing. All these different types of inter/intrapersonal activities recycle and reinforce the language being used. Here is a case example.

### **The Mind Map Lesson**

I started the lesson by explaining that writing could be broken down to a 4 step process (appendix 1) and that today we would focus on the first step - prewriting. We had

already studied the textbook chapter on self introductions so the students were familiar with the topic. I said that in the pre-writing stage it is important to gather ideas for writing and that today they would learn a technique for doing that called mind-mapping. This map included words and images but not sentences. I explained the saying "a picture speaks a thousand words." To emphasize the power an image has to generate vocabulary I talked about the topics on my mind map (see appendix 2) for three minutes and checked for comprehension. I wanted them to be aware that mind mapping is a self-disclosure exercise and if the teacher took the first step then the students would have a stronger sense of classroom security to do the same.

Next, the students received a check list of necessary criteria on a mind-map (see Appendix 3). The students read the list by themselves and then as a class we went through it. For each item on the list I read out, the students physically put their pens on that part of the mind map. In this way they showed an understanding of the list and what is expected when creating a mind-map.

The learners then made their own large, central image and the 3 main branches using the same topics (family, hobbies and dreams) as on my example. I then told the students they had 15 minutes to produce their own mind-maps. They could ask me for assistance as I circulated around the class or they could use dictionaries. I told them not to worry about being poor artists. Having seen my example few of them worried about that!

Most students worked quietly during this time, while a few asked partners for help with vocabulary. Some of the mind maps immediately impressed me with their detail and color and a few were disappointing in terms of effort. I also noted students who had misspelled words on their paper but for the time being did not correct them as the main point was for them to be engaged in the activity without worrying about writing perfect English.

After 15 minutes I wrote the following instructions on the board and modeled them.

1. *Take your partner's mind map and check it against the criteria list (Appendix 3).*
2. *With your partner exchange mind maps and take one minute to read it.*
3. *Take turns telling your stories while looking at the mind map.*

4. Ask your partner 3 questions about parts of the mind map that interests you.

With activity number 4 in mind I elicited a list of WH questions and other phrases from the students which were written on the board.

Which \_\_\_\_\_? Why \_\_\_\_\_? Where \_\_\_\_\_? What \_\_\_\_\_? When \_\_\_\_\_?  
Whose \_\_\_\_\_? Please tell me more about \_\_\_\_\_? How \_\_\_\_\_?

I asked a student to come to the front and give their 2 minute mind-map speech. While the students listened they wrote down 2 questions that they were curious to know more information about using the expressions on the board. We listened to his speech and the students asked several follow up questions which the student answered in short sentences. Having listened to and partaken in a model speech, question and answer session the students formed new pairs and practiced the 2 minute mind map conversations this time posing 2 questions during the speech. At the end each student took their partner's mind-map and underlined in pencil 3 things they wanted to know more about. I encouraged the authors of the mind-map to then spend 4 minutes adding information that the partner had requested.

We had spent some time incorporating oral/aural activities into the class. I felt they recycled and reinforced the language in use whilst keeping the energy and focus in the classroom fresh and constantly moving. Secondly, each student has her strong and weak points in second language acquisition I therefore wanted the more gregarious students to feel their natural skills had been attended to.

Finally students were given 10 minutes to speed write their self-introduction. The aim was to use the ideas generated from the mind map and write as many words as possible on their self-introduction within a ten minute time frame. No dictionaries or erasers were allowed. If a mistake was made the student simply crossed it out, rewrote the phrase and continued writing more. For 10 minutes the whole class, heads down, wrote away, line after line, occasionally glancing at their mind maps to garner information. After 10 minutes the stop watch sounded for them to put down their pens and tally up their word count. The piece was then self-edited and for homework extended into a 400 word essay to be handed in the following week. After reading their compositions a week later, the quality of their writing

convinced me that creating the mind-map and subsequent conversation and speed writing had provided learners with the time to reflect and organize their thoughts carefully. Their stories were fully developed and some students wrote considerably more than the 400 word goal. Those students invariably had colorful, intricate and information laden mind maps.

The following is a summary of how I teach mind maps and the principles behind these actions. If you choose to use mind maps feel free to apply this lesson outline or take what you want, discard the rest and add your own ideas to the mix.

## The Mind Map Lesson

### Actions

The teacher explains that mind-maps are a way to gather ideas and that brainstorming is a process that will help writing, editing and the rewriting process.

The teacher gives students his self-introduction mind-map.

Students receive a list of criteria for judging mind-maps. They check the list.

The students draw mind-maps with the same key words within a 15 minute time frame.

The teacher observes spelling errors while circulating.

Pairs check each other's mind-map according to the list of criteria.

Pairs view one of the mind-maps and the creator tells her story.

### Principles

Writing is a process and the first step is important.

Students have a concrete example of a mind-map, develop classroom security and gain an insight into the teacher's identity.

Students have a list of what is expected of them. They physically show their comprehension by identifying with a pen the mind-map parts.

It is important students have boundaries. They have a clear topic and a time frame.

The students are exploring the language. Errors should be expected.

Check lists develop peer responsibility and student accountability.

Oral/aural activities are used to reinforce the language.



A student speaks to the class and fellows prepare questions for her.

Give students a model example.

Students ask questions on the topics they find interesting on their partner's mind map.

Giving students freedom to choose what interests them builds intrinsic motivation.

Four minutes to add any information their partner requested.

The reader is a valuable source to suggest the writer's focus and direction.

Speed writing for 10 minutes.

Students have a better chance to write fluently when well prepared for the task.

For homework and to be handed in next week the students prepare the whole process: Mind map, speed writing and the 400 word essay.

The process is as important as the goal. The teacher collects and grades the preparation work as well as the essay.

## 6. Student Reactions to Mind Maps

Perhaps the most challenging students to engage with mind maps was a group of 4 or 5 male students who bunched together at the back of the class. There was an air of resistance to whatever activity I introduced to the class and mind maps were no exception. These students were not English majors and one complained to me that he had come to University to study Economics. He had no idea he would have to continue studying English and clearly did not relish the opportunity. "Kenji" the coteries' de facto, cynosure, twice eschewed mind mapping by situating his zonked visage upon the table and indulging in a desk siesta. However, by randomly pairing students at the start of class and thus breaking up this group the culture of resistance soon dissipated as these boys worked with, and were influenced by, more motivated students. Two members of this group revealed themselves to be budding artists. Whereas early on their mind maps had been in black and white and lacked much detail, as the course developed, so did their mind maps. This was evident in the explosion of colors they used and the detail on the maps with items and characters skillfully drawn in a distinct manga style. Several of these students wrote stories that although terse and replete with errors were all the same, engaging, frank and at times profound. At first this

group had frustrated me, yet from them I was reminded of the importance of group dynamics when serving up a lesson. It seemed that if the right classroom conditions were provided these disruptive students would participate in a positive and active manner that allowed them to demonstrate their natural talents.

The most typical response and for me the most desired can be summed up in “Keiko” a taciturn yet bright student. The primary purpose in incorporating mind maps into the writing course was to provide students with a base from which they could launch into a speed writing paper, which in turn would be edited into a formal essay. At the start of term I tried an experiment in which students were given a topic to speed write about for 10 minutes. This topic was given cold so they had no preparation time in which to write notes or draw a mind map. Keiko wrote 140 words the first time yet when she was allowed the time to diligently prepare her mind map and then speed write on a different topic she averaged 180 words. One reason why this happened maybe because the topics we covered in the textbook were of a personal nature e.g. my family or my weekend. With a mind map she had time to decide what to include and what to keep private so that thinking time necessary when going immediately into speed writing was made superfluous by time spent constructing the mind map.

Probably the main reason why she increased her word count was simply because the larger task of having to write an essay had been broken down into manageable, meaningful chunks such as first mind mapping and then speed writing. Having set out her thoughts in the form of key words and images keiko already had something to write about and so the foundation of the essay was in place. As any architect knows, the foundations are vital to a well structured building. The juicy details in the mind map free students to move beyond the tendency to experience writers block when being confronted with writing an essay. Instead they were liberated by this creative process to write more words than usual.

## 7. Conclusion

I have come to see mind mapping as the first step towards students expressing themselves in writing and doing so without fear of mistakes and the teacher's red pen. Through images and key words students convey information in a very compact format. Student's affective filter is lowered as their anxiety about mistakes is reduced and self-

expression trumps grammatical accuracy. The affective filter is further lowered by students selecting personal information and then sharing it in community building exercises, as they listen and react to each other's life stories.

Another power that lies inherent in mind mapping is the maps ability to organize and synthesize writing. Students can see the whole work outlined on a single piece of paper, yet it is broken down into small sub topics and therefore moment by moment the writer knows what to focus on. Sometimes writing an essay seems such a large, daunting task that it is difficult to know where to start and how to continue. Mind maps act like sign posts enticing the writer all the way to the end of the task. This visual series of objectives provide a map of what is to be accomplished and builds confidence and motivation enabling students to write in a more attentive, relaxed and fluent manner. The pictures and key words offer a zesty and original way of brainstorming that is attractive to the eye and caters for right brain, non-linear creativity which is a refreshing change to the "Kata" style still prevalent in high schools throughout the country.

In my final class of the writing course I explain that mind maps are not just for writing essays in English class but for any writing task which requires brainstorming. It is my hope that students will take into these skills into other classes where reports are an obligatory part of the course and even their final year thesis. It is my conclusion that not only the skill of mind mapping but also speed writing and focused partner discussion which combine powerfully to develop writing enjoyment and fluency.

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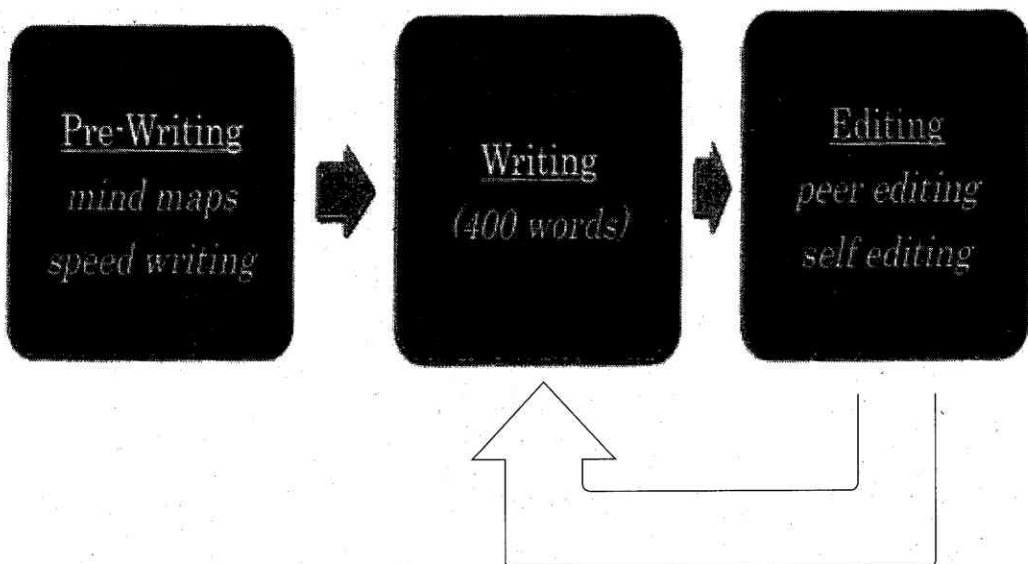
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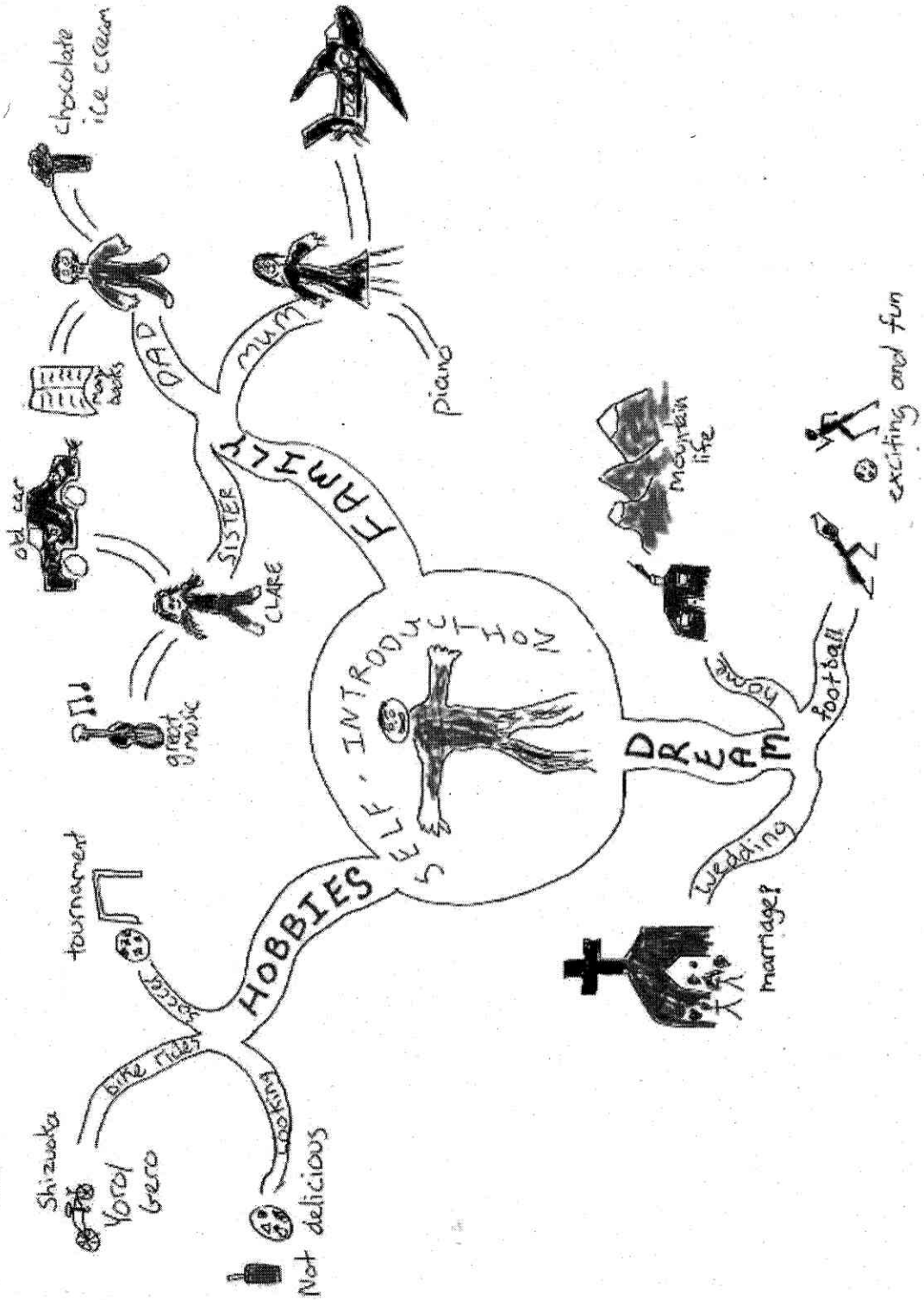
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## Appendix 1



Appendix 2



# Mind Map

(A picture speaks a thousand words)

Mind Map	Name:							
Central Image (large, color)								
Main Branches (3 or 4)								
Small Branches								
Key Words (one for each branch)								
Images on branches								
Color on every branch								