

Using Focused Freewriting to Stimulate Ideas and Foster Critical Thinking During Prewriting

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Abstract

Research suggests that writing is a useful strategy for fostering critical thinking skills among students as it requires that they think about what to write and how to organise their thoughts. Yet, students of writing often face difficulty when it comes to providing the evidence to substantiate their arguments or assertions. This paper describes how focused freewriting can be used to help ESOL students to think critically about a topic and to generate the ideas to support their arguments. In this study, nine students of a Malaysian ESOL writing course were given thought-provoking images or videos during the prewriting stages of their class and then asked to write non-stop for ten minutes about whatever that came to their minds after being shown the stimulus. This was then followed by a discussion led by the teacher on the themes that emerged from their brief write-up. The study found that focused freewriting helped the students to generate ideas more quickly and to write more fluently and independently during the prewriting stage. We posit that through focused freewriting sessions and follow-up discussions, instructors can help their students to generate ideas and to think critically about issues, hence facilitating their efforts at organising their arguments before writing academic essays.

Keywords: Focused freewriting, critical thinking, idea generation, pre-writing, ESOL.

Introduction

There was an “awed silence” in the classroom as we turned on the lights after screening the short film, “Room 8”. The student writers blinked to adjust to the lights and looked at the projector screen eagerly...they were “thinking” about the guy in the matchbox and his fate...

It was Amirah (pseudonym) who broke the silence and said, “Well, the prisoner should have accepted his fate and not try to flee from the prison cell.” Pramano replied, “Yes I agree with her. He tried to flee and that’s why the bigger man put him in the matchbox, which is worse than the prison he was in.” The students were apparently eager to discuss the film. This was the last session of the focused freewriting series we conducted, and we could see a marked improvement in their interpretation skills compared to the very first session, where they were baffled as to what to do and how to proceed.

As teachers of English writing, we have observed that many students tend to frown and fret over a particular topic and are shy to ask the teachers about the difficulties they have in writing. Often, they cannot think beyond the surface meaning of writing prompts and are unable to generate ideas as they lack the skills, as asserted by

Tang, (2009), to “think, evaluate, and express those thoughts by using proper words” (p.1). Indeed, many educators are concerned about the fact that tertiary students seem to lack the critical thinking ability required to face the challenges of the present world.

Our experience in teaching writing and our observations of how students approach or respond to the writing task reinforced our intention to incorporate critical thinking-based writing activities in our classrooms that would motivate our students to choose their own topics, as suggested by Kopzhassarova, Akbayeva, Eskazinova, Belgibayeva and Tazhikeyeva (2016). Moreover, such thinking tasks allow students to find their own academic voices through the “process of reflecting, researching, note making, reading, and writing” (Ataç, 2015, p.622). As stated by Allen (2006), the more opportunities the students get to “synthesise, practice, and develop increasingly complex ideas, skills, and values” (p.92), the better they become at being critical thinkers. That was the reason why we wanted to conduct this study—to foster critical thinking among students of writing. In this paper, we report on how we utilised focused freewriting practices to help stimulate students’ ideas at the prewriting stage as this constitutes the “building blocks” for critical writing.

Fostering Critical Thinking Through Writing

Many scholarly works have touched upon the fact that writing can be an effective means of promoting critical thinking among students. As Olson (1984) asserts, writers have to go back and forth between the stages of writing and thinking to produce a logically organised piece of work. This “recursive and reflective nature of the writing process” (p.29) is precisely what Applebee (1984), in his classic work, “Writing and Reasoning” argues as contributing towards critical thinking, which Newton (1985) identifies as “a manner of assimilating and processing information and evaluating ideas” (as cited in Taglieber, 2000, p.143). Applebee’s thoughts are also echoed by researchers such as Resnick (1987), Marzano (1991), and Gammill (2006), who attest that writing can be used to improve higher-order thinking since it provides the opportunity for students to think about how to provide arguments and respond to problems. Indeed, Olson (1984) mentions that the stages of writing such as prewriting, pre-composing, writing, sharing, revising, editing, and evaluation resemble the six cognitive domains of Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives; specifically, “knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation” (p.32).

Numerous studies have also been conducted on how writing activities can be used to foster critical thinking. Lu (2013) incorporated an intercultural syllabus into her EFL classroom that teaches students to analyse and interpret a reading text, which is the first stage of their writing process. Then, they had to write about the text first, individually, and then in groups. The group-based written assignment entailed their analysing the material, identifying the discussion topic, giving opinions, and self-reflection. The findings showed that compared to the first assignment, the students had improved in terms of organising their ideas and developing arguments for their essays through critically thinking about the topic. In an empirical study on the critical thinking skills of Chinese students in English composition courses, Dong and Yue (2015) found that the students who had high scores on critical thinking also obtained higher marks in their final writing. They argue that if teachers nurture critical thinking among students through the relevant writing tasks, the students would, in the long run, become independent and critical thinkers. Likewise, Lo (2010), in a study that assessed the nature of critical reflective writing among Taiwanese undergraduate students, found that they were able to think critically when asked to read the newspaper cuttings given by their teacher followed by a task in which they had to write thoughtful essays based on the information obtained. The themes reflected in their writings included their personal concerns about the topic.

In another study on the pedagogies that are associated with the development of critical thinking skills among students from four American colleges, Tsui (2002), using the Institutional Growth in Critical Thinking (IGCT) Scale to measure their critical thinking level, found that the two institutions scoring higher on the IGCT scale had writing in their curricula and incorporated the practice of peer reviewing, rewriting, and resubmitting of assignments in every course. On the other hand, the other two institutions scoring lower on the IGCT scale did not have a writing component in their curricula. The same was found by Varelas, Wolfe, and Lalongo (2015),

where the use of repetitive, short, low-stakes writing assignments worked as a scaffold to improve students' thinking ability; Leggette, McKim, Homeyer, and Rutherford (2015), that having regular writing tasks throughout the four years of undergraduate life is a key factor in developing critical thinking among students; and Caropreso, Haggerty, and Ladenheim (2016), where both the teachers and students felt that not only is writing a good medium to foster critical thinking but that "written feedback to students", "oral feedback", "the act of writing" and "revising papers" (p.266) are the four most effective instructional strategies for doing so. However, it should be stressed that while writing is an important means of fostering critical thinking ability among students, their language proficiency may prevent them from doing so, as found in Alagozlu's (2007) on Turkish EFL students, where they wanted to express their opinions in academic essays, but were not able to do so when they were given an argumentative essay topic to write on.

Given the substantial body of literature on how the writing classroom can be used as a means to develop critical thinking among students, our search for a strategy to develop this skill led us to the use of focused freewriting, which we will discuss in the next section.

Focused Freewriting and Critical Thinking

Focused freewriting originated from the concept of "freewriting" where students are asked to write non-stop, about "anything" that comes to their minds for five to ten minutes. This strategy arose from the observation that often, students have "plenty" to say before and after the writing class. But whenever they begin to write, they become "paralysed" and cannot write on paper (Southwell, 1977, p.676). Freewriting was thus proposed as a means to push the students to write and come out of this paralysis. Peter Elbow (1998), the popular advocate of this teaching approach, says that freewriting is like "writing something and putting it in a bottle and throwing it in the sea" (p.3) as the students are not required to submit their writing to their teachers for feedback. Elbow (1983) contends that this teaching strategy helps students to relax and get rid of the anxiety of getting a good grade for the task. He also asserts that because students are told not to edit their work as it may hamper their flow of writing, it becomes easier for them to hop over the speed breaker that is often referred to as writers' block.

However, despite its usefulness, many researchers also believe that freewriting has its demerits. Firstly, they argue that it cannot be considered as a part of academic writing as a student may choose to write a personal, instead of an academic essay when doing freewriting. Secondly, as the teacher does not check the students' work for grammatical accuracy and logical arguments, Bartholomae (1995) doubts that they will be able to learn how to write well. Hilgers and Marsella (1991) also believe that freewriting does not hold much "promise" other than being a type of personal writing (p.93). This type of writing, they argue, gives students a "powerless" voice because they use colloquial language instead of the appropriate academic register. It also does not let them go beyond the realm of personal thinking to explore the ways of thinking academically (Bizzell, 1982). Indeed, Fawcett (2018) remarks that freewriting is a powerful way of expressing thoughts into writing that sometimes may produce "only nonsense" (p.10).

Such criticisms of freewriting paved the way for focused freewriting as a more acceptable form of freewriting (Fawcett, 2018), where a student chooses a specific topic and writes non-stop about "only" that topic for five to ten minutes, and later looks at the writing to exclude the irrelevant ideas that would not support the main argument. Similarly, Wallack (2009) states that any writing that has a particular point of focus and that helps the writer to "discover" (p.29) more about a topic can be considered as focused freewriting.

The literature provides ample evidence for the benefits of focused freewriting. Vilardi and Chang (2009), for instance, believe that the writing prompts or questions posed during focused freewriting allow students to think silently and critically about the issues concerned. This silence, according to the researchers, is essential in giving shape to their discovered ideas and perspectives. Similarly, Rosenwasser and Stephen (2012) propose a passage-based focused freewriting (PBFF) strategy that asks students to read a passage and write freely on its key points. It helps readers to comprehend the meaning of the passage well and develop their critical

thinking. Shaarawy (2014), in a study on focused freewriting involving Egyptian undergraduate students, also found that the students who were asked to write weekly journals on the topics they had studied were able to think more critically than the group without the journal writing task. Likewise, Munday, Cartwright, and Windham (1990), in a study on the effects of using focused freewriting activities in a class of pre-service teachers, found that the 22 teachers who went through eight sessions of focused freewriting believed that the activities contributed toward enhancing their critical thinking.

As emphasised by Combs (2016), focused freewriting has an “extraordinary impact” (p. 70) on independent writers. It teaches them how to think critically on a topic and write early sentences that they can rewrite in the final drafts. On this note, Hammond (1991) states that focused freewriting fosters critical thinking by giving students the opportunity to identify “all the available arguments”, looking at “issues or images in all of their complexity”, and thinking “inductively from first thoughts to new insights” (p.89). In her study, focused freewriting was in the form of writing memos at different stages of thinking on an issue. The process of focused freewriting, revising, and finally rewriting, helped them to understand the issues well and write critically about them. Indeed, this is precisely how, as Castle (2017) argues, focused freewriting enables students to make connections between ideas; and that is, through logical reasoning.

The benefits of using focused freewriting motivated us to write this paper, which aims at exploring how the focused freewriting sessions and discussions during the prewriting stage can help the students to stimulate ideas and think critically.

Research Design and Methodology

To address the questions we had in mind, we chose to conduct a case study because it is the most appropriate approach for this study as it addresses the “how” and “why” dimensions of the issue (Yin, 2002, p.14). It helped us to determine “how” students can come up with various ideas through the practice of freewriting and later shape them into well-argued essays. Moreover, the case study approach is “wholistic”, “empirical”, “interpretive”, and “emphatic” (Stake, 1995). Our study adopted a “wholistic” perspective of research to find the relationship between focused freewriting sessions, discussions, and students’ critical thinking output. The study was “empirical” as we observed the participants in the classroom; and “interpretive” because we interpreted their free writing. Also, the study had fulfilled the requirement of being “emphatic” in the sense that we had the emic view of the classroom experience to some extent—where the researchers were a part of the setting and insiders in some way.

To support our study and to allow for triangulation, we used multiple sources of data such as classroom observations, field notes, and students’ focused freewriting work—all of which are aimed at contributing toward the credibility or trustworthiness of the findings (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999, Gillham, 2000). The focused free-written pieces by students were analysed with Facione’s (2015) core critical thinking skills (see Appendix A).

The Participants

The participants of the study were nine students of a pre-university writing class at a tertiary institution in Malaysia, whom we chose using the purposive sampling technique. The main criterion for selecting the participants was that they had completed the full series of free writing tasks. The second criterion was that they had written sufficient amount information in the essays that we could analyse for tracing their generated ideas.

Lesson Procedure

The students had been taught the basic structure of academic writing by their teacher in the initial weeks of the semester. We joined the course around the sixth week of the semester to take four sessions on focused freewriting.

In the first session, we showed them a movie clip from Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. Then we asked them

to write non-stop for 10 minutes on anything that came into their minds regarding the movie. As the designated time came to an end, we asked the students to share the ideas they had written in a whole-group discussion. Each student read his or her writing aloud and summarised the key ideas. As facilitators of the session, we encouraged all the other students to ask us questions. Moreover, we listed all their ideas on the board, so that everyone could keep track of the themes that emerged from this activity. We considered the focused freewriting task and discussion as part of the prewriting activities because right after completing them, the students were asked to choose a single recurring theme from the focused free-written pieces as a topic for a full-fledged argumentative essay.

Choosing Writing Prompts

We decided on which materials to use as writing prompts based on Brookhart's (2010) principles of assessing higher order thinking skills. These principles ask teachers to: a) know exactly what they want to assess, b) design activities in such a way that requires students to use their knowledge and skill, c) determine which evidence will be considered for measuring the degree of students' knowledge and skill, d) present students with something that stimulates thinking; e.g. a text, scenarios, visuals, resource materials, or problems e) use a new material that has not been discussed before and f) differentiate between the difficulty levels, such as easy or difficult and lower order or higher order.

The materials that we chose were thought-provoking visual images (downloaded from online ESL forums) and a short film (selected from the *British Academy of Films and Television Awards* archive). We presented the more "easy to interpret" images in the beginning weeks and moved towards more difficult ones to maintain motivation and active learning.

Results

In the following sub-sections, we will first describe the visual prompts in detail. This will be followed by selected, unedited examples of critical thinking skills from the nine students' focused free-written pieces.

I Cannot Walk, but I can Dream

In the first session on focused freewriting, we showed two images, out of which students chose only one to write about. The first picture showed a handicapped woman without arms, sitting in a wheelchair, in a dark room, facing the bright light coming from an open window. The wheelchair has colourful balloons tied to its handle as if they are trying to float the wheelchair up. The second picture showed two happy children hugging each other by the sea. One is a Caucasian while the other, an African.

The students looked at the first picture and wrote about it for ten minutes. Then we opened the floor for discussion. The students read their writing aloud and discussed the salient ideas that emerged. Some of the students analysed the picture by saying that the different colours of the balloons signified happiness, while some others commented that they found the woman to be sad because she was sitting in a dark room (Hadi). Khalid used binary oppositions, such as darkness or light, to write his free-written essay. The following is an excerpt, which we have left unedited.

Every human's heart is looking for happiness, and a point of hope makes us positive and happy. Without the darkness, we cannot appreciate the importance of light in isolation.

When we asked him to explain what he meant, he opined that for us to know how it feels to be happy, we must go through the path of sorrow once in a while.

Another student, Jamil, stated in the discussion that the balloons were facing upward which showed that, even though she was handicapped, she wanted to fly high and reach her goal in life, like any other normal human being. In his free-written text he wrote:

Disability girl have emotions, dark room, nothing inside. She is weak but positive, she is facing the bright window.

Even though Jamil's free-written essay consisted of incomplete sentences, we could trace the central idea that she wanted to convey.

These examples show how the students are able to both interpret and analyse the pictures with well-reasoned, logical arguments. This is also exemplified by Sahal's comment, which indicates his depth of thinking: "We should look for hope in darkness." His utterance reflects another facet of critical thinking skills, which is to evaluate a context using one's own opinions.

You are Black, I am White...Are You White or Am I Black?

The class was a mixed group of students from India, Palestine, Bangladesh, China, Somalia and Malaysia. We noticed that almost all the students wrote about racial discrimination when they looked at the second image. Perhaps, their being in a multicultural country such as Malaysia enhanced their connectedness to the theme of racial differences.

In the discussion session, the students shared the ideas they had written. They analysed the pictures by saying that the two children are symbols of innocence. Hadi and Sahal said that the children made friends without thinking of each other's colour or race. Yang was also of the opinion that the picture inspired her and their friends to look forward to building a better world without discrimination among people. These views are also reflected in Amirah's free-written text:

As a human being, how hateful you became, there will be pieces of your heart that you have the kindness. Skin colour, religion does not matter. A hug can make a person who is struggling."

The excerpt shows how Amirah interpreted the image of the two little children as reflecting the need for the world to have less racial discrimination.

Some of the students, like Azyanie, used evaluative judgments in their writing; that we should not be racists and that we need to be friends with everyone. Once again, lack of proper words was a difficulty that the students faced while writing about this picture. The word "racism" did not appear in their written work. Instead, they were trying to define it through binary oppositions such as rich or poor, or black and white. While listening to their comments, we helped them to come up with the appropriate term.

We extended this discussion by asking the students to think about the current happenings in the world that they could relate to the picture. They took some time, and came up with the example of the USA president Donald Trump as being a racist as he has set particularly strict immigration policies for Muslims and other foreigners in the country. The tragic situation of Muslims in Syria and Myanmar also came up as reflecting not only racial and religious discrimination, but also hatred toward people who are not from one's religion or culture. We were pleased to see how the students were applying their existing knowledge to analyse the picture and think critically about what it signified.

A Rose vs a Rifle

The following week, students seemed much more relaxed as they were already familiar with what they ought to do; and we, as guest teachers, had become somewhat known to them as well. In fact, we began the second session with an icebreaking game and changed the seating arrangement from the typical classroom rows to a horseshoe so that everyone could see and hear each other. As stated by Forsyth (2006) and Falout (2013), the semi-circular seating arrangement is best suited for discussions as the students are visible to one another, and are able to listen to and interact with one another.

This session revolved around a PowerPoint slide of a series of images. The first image showed an American

soldier on duty sitting in the middle of the battleground with a small seven-year-old girl. The face of the soldier reflects his humility and bewilderment. The second image showed a little boy putting a red rose into a rifle, while the final image is a picture of the earth circled by several human palms. Each palm symbolises the different ethnicities that make up the human race. The students analysed the images and wrote that even a soldier has the humility to care for an injured person—as was the case in Amirah’s and Jamil’s writing, while Yang expressed the following in her free-written piece:

War makes people homeless and a father hug his daughter maybe his daughter was die, but he can't let her go. War take human damage. Nowadays the war always happen so many people die of war, we all need people, we should use the flower instead of gun.

Even though Yang mistook the American soldier for the father of the small girl, her main ideas, as seen from her writing, are about the adverse effects of war that we see around us. The last line of the excerpt shows her evaluative comment on the issue.

The picture of rose in the rifle and the earth held all the hands of people of various races reminded the students of how much this world craves for “peace”, a sentiment shared by Baraquo, and how all of us can stop war if we become united, as expressed by Hadi, Sahal, and Azyanie.

A unique point related to war was pointed out by Baraquo in her brief essay. She wrote: *TV and newspaper inform us about protests and wars which is not always good for us.*

When we asked her to elaborate on this idea during the discussion, she said that the media contributes toward hostility between countries by showing the atrocities of the war around the world. Her idea on the media's role in projecting war news is quite unique as she was thinking beyond the image shown in the classroom and expressed her own opinion.

The Grass is Always Greener on the Other Side

In the final focused freewriting session, we took the students to the university library to show a short film on a big screen. The change of venue was readily welcomed by the students as they felt happy to get out of their usual classroom.

As the students settled in small groups, we played an eight-minute short film titled “Room 8”, created by James W. Griffiths and produced by the Independent Films Gravity Production. This movie, a winner of the British Academy of Films and Television Awards (BAFTA) 2014, was one of the short films of the Bombay Sapphire Imagination series 2012. The film is set in a Russian prison where a prisoner, with his hands tied behind him, is seen being pushed by two soldiers to walk forward. After a while, the prisoner enters a prison cell where a man is sitting at a table and reading a book by the only window in the room. The room has a box placed on the only bed on one side of the room. The prisoner looks at the box and touches it. The other man forbids him to do that. However, out of curiosity, he opens it and realises that the box is the tiny prison cell that both of them are in. He then finds out that whenever he opens its lid and puts his pointer finger in, the ceiling of his prison cell opens up and a hand appears, just like his. He excitedly keeps the box on the floor and asks the other man to open the lid for him. He puts a stool at the corner of the prison cell, and when the other man opens the lid of the box, the ceiling of the room is opened in the same way. The prisoner happily jumps over the wall to have his freedom. Unfortunately, however, a gigantic hand comes from behind and puts him into the small matchbox. The camera pans to the same prison cell viewers saw a while ago, and shows “the other man” putting the matchbox into a drawer of the reading table, which is full of matchboxes trembling; as if the prisoners trapped in them are trying to get out.

Our students were surprised, and were silent for a few moments to see the strange ending of the film. After the 10-minute focused freewriting practice, we asked them to share their writing with the whole class. The students,

such as Azyanie, Baraquo, and Amirah pointed out the fact that every human being wants to have freedom, which, unfortunately, is sometimes being infringed upon by the powerful agencies of the political powers or government. The "other man" sitting at the desk represents such a power; one that runs people's lives by imposing unwelcomed laws. If the public does not follow the law, said Sahal and Hadi, they are taken into prison like the prisoner. In his brief essay, Khalid wrote:

We are in Renaissance time. Many human rights organisation are there to help in getting freedom.

The word, "Renaissance", was used by him to show that people know how to revolt for their freedom. On the other hand, the stubborn prisoner's curiosity to want to know the unknown, as said by Baraquo and Amirah, and the temptation to escape to freedom, as added by Azyanie, was rewarded with something unforeseen. He thought that the grass would be greener on "the other side", that is, outside the prison cell he was in; but unfortunately, he came to be imprisoned in a tiny matchbox instead. Yang and Pramano mulled over the message of the film and said that the movie reminds us of the fact that we should be careful before taking any action, and to be content with what we have in our lives.

Jamil, however, responded differently to the film, as shown in his freewriting essay:

Punishment is the way to correct a person to be obedient and bring safety in the region. In Japan, punishment is strict, and crime is low. So punishment should be made stricter.

His analysis of the video was slightly different from that of the others because he thought of the prisoners as criminals who should have been put under stricter surveillance.

We were pleased to see that the students did not require much support from us and could carry on with inferring, interpreting, and analysing the video on their own. The practice of doing focused freewriting had raised their confidence in thinking beyond the literal meaning of the prompts or topics.

The Epiphany

We analysed students' focused free-written texts to discern their ability to generate ideas and think critically. However, there were some other incidental revelations that came out of the analysis. For instance, we noticed that the length of their writing gradually increased. We remember the first session, where their writing was very brief. However, by the third session, they were able to write longer essays. This finding corresponds with Herder and Clement's (2012) study, where the students' fluency in writing increased through the practice of focused freewriting. Given this improvement, we believe that with practice, our students will be able to think more effectively about a topic and generate various ideas for their essays. We observed how they had analysed and evaluated various aspects related to the prompt as well as the main issue and tried to tie the ideas together with logical reasoning and evidence (Roche, 2015), which is considered as one of the prominent features of critical thinking.

Finally, another observation we made that is worthy of mention is that when we asked the students to share their ideas from their freewriting pieces, some of the students opted not to respond to our questions. As some students may have shy personalities, we knew that if a student did not speak up, that did not mean that he or she is not thinking (Coplan and Evans, 2009; Rosheim, 2018). Indeed, they may have come from cultural and educational environments in schools that did not encourage them to question the teacher as a means of showing respect (Oh-Hwang, 1993; Kim, 2012; Murphy, 1987, Chan, 1999; Yang, 2006; Zhao, 2007; Sit, 2013, Kelly, 1978). The technique of focused freewriting is a good way of providing such students with an opportunity to write their own critical opinions on paper.

Discussion

In the initial two sessions, we noticed that it took a bit of time for all the students to be accustomed to the new

way of writing. But by the third and fourth week, they broke out of their reticence and wrote more confidently. At this point, it is pertinent to mention Young's (2003) view that one cannot judge a person's critical thinking ability from a single task of a written essay as the skill comes with continuous practice over a reasonably long period of time. The skill is enhanced when many opportunities are provided to learners for writing (Allen, 2006), and for them to reflect on the topic or writing Lo (2010). Hence, although our students were at first not accustomed to the activity of freewriting, we were quite confident that as we gradually exposed them to various prompts for writing, they would be able to think more deeply about a topic.

In this class, we tried to introduce the freewriting task paired with thought-provoking questions in the discussion sessions so that the students could both write and think about the prompt independently. We found that their free-written essays contained various ideas that they could organise and rationalise during the discussion sessions. While the free writing sessions helped them to generate ideas, the discussion sessions facilitated their refining of those ideas into logical arguments. It is important to mention that quite a few studies have found that learners can be helped to think critically when teachers ask the appropriate questions (DeWaelche, 2015; Vilardi and Chang, 2010).

Indeed, the focused freewriting sessions we conducted helped our students to think critically about the visual prompts. This is reflected in their scripts, where we found a great deal of evidence of Facione's (2015) analytical, interpretive, evaluative, and explanatory critical thinking skills, which is congruent with the findings of previous research on focused freewriting (Munday, Cartwright, and Windham, 1990; Hammond, 1991; Rosenwasser & Stephen, 2012; Shaarawy, 2014; Combs, 2016; Castle, 2017). In the final freewriting session, all the students could interpret a prompt (video) confidently and provide the appropriate evidence for their views. As Li (2007) attests, focused freewriting builds students' confidence in understanding a concept well.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have a number of pedagogical implications for the writing teacher. Since using focused freewriting during the prewriting stage provides students with the scope to generate ideas for their academic essays and helps them think critically about a topic when refining their freewritten drafts, teachers can use this strategy to remove writers' block, which is very common among writers in the ESOL/ESL/EFL contexts. Writers in such these contexts generally struggle with not only the issue or topic given but also the language needed to express their thoughts. Teachers can also use focused freewriting tasks to solve their problem of students' apprehension of having to think critically through writing, which often hinders them from completing their writing tasks. Thus, focused freewriting can motivate students to write in composition courses and to get used to the practice of writing. A further implication is that teachers should use scaffolding by asking pertinent questions and using the appropriate prompts to help students move progressively in their ability to think and use the more complex thinking skills. The teacher's role in guiding the students and providing feedback is essential and cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

The findings provide convincing evidence that the strategy of focused freewriting is effective in stimulating ideas for writing among students and in helping them to think critically. This is apparent even among students who are not very proficient in the language. The findings also show that focused freewriting helps to build a student's confidence in writing. Hence, teachers should provide feedback on the students' free-written essays to motivate them further and to enhance their capacity for generating ideas.

Although the concept of focused freewriting is relatively new in Asian ESOL classrooms, it is expected that with the right approach when using focused freewriting, students' ability to think critically will continue to improve. This technique is indeed very useful for teachers of English academic writing in fostering critical thinking among students in ESOL tertiary contexts. In fact, the technique of focusing on a single topic and writing on it can be implemented not only in the writing classroom but also in other subjects to deepen students' understanding of a

topic. It inculcates the practice of thinking critically through asking the right questions, a universally essential skill for both teachers and students.

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Appendix

Appendix A
Facione's Core Critical Thinking Skills

Skill	Experts Consensus Description	Subskill
Interpretation	"To comprehend and express the meaning or significance of a wide variety of experiences, situations, data, events, judgments, conventions, beliefs, rules, procedures, or criteria."	Categorise Decode significance Clarify Meaning
Analysis	"To identify the intended and actual inferential relationships among statement, questions, concepts, descriptions or other forms of representation intended to express belief, judgment, experiences, reasons, information, or opinions."	Examine ideas Identify arguments Identify reasons and claims
Inference	"To identify and secure elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions; to form conjectures and hypotheses; to consider relevant information and to reduce the consequences flowing from data, statements, principles, evidence, judgments, beliefs, opinions, concepts, descriptions, questions, or other forms of representation".	Query evidence Conjecture alternatives Draw logically valid or justified conclusions
Evaluation	"To assess the credibility of statements or other representations that are accounts or descriptions of a person's perceptions, experience, situation, judgment, belief, or opinion; and to assess the logical strength of the actual or intended inferential relationships among statement, descriptions, questions, or other forms of representation."	Assess the credibility of claims Assess the quality of arguments that were made using inductive or deductive reasoning
Explanation	"To state and to justify that reasoning in terms of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, and contextual considerations upon which one's results were based; and to present one's reasoning in the form of cogent arguments."	State results Justify procedures Present arguments
Self-Regulation	"Self-consciously to monitor one's cognitive activities, the elements used in those activities, and the results educed, particularly by applying skills in analysis, questioning, confirming, validating, or correcting either one's reasoning or one's results."	Self-monitor Self-correct

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