



Tips for Teachers

Semantic Mapping as Scaffolding for Building an Essay

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As communicative language teachers, we are constantly reminded that there is a continuum of tasks, from manipulative and structured, to communicative and free, along which we are to lead our students. As we all know, teachers often spend too much time either on the structured end of the continuum (drills, rules, etc.) or too much time on the opposite end (unstructured tasks, group work, freewriting, etc.) The key, it seems, to any successful language class, particularly at the beginning and intermediate stages, is the effective development of task types or activities that lead students progressively and confidently along the continuum. This requires the development of a vast repertoire of activities that bridge the middle ground effectively.

One such activity is semantic mapping. This activity has proven to be an efficient tool to develop reading strategies and promote written expression. In this paper, I will attempt to describe how I used a semantic mapping in developing a structured writing activity for small groups.

When I tried it, for the first time, in March 1999 with my 3rd year learners, I was delighted to realize the implementation of such a tool could result in heightening learners' motivation in writing and rid them of their writing phobia. Before embarking on explaining how I proceeded, I would like to caution my colleagues that this technique cannot work out well if learners are not familiar with the mapping/brainstorming process.

Writing assignment:

What is air pollution caused by? What are its effects? What solutions do you suggest?

Procedure:

The teacher draws a circle and writes the topic inside the circle.

The teacher, then asks questions about the topic. The benefit of this brainstorming is to make learners process their existing knowledge, provoking in this way a chain reaction, since one learner's idea will enable other learners to recall the information, record it, correct it if wrong, and improve it if incomplete.

Learners' answers are written on corresponding nodes. Each principal node is linked to secondary nodes by a straight line.

- What is air pollution?
- What is it caused by?
- What makes factories dangerous?
- What will happen when we breathe polluted air?
- What will bronchitis result in? . . .

Once learners have finished generating ideas, they decide in groups on the organization of their essay. The map will help them in its organization. (See Appendix for example).

A very important point here is that learners should feel free to take, add, or eliminate what is suitable to them. In other words, they should not be forced to use all the information radiating into the nodes.

A Sample (revised and corrected):

Air pollution means polluted air or dirty air. It is a serious problem. It is caused by dust or pollen. These are natural causes. There are other causes. These are man-made. Factories that pour smoke into the air or burn fossil fuels are the main cause of air pollution.

Air pollution can have serious consequences on people's health. It can damage the respiratory system causing bronchitis and trouble in breathing.

Local authorities should do something to solve this problem. They can pass laws to reduce or cut off CO₂ emissions. Mass media can be used to raise people's awareness on the problem.

About the Author

Mr. Azzeddine Bencherab is coordinator teacher of English in a Senior school in Algeria. He has been teaching English for more than 13 years. His field of interest is developing reading, writing, and syllabus design in mixed abilities classes.

Appendix

