

Using a Class Newspaper to Improve Writing Skills in a Multicultural Classroom

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Abstract

Can a class newspaper be used to motivate student writers? This study looks at a group of language minority students reluctant to write in their native language. Using strategies such as modeling, brainstorming, graphic organizers, checklists and technology, the project explores whether these approaches improve writing performance. In addition, the researcher finds that students are more motivated with a final product as their goal. Research compares student writing samples and attitudes before and after the newspaper project.

Introduction

I teach Spanish for Fluent Speakers (SFS) to eighth graders at Ellen Glasgow Middle School in Fairfax County, Virginia. Glasgow's student population has over 1200 students who speak 37 different languages and represent 71 countries. Hispanics make up over 40% of our student population. In order to be placed in the Spanish for Fluent Speakers class, students must pass a screening test in their native language. The test consists of a short personal questionnaire and a reading comprehension section. Students who perform well on the test are placed in the SFS class, rather than the Spanish 1 class.

I have two classes of Spanish for Fluent Speakers. There are 20 students in each class. Many of these students were born in the United States. Others have only recently arrived. Therefore their levels of proficiency in reading and writing in their native language of Spanish vary greatly. In my teaching, I try to incorporate listening, speaking, reading and writing into my lessons. I have tried many of the methods studied in my education classes to teach each of these language components. The area that I find my students are weakest is writing in Spanish. I have noticed that they are very reluctant to write or write the bare minimum of what is required. They often complain or say, "I can't." They write half of what is expected and if they get stuck, they do not use Spanish/English dictionaries. They are not confident with their writing and tell me they can speak, but not write. I explain to them that this is the reason we have created a Spanish for Fluent Speakers class. It is to help these students improve their reading and writing skills.

I am looking for ways to excite these student writers. I want to know which writing strategies will motivate these students. I want to draw the language out of them, to make it easier for them to use what they already know to produce the language on paper. I am not looking for perfect grammar, but I want my students to make an attempt to write more in their native language. What has worked in other classrooms?

After taking a broad look at teaching and learning in my classroom, I decided that some changes needed to be made in the instruction so that my students would be more motivated to write. The purpose of this study was to identify what activities I could try in class to help prevent writer's block. Using data from this study, I hope to incorporate my findings into future lesson plans to better motivate Spanish speakers to write in their native language.

Literature Review

Trying to motivate student writers has been a challenge for many teachers in classrooms of all ages. Many students don't take pride in their work or are satisfied with doing just enough to get by. According to Shirley Hildebrand Benson (2000), teachers are spending too much time and energy on lessons, but students are still doing mediocre work. She believes that there is a need for change in education because of this lack of motivation. After observing in other classrooms, Benson found that students appeared to be highly motivated when teachers allowed them to self-manage their own work. When students were able to set goals for themselves, they could work at their own pace as long as the work got done and the quality was acceptable. Benson felt students responded positively to added responsibility and they like having choices. Ultimately it increased their self-esteem.

Lynda A. Holmes also wrote an article about unmotivated students titled, *What do students mean when they say, "I hate writing"?* (Holmes, 2001). The title caught my eye because I hear that same expression from many of my students when we work on writing assignments. In her article, she states that students can acquire the motivation and engagement necessary to learn to write well. Holmes feels educators should take advantage of opportunities to help students overcome their problems with writing through the use of strategies and activities that promote motivation and engagement with writing. For example, students struggling with "writer's block" can write notes in an outline format, ask other students what they have found helpful in overcoming writer's block, or work on a different task or activity for a while and get back to the writing assignment. She states that students are usually more motivated and engaged with writing assignments when they choose their writing genres. This will play an important role in my research because control is an important issue, particularly in middle school.

Sheila Alber also tries to motivate student writers by using a classroom newspaper (Alber, 1999). Her approach to motivating reluctant writers is to allow them to work with their peers and provide them with opportunities to be published. She feels that students are reluctant to practice writing because it is difficult and complex. She found success with a classroom newspaper because it allowed students to direct their writing to a specific audience and increased their motivation. Alber's article focused on mainstreaming because students at various levels can benefit from the variety of activities involved in producing a classroom newspaper. At Glasgow Middle School, mainstreaming is particularly important with our student population. In one classroom a teacher may have students with learning disabilities, students in the gifted and talented program

and students learning English as a second language. Keeping all students motivated to write is a challenge.

Derek Furr is an advocate of the use of writing workshops in class to motivate needy students to compose meaningful essays (Furr, 2003). Like me, he has a group of students who do not know what to write because they are not sure how to start. Furr teaches his students the procedures needed to complete the writing process. He uses modeling and brainstorming strategies as well as activities in order to plan, draft, revise and edit a piece of writing. He found that by teaching the nuts and bolts of writing in class workshops, students learn how to begin, how to develop a piece of writing and are surprised by how much they can do.

Motivating reluctant writers is the common theme to all of the studied research. I think that creating a student newspaper in Spanish would reflect a respect for the large number of Hispanic children at Glasgow and therefore motivate them to write about their culture. The research clearly shows that low motivation can be improved by using a variety of strategies, such as a class newspaper, writing workshop, and allowing students to be active in the writing process. The research indicates that these strategies make a positive impact on students' self-confidence, which is what I hope to accomplish by my study.

Methods

This is my first year teaching Spanish for Fluent Speakers. I was not given a set curriculum, but was told to help these students improve their reading and writing skills in their native language of Spanish. As mentioned earlier, the students' level of proficiency in reading and writing in their native language vary greatly, but all the students need to improve their writing skills.

I had made the assumption that since my Spanish-speaking students learned the writing process in English class, naturally they would be able to transfer those skills to writing in Spanish. My assumption was incorrect. My students were afraid of the blank page. They dreaded writing. And not only that, I found that they needed more practice with the writing process.

Because my objective was to find out what strategies would motivate students to write in their native language, I began this project by surveying my students. First I asked them what their goals and expectations were in my Spanish for Fluent Speakers class. Some responses received were:

- To learn how to spell
- To learn to write better
- To know when to use accents
- I don't want to get mixed up with the present, past and future
- To feel comfortable reading and writing like the way I speak Spanish
- I want to be able to speak and write in just Spanish because sometimes I say things in English too
- My goal is to write better in Spanish because at home I only speak Spanish but I write better in English
- I want to be able to write better in English and Spanish to get a good job and make a lot of money and so my family is proud of me

Although students had many excellent goals for the year in Spanish, including the desire to learn to improve writing skills, I still found that they did not like to write. In order to find out exactly what it was that students did not like about writing, I surveyed the class. When asked why they do not like to write, the comments I got from the students varied:

- I don't know how to begin
- I don't know how to begin a paragraph
- I don't know how to express myself
- I don't like accents
- I don't know how to give details
- I don't write well in Spanish
- My hand hurts
- It's boring
- I have to think a lot and sometimes I don't know the word

In the survey, I also asked students to tell me what they would prefer writing about if they were required to write in class. They told me that they like to write journals and do projects. I was also told that they like to write e-mails, cards, and letters because they think it is more casual and they don't have to write the way teachers expect you to write in class (you don't have to think so much). A few students also told me that they like to write about things that they are interested in, such as sports and music. With this in mind, I realized that if I wanted to get my students excited about writing, I needed to have them choose topics that interest them.

I got the idea of using a class newspaper to motivate students from an article I read by Sheila Alber (1999). It worked for reluctant writers in her classroom, so I decided that I would give it a try with my Spanish-speaking students. But first I had to solve the blank page problem. I decided to start the writing process from scratch and try some different strategies in class to reinforce good writing skills. We began by analyzing good writing, then experimented with different brainstorming activities, learned how to write perfect paragraphs and finally, we tried different types of writing assignments in class, including writing an article for a class newspaper.

First, we analyzed good writing. We do not have a textbook in this Spanish for Fluent Speakers class, but I do get supplemental reading magazines in Spanish from Scholastic News. I also picked up some local newspapers in Spanish. I modeled some good examples of writing in each. We took a closer look at one of the articles about Colombia. Together students helped me cluster the ideas in the article onto a word web graphic organizer on the overhead (see Appendix C). I wanted this brainstorming activity to allow students to examine what the writer may have mapped out before writing the article. We started with the main idea or topic in the middle circle and students helped me write the supporting ideas and details from the article in the surrounding areas.

Next, we brainstormed information for a topic of the students' choice. They picked El Salvador, where the majority of my students are from. After

having modeled the web about Colombia, students understood what was expected and were eager to offer supporting ideas and details for the web about El Salvador.

The next part of the assignment was to write a paragraph using our new ideas and details about El Salvador. Even after gathering information and organizing it in a web, some students still did not know how to begin writing a paragraph. So I took time out of class to introduce a mini-lesson on writing perfect paragraphs. I gave students a labeled paragraph with the perfect ingredients: a topic sentence, 2-3 supporting sentences with 2-3 details and one concluding sentence. We then practiced unscrambling sentences to put them in the correct order for a perfect paragraph. And finally, we practiced writing a perfect paragraph of our own together as a class. After writing one or two sentences of our shared paragraph, students begin to contribute orally and finish the rest themselves.

As soon as students understood how to use this word web graphic organizer to help them begin their writing, I began to share other types of webs for them to use when brainstorming (see Appendix A and D). I felt confident that they could use these strategies effectively to get their ideas on paper, thus eliminating the blank page. In addition, most students understood the mechanics of a well-written paragraph. Now it was time to expand this idea and ask them to write five paragraph essays.

Rather than assign all students the same topic, I wanted to give them the opportunity to select their own ideas based on their interests. My class newspaper idea seemed to work perfectly to fit both the feedback I received from the class surveys and I thought it would motivate students to write since they could pick their own topics. Many students decided to write about their own country of origin, much like the article we had seen modeled, but others wrote about world soccer leagues, what they like about school, sports, after school activities, fashion and music, heroes and pets.

In addition to choosing their own topic, I thought the idea of getting published would also get students excited to write. The first step in the process was to get their ideas out in the open through brainstorming and then to cluster the words into meaningful associations. With each grouped association, they were encouraged to write a perfect paragraph. Using our model paragraph, they begin to write their own newspaper articles. Most of the class seemed to be catching on and they worked very well independently. For those who continued to struggle with generating text, there was much support available, the class web and model paragraphs.

In addition, I circulated around the room, conducting one on one conferences, a critical component for keeping students on task. It was also a good way to suggest revisions and give them feedback quickly. Because our objective was to create a classroom newspaper, students seemed to be more motivated knowing that their writing would be published. They asked to get detailed information off the Internet, revise and complete their articles on the computer. I observed the students engaged in this activity – working

independently to complete required checklists. With a deadline, I saw more writing than I had seen all year.

Findings

The data collected was primarily qualitative. My observations, answers to the surveys given to students, and a comparison of written work at the beginning and end of the year were used as the basis for my findings.

After students finished their newspaper articles, I compared their final product to work samples from the beginning of the year, which I have saved in student portfolios. The quality of work was much improved. Students are now writing introductions with catchy attention grabbers, giving descriptive details and concluding with a clear summary of the main idea.

In addition to comparing work samples, I also wanted to find out if student attitudes had changed towards writing. I gave them an end survey questionnaire to find out their opinions on writing articles for a class newspaper. Students were asked if they enjoyed writing an article for the class newspaper, why or why not? The responses were varied:

- Yes, because I got to do research on the Internet
- Yes, because it is easier to write when I get to pick my own topic
- Yes, because we didn't have to write about anything boring
- Yes, because it was fun to use the computers in class
- No, because I don't like to write
- No, because it was hard for me to think of a topic

When asked what they would do differently next time, students replied:

- I want to write more about sports
- I want to print out a copy of the newspaper to show my friends and family
- I want it to be more like a real newspaper
- I want to have more computers available in class

I have learned that although many of my students do not like to write, they do much better when they have structured assignments with clear expectations. By assigning a newspaper article to each student in class, I found that they were more motivated to complete the assignment. In addition, the quality of their writing was much improved from work samples collected at the beginning of the year. This could be due to a variety of reasons.

First, students may have improved because they have seen many examples of good writing through the modeling activities done in class. Additional lessons were given during the study in order to review paragraph writing. This enabled students to practice the essential components of good writing. Earlier in the year, I saw many poorly written paragraphs; now students have shown me that they can write a perfect paragraph, with a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a clear conclusion.

Students also practiced brainstorming with graphic organizers. The use of this strategy in class gave students many excellent ideas on how to eliminate the blank page fear and instead, get their ideas down on paper. Students tried using

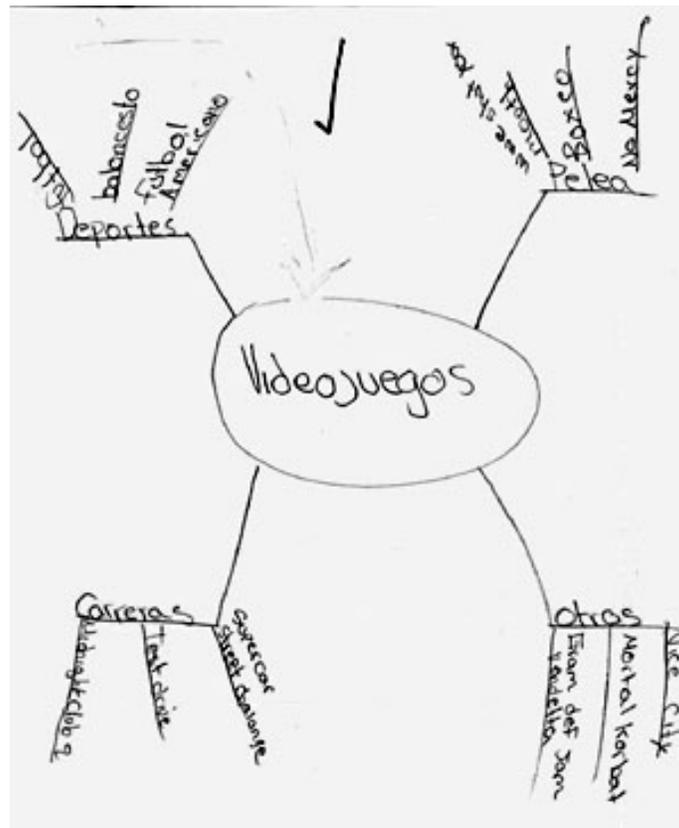
a number of graphic organizers in class and have demonstrated the ability to plan their writing. Some stick to preferred graphic organizers, others are willing to try new ideas.

Another strategy students practiced during the project, was to use a checklist. Students stayed on task when they knew the teacher's expectations. They had a checklist for the components of a good paragraph (see Appendix B) as well as a checklist for what was expected to be included in their newspaper article. This improved the content of their writing because they were sure not to leave anything out.

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Appendix A



Appendix B

Perfect Paragraph Checklist:

1 topic sentence	✓
2-3 supporting sentences	✓
2-3 detail sentences	✓
1 concluding sentence	✓

The use of technology certainly motivated students to finish the draft and final copies of their article in order to type it on the computer. Technology was an important piece in motivating these students to write. Many were creative with the presentation of their writing (see Appendix E-G). In addition, having a final product in mind got students excited and more motivated to write. The idea of publishing the newspaper gave them a goal. Many students volunteered to format the class document because they enjoy using the computers in class.

It is evident from my observations that each of the above factors contributed to the improved quality of students' writing as well as their motivation to write for this project. In my experiences, I have found that students become frustrated with writing when they feel like they are left on their own without any guidance from the teacher. I want my students to become independent writers, by choosing their own topic, genre and brainstorming style. But I found that giving them independence before they were ready to write on their own was frustrating for them and led to writer's block. I have learned that by modeling and practicing good writing skills in class, students learn to build a foundation of planning, drafting and revising in order to publish. It's a good start to future writing in any language.

Implications for Further Study

Based on what I have learned from this study, I will continue to use the newspaper project in my Spanish for Fluent Speakers classes to motivate student writers. I would even encourage other teachers to use it in their curriculum, English or Spanish. However, there are a few questions I still have following my research study which make me think that I would try new things next time. For example, I wonder if I could stretch this newspaper project into a year long assignment? I also want to know why some of my students still say that they don't like to write. Have I given them enough choice and variety in their writing assignments? And how else can I improve the technology component for this newspaper project?

My students did perform better with the deadlines and structure that the newspaper provided. Therefore, I would consider doing this again in class. I would like to create a class newspaper again, but next time we could publish the final paper a few times throughout the year. Maybe we could have deadlines once per quarter, rather than just a one-time assignment.

Although students did perform very well on their writing assignments for the newspaper, some students' attitudes towards writing didn't increase as much as I had hoped. I am curious about how students would do if I let them have

more ownership of the newspaper. Maybe they could create their own deadlines, topics for articles, format and layout of the paper. Perhaps they could take increasing ownership over the course of a year. If we continued the newspaper project and added different deadlines with different topics, I may be able to reach more students and tap into their interests. I want them to be excited and proud about their writing. What kinds of authentic material could I have them write? Some ideas that come to mind are news, style, entertainment, advice, astrology, comics and advertisements. Maybe students could help brainstorm their own columns or themes.

Finally, technology seemed to be my biggest challenge with the class newspaper project. I had envisioned myself combining each of the students' articles into one big class newspaper, but in the end, we just printed each of the articles individually. I don't know very much about popular publishing programs except how to create columns in Microsoft Word. In the future, I would try to familiarize myself with a program that might work easily for our class project. I could try working with the school's technology resource teacher for more training and support. In addition, the media lab could be used during this unit so that all students would have the opportunity to use the computer to write, edit and format his or her article.

This study has taught me that using a class newspaper can improve writing skills in a multicultural classroom. I will continue to use the newspaper project in my Spanish for Fluent Speakers classes to motivate student writers. This project does leave room for improvement, and there are many things I would like to change. However, I saw a positive change in student performance and increased motivation with this project.