

Strategies for Improving Student Writing in an Ethnically Diverse High School English Class

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Submitted June 2000

Abstract

This research study outlines several strategies used to improve the writing of tenth and eleventh grade students, some of whom are former ESL students. I surveyed students, found common mistakes in their writing, and worked with students individually through writing conferences.

Background and Introduction

I was hired to teach English part time (two grade 10 classes and one creative writing class) at Annandale High School (AHS) and, when I was not teaching these classes, to tutor students who had failed the Virginia Literacy Examination. During my initial days as a new teacher last year, I kept a journal in which I recorded my impressions. One of my early entries described the school's physical plant. In retrospect, I feel I was probably too critical. The building is only a shell; the students it contains are the variable that makes the school an alive and lively place. But before I knew the students, and because I spent a lot of time alone in the halls when they were empty between tutoring assignments, I felt compelled to jot down some observations. I wrote:

[It] is an ugly, squat brick building with casement windows that needed replacing ten years ago. Inside, though, the building is surprisingly attractive. There is a green terrazzo floor polished to a fresh shine every day. The walls are made of a kind of brick tile, in a lighter shade of green. At intervals, real wood (oak?) doors interrupt the pattern of the tiles. The school's colors are red and white, so there are many rows of red lockers along the walls. Less understandably, there are also many rows of lockers in an ugly tangerine color.

In addition to writing about my frustration as a "floating" teacher traveling among several different classrooms, I also wrote about frustrations with various administrative duties, such as writing and collecting passes and taking attendance. Luckily, in my second year of teaching, I became much more efficient at these tasks. Also, I wrote several more pages on my frustration with the amount of time I spent in conferences about various students who were failing one of my classes. I felt that this time could have been better spent helping students who wanted extra help after school. I continued to feel this way about most conferences in my second year. Some observations from the journal about my time in class included the following:

Education schools have developed any number of theories on the best ways to divide students into 'instructional groups.' Mixing students up seems almost always to be a good idea; it is surprising how often students don't even know the name of the person sitting next to them. But students are sometimes reluctant to work in groups.....Most [students] will work diligently when they know something is "due" at the end of the period. If I've set up such an artificial deadline, distractions and complaints almost cease...

In retrospect I wish I had spent more time getting to know students individually during my first year, something I have had a little more time to do during my second year. I also wish I had taken the time to learn more about the backgrounds of different students so I could fully appreciate the many cultures represented at AHS. I feel the research project gave me the opportunity to accomplish some of these goals.

For the research project this year, I decided to test the following hypothesis. I hoped that the results of the research would help me adjust my teaching style and curriculum to improve results in subsequent years.

Hypothesis

Students will write better when they have some choice in their writing topics. This is based on my observations of different kinds of student writing. While grammatical mistakes may occur (sometimes frequently) in any kind of student writing, I hope to show that students will make better use of sensory imagery and metaphors in their writing, as well as demonstrate a greater understanding of the topic about which they are writing, when the topic is of their own choosing. Students also may be more forthcoming with details in autobiographical writing.

In a typical high school English class, students are required to complete a variety of writing assignments. Although I added several "creative writing" assignments to my own curriculum each year, most students' writing was based on literature read in class. Students were often frustrated by both the critical thinking and writing processes as they complete these papers. Moreover, according to a survey I administered, students disliked this kind of writing. However, I found that I assigned a good deal of it anyway for various reasons, not all of which were solely to improve the writing itself. Below were some examples of student writing for an "undesirable" assignment. Students had misbehaved during most of the period, and I assigned them to summarize a chapter on William Shakespeare's life as "punishment." Each student is identified by initials only for the sake of anonymity. I have re-copied the sentences exactly as they were written.

- "William Shakepeare is not known like some other writers."
- "Shake's Speare life as a child was hard From my point of view."
- "William Shakespeare is well known in one sense, however, not much is known about his personal life."

- “William Shakespeare is a very famous playwright.”
- “William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-on-Avon. He was also baptized there...when he became 28 he was famous for his playwright...he passed away when he was 52 of a tragic death.”
- “Nobody knew that he would be great.”
- “He wrote many great play during his lifetime.”

The examples above illustrate some of the mistakes I most typically find in my students' writing. (I actually made a list while grading a set of papers so I could write customized “mini-grammar lessons” for each student; information on that failed attempt is provided below.) More disheartening, however, is the almost palpable lack of interest the students show in the subject. We had read *Julius Caesar*, Act I, scenes i and ii aloud during the first part of the class period. Had I really made Shakespeare seem that boring?

Students seemed to enjoy creative writing assignments, however. The quality of their writing actually seemed to improve during these assignments, particularly in the following areas: using precise verbs, using imagery, and employing similes and metaphors. For example, when I assigned an essay on how students spent their holidays and when students were allowed to write a short story for submittal to the PTA's “Reflections” contest, they seemed to enjoy the writing process and were forthcoming with details about their own lives. Here are some illustrations of these points:

- “I chilled with my cousins and talked about things. Then they started break dancing which is one of the things they like doing on New Year's...This is how I want all my New Year's celebrations to be like.”
- “This Christmas has definitely been my worst Christmas. On the night of December 23rd, I had the chicken pox (which was weird because I thought I'd already had it when I was seven, but it turned out to be just a dream)... I had to be in bed with humidifiers.”
- “On the twenty-fourth of December, the members of my whole family come together as one and we have a family dinner.” (The author then relates a story in which the family was divided about allowing a sister who had been “kicked out of the house” to return for the meal.)
- “Sometimes I look out the window in my classroom. It doesn't look like winter. The sky is gloomy and always rain. I wanted to see some snow falling in the street. It's like put on a white new cloth for street. I miss winter.”

Reading these “creative writing” assignments helped me to feel that I understood my students' lives a little better, and therefore helped me to relate to them as a trusted adult as well a mere grammar expert or mistake-finder. However, as I graded all kinds of papers I tended to find similar mistakes among all students. The list I created included mistakes that seemed to occur frequently and distracted me, even as I was enjoying reading the students' papers. While one goal of my research was to find strategies to help non-native English

speakers, I found that these “common mistakes” were not unique to that group of students. A broad spectrum of students commonly made these mistakes in writing.

Common Mistakes

I listed and tallied the mistakes I found most often when grading a set of papers. The most frequent mistakes were:

- Confusing the plural (adding s) with the possessive (adding 's)
- Substituting singular nouns for plural nouns when a plural noun was needed
- Problems with subject-verb agreement
- Problems with verb tense
- Problems with proper placement of adjectives and adverbs
- Homonym problems (accepted vs. excepted, there or their vs. they're, etc.)
- Confusion between two words that are “almost” homonyms (for example, were and where)
- Lack of a verb (for example, writing “it” instead of “it’s”)

To verify my assumption that students preferred writing topics about which they had some choice, I designed a brief questionnaire that would allow students to tell me what kind of writing they preferred. (See sample questionnaire, appendix.) I first typed a list of the major writing assignments from first semester and asked students to circle the ones they liked best, circling as many or few as they wanted. Secondly, I asked the students to estimate the percentage of time they would like to spend on in-class writing. Finally, I asked students to write about what they liked most and least regarding writing assignments.

After reading some advice in Brenda Power’s *Note Taking*, I decided to tell the students about the research before I passed out the questionnaire. According to Powers, “if you’re honest [with students] that this is a learning process for you and you’re just trying to do a better job of understanding what your students need, they can be so helpful” (Powers, 1996, p. 74). I hoped that I would find her advice to be true.

Student Responses

For the first question, in which students were asked to circle as many or as few assignments they liked “best,” there was a variety of responses. Of the 77 tenth and eleventh grade students who completed a survey, 36 circled “bio poem” (a poem in which students followed a format that enabled them to describe themselves) and 32 circled “timed writing on a holiday memory.” These assignments both allowed students to write about themselves without labeling either assignment an autobiography. The second two most popular choices were “journal writing” with 14 responses and “short story for the [PTA] Reflections contest.” These assignments also allowed students the opportunity to write creatively and to write about themselves, if they so chose.

Some of the responses that were most helpful to me were the responses to questions three and four (the questions that asked what students liked or disliked most about the writing done in class). I particularly enjoyed reading about what students liked about writing, but was enlightened by their responses to those things they disliked as well. The most troubling part of reading the survey was the number of students who failed to respond to either question at all. A few of my favorite responses to question three are listed below. (Student quotes are as written; they have not been amended to correct spelling or grammar mistakes.)

- “I like it when we can make rediclous stories.”
- “[I like] writing based upon our real lives experience.”
- “We’re expressing ourselves.”
- “Well, I like writing about ‘how was my day’ like we did once b-for.”
- “I like when we write opinion essays.”
- “[I like] when we write storeys of our choice.”
- “I like that we take time to go over and explain the writing.”
- “I like how we are given a fair amount of time to finish the writings.”
- “[I like] that sometimes like in the research paper we get to choose the topic. And maybe it was something that we really like and enjoy doing the research.”
- “We get to express our opinions on different things that we do. Also, we learned many different formats of papers.”
- “It helps me with my writing skills, and it makes me think about topics I don’t normally think about.”
- “I like writing creatively.”
- “I love to write in General and using my imagination + creativity to write an interesting paper.”
- “[The assignment] gives us a chance to think for ourselves.”
- “Nothing really, I’m not much of a writer, but if anything the paper (not long papers) should be our choice of writing + No reports.”

Two respondents emphasized the fact that what they liked about the timed writing was its autobiographical nature, rather than the “timed” element of the assignment. As one said, “not that it was timed, but it was about me. I can write about that kind of stuff.” Another student wrote, “We got to write about what we liked, did over the holiday, or what our favorite holiday memory was.”

One respondent seemed to change his opinion about in-class writing as he wrote:

“I like to think and if I have a question, I can just ask you right there or ask those people who sit beside me. Either if I did it right or wrong but most of the time I perifere (sic) writing at home.”

Students cited a seemingly wider range of reasons for disliking in-class writing assignments. I have quoted a few of the responses below.

- “I don’t like it at all. We should talk more instead of writing.”

- “I don’t like it, we should have more discussions.”
- “[I dislike] everything, more movies.”
- “[I dislike] long pointless essays.”
- “[I dislike] stupid questions.”
- “[There are] too much noises in class some students try to be funny.”
- “Nothing, all boring.”
- “I don’t think the guidelines are very specific. We should have a thesis approved before we write the paper.”

Several students wrote about specifically disliking timed writing assignments; two felt that they lacked adequate time to finish the assignments, and one felt that the writing itself was too “time-consuming.” Those comments are quoted below.

- “I don’t like when the writing is timed because we don’t get enough time to finish or to be satisfied with our writing.”
- “The time it takes to do the assignment is not reflected in the time it is due.”
- “I don’t particularly like to write because it’s tedious, time-consuming, and difficult to sort out all my ideas.”

Finally, two students complained that the writing assignments caused the following physical ailments to occur:

- “It makes my hand hurt.”
- “[I dislike] the headaches that it gives me.”

I enjoyed reading all of the student responses to questions three and four. I was grateful that the students were so honest and forthcoming with their responses, and felt that just reading them would enable me to tailor my assignments to fit a greater majority of the students.

The least satisfactory question on the survey was the second question, “How much time (as a percentage) would you like to spend on in-class writing assignments?” Students filled in percentages from “0%” to “95%.” The students who chose lower percentages were not necessarily any happier with in-class writing assignments than those who chose higher percentages. I decided to disregard this question as a useful piece of data for the time being.

After administering the survey, I decided to employ more journal writing at the suggestion of several LMTIP group members. I hoped that this kind of writing would allow the students to write about themselves, if I structured the assignment that way. Also, because the assignments would be brief, I hoped that students would feel fewer time constraints. Because I planned to collect journals frequently, I hoped that I would be able to “catch” any mistakes that a given student made frequently before they became entrenched. Finally, I hoped that I would be able to use the “flex” periods to hold individual conferences with all students, rather than waiting for students to seek help on their own after school.

The first day that I tried the “new” journal assignments, I was dismayed when several students asked for a list of topics, even though I had given them a list of “37 formats for creative writing” from Stella Millet. Students in subsequent

classes reacted the same way. When I asked them why, given that according to the writing surveys they seemed to prefer more “open-ended” assignments, they insisted that they needed some suggestions to get started. I compromised by writing a few questions on the board each day above the warm-up assignment. I included activities for the “right” brain (analytical questions from current news stories, for example) and for the “left” brain (questions about what colors or paintings students liked, for example). With these suggestions, and the option of disregarding them, students seemed content.

In addition, I started a series of individual “writing conferences” during “Flex” periods. (Flex periods are extra class periods that rotate through the schedule allowing each teacher to offer students extra help about once a week.) The first students to volunteer were generally the stronger students. Although I had planned to use the conference time for individual tutoring and helping students with general writing problems, these early volunteers already seemed to know their weaknesses, and wanted to address them with me. Several students were going to attempt Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses in the fall and seemed to need reassurance that they were prepared for those classes. Some of their concerns included the process of writing the research paper and using internal documentation properly, how to integrate a quotation into the body paragraph in an essay, and how to write a good thesis statement.

During these conferences, I found that writing a thesis statement seemed to be something that bothered a lot of students. Most students felt that their ninth grade teachers either hadn’t taught them how to write one, or assumed that they already knew how. I felt that this consensus was fruitful, because it resulted in an idea for a “mini-lesson” that would be helpful to many students. However, I hoped that more students would volunteer for the conferences, even if they needed to visit me during a flex period in addition to the period allotted for their own class.

Several months after the beginning of my research, I found that writing conferences were generally helpful to the students. Students were reluctant to volunteer at first, so I dragooned a few of them into it. After that, some students were able to request conferences on their own. Unfortunately, some of the students who seemed to need the most help were the least likely to come forward to request it. I feel that my research lacks any data to indicate improvement, other than my own instincts. However, it is helpful to be “face-to-face” with a student, when explaining something so they can ask questions and reassure themselves and me that they “get” the point we are discussing.

Conclusion

Although the participation in this research project has increased my confidence as a teacher, I am reluctant to identify any specific activities that I can assuredly say will increase student success. Reviewing the writing folders convinced me that students need to have the opportunity to write in a variety of styles. However, preparing students to pass the SOL examinations requires that we teach students how to write such “formal” papers as persuasive essays and

research reports; students often rate these activities as less enjoyable. I hope that at some point I will be able to continue my research and add a component to measure student motivation. Perhaps if students are able to see that successfully completing a difficult writing project can be its own reward, they will be less likely to object to the more arduous tasks involved with learning to write essays, research papers, and other “technical” papers. In the meantime, I will continue to assign some creative writing each quarter to teach basic writing skills in an enjoyable context.

References

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- Wilhelm, J. (1997). *You Gotta Be the Book.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Appendix: Writing Survey

Please answer the questions below. Your answers will be confidential. Thanks for your help!

1. Please read the list of writing assignments from first semester below. Please circle or highlight the writing assignments you liked best. You may circle as many or as few as you would like.

All

Journal writing

Bio-poem

Short responses: Richard Rodriguez essay

Short story for the "Reflections" contest

Essay on "I Have a Dream" speech for the Washington Wizards contest

Timed writing on a holiday memory

Tenth grade only:

Expository essay on Lord of the Flies

Research paper

Eleventh grade only:

Aphorism/epitaph assignment (review of Franklin/Masters readings)

Author "expert" paper #1 (a biography of "your" chosen author)

Author "expert" paper#2 (a critical analysis of a second work by "your" author)

2. How much time (as a percentage) would you like to spend on in-class writing assignments?

__%

3. What do you like **best** about the writing we do in this class (in class or for homework)?

4. What do you like **least** about the writing we do in this class (in class or for homework)?

Thanks for your help! If you would like to speak to me in detail about your answers to the survey, or any other aspects of this class, please make an appointment. Your answers will be kept in strict confidence.