

The Photo Essay Project: “You Mean I Have To Write, Too?”

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The Question

I am a reluctant writer. Writing has always been difficult for me. I put off any writing task for as long as possible. I noticed a similar reluctance to write in my students in my beginning ESOL Literature classes. Often, when asked to write a short paragraph or a journal entry, they would complain about how difficult writing is, or about not knowing what to write about, or that they can't express themselves in English. I can't blame them for complaining about writing. After all, they are beginning level students with limited English. They must feel uncomfortable about writing in a language they have only just begun to learn. It is no wonder they are reluctant to write.

I thought about my own dreaded writing experiences and recalled a time when I had to write a descriptive paragraph in French on a topic of my choice. Out of desperation I found a photograph of a street scene made by one of my favorite French photographers, Eugène Atget, and described the image. Surprisingly, I was able to start writing, and I actually enjoyed the experience. In the process, I learned new words and different ways to express myself in French. I wondered if my students would experience a similar positive change in attitude toward writing in English if I asked them to use pictures to help them write.

So, I decided to give each student a disposable camera to document something important to them or something they cared about a great deal and write about it using photographs they made themselves. I called it the Photo Essay Project. I wondered, would producing their own images and writing about those images help beginning ESOL students feel more at ease with writing in English?

How I Got Started

Before I started the Photo Essay Project I conducted an informal survey to find out how my students felt about reading and writing in their language and in English. They did their best to express their thoughts in English. Here are some representative responses to some of the questions in this survey [exactly as they were written]:

Responses to “Do you like to write in your language?”

- *Yes, because I don't want to forget my language.*
- *Yes, because nobody can understand what am writing. accept the spanish people.*
- *Yes I like write in my language because is very easy for me*

- *Yes, I like to write in my language because it make me feel good.*

Responses to “Do you like to write in English?”

- *No. I cann’t write English, well.*
- *No, because is a little difficult and hard to write in English*
- *Yes, because I need to learn more English and writing is a good way to do it.*
- *Yes, because I can practic more my English.*
- *Yes, I like to write a little in English because I have many mistakes, I don’t know some meaning of the words but write help me to find new words with new meanings*

All in all, the survey results were relatively positive. Yet, in spite of their positive attitude toward writing in English, my students always complained whenever I introduced a writing activity to them. I hoped the Photo Essay Project would produce more enthusiasm to write in English.

The Assignment

When I introduced the photography assignment my students got excited about the thought of taking their own pictures, but complained about having to write about them. I wanted to make sure they understood that they were to use the photographs to help them tell their story rather than just describe what was in each photograph. To help them grasp this concept, I presented the assignment in the following manner:

- I cut up an article from a National Geographic magazine and laid it out on 2 large pieces of paper so students could see the article as a whole and not have to flip through the pages of the magazines.
- On one paper I pasted just the text of the article with holes from where the photographs were placed. On the other paper I pasted the photographs in the same position they were in the article. I fixed it so I could overlay the photographs into the holes on the text overlay. There were only five photographs.
- First, I presented the text overlay, which was about small towns in New Jersey. I asked my students if they wanted to read the article. They said no because it looked boring.
- Then I put the photograph overlay on the text overlay. Visually, the students said the article looked more interesting with the photographs. I asked them if they felt all the words on the pages described what was in each photograph. Most students said they did not think so because there were too many words.
- Some did not understand the question, so I pointed to one of the photographs in the article and gave a detailed description of the image. It was a photograph of a Little League baseball game. I asked my students if the author of the article wrote a similar detailed description

of the photograph. My students said no because the article was about New Jersey not the photograph of the baseball game.

By examining how other photographs connected to the content of published stories, students were beginning to understand the role of the photographs in their writing assignment, and it was time to give them the guidelines for their Photo Essay Project.

The Guidelines

Students received a disposable camera, a set of guidelines, a paper that outlined the steps in the writing process, and a grading rubric. The guidelines outlined the assignment in detail. Students were to take 13-14 photographs about something that was important to them or something that they cared about. Some of the suggested topics were: my family and friends, my job, my school, nature, my neighborhood, my life in 24 hours, hobbies, goals, sports, self portrait, or any topic of their choice as long as it was appropriate. Once the photographs were developed students were to edit their collection by choosing five to seven photographs that they felt would help them tell their story. Then, once they edited their photographs, students were ready to start their writing.

For economic reasons, students worked in pairs when using the camera. However they did not work on the project together. One student used the camera for five days taking half of the 27-exposure roll then passed it to the other student to take his or her set of photographs.

The Process

Initially, I had planned to have students write on their own outside of class. However, I quickly realized that they needed to be guided through the steps in the writing process in spite of having gone through some of the steps on various assignments throughout the year. So, I devoted almost all of every class period throughout the project to reintroducing and working on a step in the writing process. We started with a brainstorming session using a mapping graphic organizer. Using their photographs, many students were able to get their ideas organized on this paper and actually start writing. A few students had difficulty working with a graphic organizer. These students did not have an idea of what they wanted to write about. I spent more time working with these students to help them get started.

Subsequent class periods were spent working on writing drafts. For almost all students, the concept of writing multiple drafts seemed foreign to them. Many wanted to hand in their work after the first draft. When I asked them to share their work with a partner, they discovered that their project was not ready to hand in as final work. During two to three class periods I sat at a table and was available for students with questions about their first drafts. Participating in this writing conference with me was voluntary, and for many of my students, it was the first time they had done anything like this. Working one on one with each student helped me because it gave me a better idea about their frustrations with writing in English. The writing conferences seemed to help my students because the

process we used required them to take a careful, focused look at their sentences, paragraphs, and organization of their story. As a result, they became more engaged in the project and seemed to be more willing to go through the revision process to get to the final draft.

“Miss, I Don’t Know What to Write”

“I don’t know how to do this. I need help.” During the writing conferences some students expressed frustration over not being able to begin writing. They had their edited photographs, yet they had no idea what to write about. This is a writing frustration I know all too well myself. I explained that I understood how they felt, and that they should ask questions about their photographs to get some idea about why they took them.

For example, one student, Stephan, started our conference with, “Miss, I don’t know what to write”. I asked him a series of questions about his photographs. As he responded to the questions, I wrote down his answers. By the end of our conversation he had a page filled with ideas to write about. Soon he realized he had a lot more to say than he originally thought. Now it was a matter of organizing his ideas on paper.

Another student, Antonio, was very reluctant to write. He did not feel comfortable about his writing. In fact, he often neglected to hand in his work if it involved any kind of writing. Nevertheless, working with him during the writing conference seemed to spark in him some enthusiasm for composing his photo essay. Being very artistic, he had a wonderful collection of photographs depicting his favorite activity, break dancing. When I asked him questions about his collection, he responded enthusiastically, his eyes lighting up as he described the different kinds of break dance moves and why he loved to break dance. In addition, as he came up with more ideas about his topic I noticed his willingness to start writing right away. By the end of our session, Antonio said he felt better about writing. I was pleasantly surprised when he actually did his homework assignment for the next class period. The assignment was to continue writing his piece to flesh out some of his ideas and to make any necessary changes. He came to class ready to show me what he had written, and he was proud of his work.

Overall, many of my students took advantage of the writing conference. Talking about their photographs seems to have helped most students begin to compose and create their Photo Essay Project. Stronger students tended to work on their own, while less confident students asked for help. I feel that the photographs played a valuable role in helping my students by serving as a starting point for their writing.

Finally, everyone was ready to put pictures and words together. I gave out the paper for the final product and let the students spend a class period placing photographs and writing the final draft. Many were excited and relieved that the end of the project was in sight, if only to see their words with their pictures in final form. Some students looked at their preliminary drafts and commented on how their writing improved. They were proud of their work.

I was overwhelmed by the number of projects that were handed in on our agreed upon due date. Out of 51 projects, I received all on time except for four late papers and two that were never turned in. The two students who did not turn in their project tended not to complete their work in general. The late papers were from students who had had trouble getting started on the project in the first place, partly because they wasted time in class and partly because their project ideas were not clear to them. By the next class, my students wanted to know their grade on their photo essay. I had never had so much student interest in an assignment before.

Findings

When I first thought about and started the photo essay project I envisioned my students totally engaged in the assignment, excited about taking their own photographs, and enthusiastic about writing a story to go with the photographs. I wanted them to feel comfortable about writing in English, and I hoped that making their own photographs and writing about them would encourage them to take ownership of their work. Indeed, most of my students were engaged in the project and seemed to show pride in their work, whether it was in their photographs, in their writing, or in both. For them, producing a photo essay that presented a meaningful theme, I believe, encouraged them to try harder in all aspects of their work. Of course, there were some students who were not very interested in the project. In talking with these students, I realized that not everyone likes to take photographs or even use photographs to help them write. In fact, one student said he felt no emotion from his photographs. They did absolutely nothing for him and his writing. It is interesting to note that this student wrote a very creative and funny story for his project.

Overall, I feel the response toward the Photo Essay Project was positive. The turn in rate for the project exceeded the turn in rate for homework assignments this year. After turning in their projects, students wanted to know their grade almost immediately. No other assignment or project I gave during the year generated such enthusiastic interest.

In a post project survey about the Photo Essay Project and the writing process, students were very honest with their responses. When asked what they liked the most from the project, overwhelmingly, students preferred taking the photographs. Making the photographs for most of them was an opportunity for them to be with their family and friends or in a place they enjoyed. Writing, especially writing multiple drafts, was the part of the project they liked the least. However, when asked if learning about the writing process helped them with their writing, almost all students said it did, and a few even suggested they learned the importance of writing more than one draft.

Finally, for three students, Yasmin, Eduardo, and Giovanni the time and effort they put into their Photo Essay Project paid off in a special way. Yasmin and Eduardo will have their essays published in the school's teacher-sponsored, student-published literary magazine, *The Filament*, and two of Giovanni's photographs from his photo essay will be published in the same magazine.

Implications

This teacher-research project gave me an opportunity to take risks and to try something new in my beginning ESOL literature classes. Also, it forced me to step back and reflect on my teaching. Here are some implications for my teaching that I have discovered:

- Create projects that are meaningful to my students. As a result, they will be more willing to become involved with the assignment and care about their work.
- Use the arts such as drawing, drama, photography, filmmaking, or digital media to make lessons more interesting and engaging.
- Step back, guide instead of direct my students through meaningful activities. I will let my students take ownership of their work. As a result, they will be rewarded, and so will I.
- Keep in mind that students have different learning styles. For example, with the Photo Essay Project, offer comparable alternatives for students who may not enjoy taking photographs.

After doing the Photo Essay Project with my students, I noticed that they were writing more for their writing assignments. In addition, I noticed that they made more of an effort to write at least one draft before handing in final work. Also, they didn't complain as much when I gave them a writing assignment. Many of my students mentioned that they were beginning to feel better about having to write in English.