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Author

Peitzman, Faye

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Teaching Analytical Writing to ESL Students: A UCLA/High School Collaboration

How can high school students still in ESL classes stretch their abilities to prepare for the analytical reading and writing expected at the university level? For the past 10 years UCLA faculty and high school teachers in the greater Los Angeles area have collaborated on a curriculum and assessment project aimed at sharing teaching expertise and helping ESL high school students approach college-level reading and writing. The centerpiece of the program has been the UC Subject A exam, the writing placement exam that 12th-graders already accepted to a UC campus take in the late spring of their senior year. These 12th-graders have two hours to read a two-page passage and, on the spot, respond in writing to a question that taps their analytical abilities.

But while the purpose of the Subject A is to assess and place, our purpose in this university-schools collaboration is to make challenging materials and tasks accessible, to expand repertoires, to support and encourage. Through the years we've developed a process in which advanced-level ESL students, ninth- through 12th-graders, might take this same placement exam under nonexam conditions. As part of this process, ESL students work with their teachers for five to 10 days, engaging in reading and writing activities that make the passage fully accessible to them. Then they have two hours to write to the essay prompt. In one week's time students see their papers again—with comments crafted to help them revise. With the help of their teacher and peers, they work with the comments and produce a second and final draft. The goal is not only for the revisions to be improved versions, but for the students to have grown as writers in the process.

How This Program Came to Be

Back in 1980 when local high schools asked UCLA to provide a model for university writing standards, we responded by visiting several 11th-grade English classrooms and discussing sample essays written to the Subject A exam. Students were given a copy of the holistic scoring rubric and were quickly able to assign the samples the appropriate score. Shortly afterwards, they wrote to another Subject A prompt and received scores and written comments for their own essays.

By 1982 we developed a more collaborative model. Twenty-six high school teachers and eight UCLA writing programs lecturers met for two weeks in the summer to read their 11th-grade students' Subject A essays, score them, and devise a model for commenting. This time we determined that the comments would be written for the purpose of helping students revise. After reading the research on commenting available at the time and drawing on the collective wisdom of the group, we produced guidelines for commenting that we all would follow.

By 1986 the second language student population in Los Angeles schools was increasing dramatically. One of our team leaders, Beth Winningham, had planned to have her 11th-grade class participate—but the first week in February her teaching assignment was changed. Now with her class of advanced ESL students, she wondered about their ability to participate. With just a few days to make up her mind, she decided to give them the opportunity. So, along with the native English-speaking (NS) participants, they read the passage and wrote within the two-hour time frame. Their papers were scored according to the rubric, and they received written comments to help them revise.

Fortunately, the written comments prevented the experience from being discouraging. But it was clear to us all that while our program model might have been fine for NS 11th-graders, it was clearly lacking for ESL students. And given the changing demographics, shouldn't we begin to pay more attention to students in the process of acquiring English? If these students were to become our focus, in what ways should the program change?

Changes for Second Language Students

The following year our program invited both English and ESL teachers and their students to participate; and from 1988 to the present we've focused exclusively on second language students. Although the population we were serving changed, the ultimate goal remained the same: We hoped to give students a better sense of university expectations and strengthen their writing abilities. But while for NS 11th-graders our articulation model offered one push forward, for ESL students our program would

inevitably offer frustration rather than appropriate challenge. We decided on two major changes: (a) extending the reading-writing process and (b) building in visits to schools by UCLA undergraduates who had formerly attended ESL/bilingual classes in elementary or secondary school.

Extending the Reading-Writing Process

We've learned that it's not unusual for advanced ESL students to be unfamiliar with up to 30 words in the two-page reading that makes up the Subject A passage. In addition, idioms and familiarity with U.S. culture and history may not yet be part of their background knowledge. While we could have easily rewritten the passage to control vocabulary and to provide explanations of historical references, we decided against such a rewriting. We wanted students to experience the style of the passage intact and to become familiar with new words and their particular connotations. So we posed this question to our group: How can we make this passage accessible to high school ESL students? Then, working in small groups, we designed into-through-and beyond activities that teachers could draw from as they presented the reading to their students (see Gadda, Peitzman, & Walsh, 1988; Peitzman & Gadda, 1994).

Into activities—preliminary ways of introducing the students to the themes of the passage—might range from writing journal entries, discussing photographs from a particular historical era, or reading poems or other short pieces of literature. *Through* activities—ways of helping students make meaning from the passage—might begin with the teacher reading the passage aloud to the class. They might also include student activities such as constructing star diagrams that cluster important vocabulary, paraphrasing, holding class discussions or debates, and engaging in a variety of types of notemaking and writing activities. In many ways the *beyond* activity—is the Subject A prompt itself. Teachers also construct other culminating activities that could include letter writing, pairing the passage with a short story, or writing a silent dialogue together with another student.

While we elected not to rephrase the Subject A passage itself, we did finally decide to rephrase the actual essay question, which had confused many students. For example, the Subject A prompt for the passage "The Poets in the Kitchen" by Paule Marshall, read:

To what extent do Paule Marshall's ideas about the importance of conversation for her mother and her mother's friends shed light on the uses of language in groups that you know? In responding to the ideas in this passage,

you may choose to discuss functions of group talk that Marshall does not mention. To develop your essay, be sure to discuss specific examples drawn from your own experience, your observation of teachers, or your reading—including “The Poets in the Kitchen” itself.

Not only was the initial question syntactically difficult for the students, many could not understand the expression *shed light*. We rephrased the first two sentences of the original and kept the last intact:

In what ways does Paule Marshall think that conversation was important for her mother and her mother’s friends? Are those ways similar to the purposes for which people use language in groups that you know? Why or why not?

While almost any rephrasing may modify the question—in this case we miss the notion of *to what extent*—we were nonetheless satisfied that our ESL students were answering essentially the same question.

While we’ve retained our eight guidelines for commenting, we’ve amplified them for teachers of second language students.

In Figure 1 the four inset sentences represent additions we made in the year that both 11th-graders and ESL students participated. While many of the ESL essays were perceptive and well organized, a large number had errors in every line. We decided, for our first reading, that we would read over—or ignore—errors, in order to focus on content. And we found that, once decided, this was indeed something all of us could do.

The second item had to do with plagiarism. We found papers that had phrases, sentences and sometimes full paragraphs lifted from the original passage. After discussing this amongst ourselves, we agreed that the issue was not attempted deception. After all, everyone had a copy of the passage. Rather, it turned out that the analytical writing task was still beyond the reach of some students. Some may have understood the passage but didn’t yet have enough of a lexical and stylistic repertoire to put their ideas in their own words. And of course, in some cultures, it is perfectly permissible to copy without quoting; students and professors do it all the time. It is a way of emulating the text and showing respect for the author. While our goal was to teach students that in the United States it is not proper or permissible to plagiarize, we did not feel it appropriate to display moral outrage.

Figure 1

Guidelines for Commenting on ESL Students’ Essays

- Skim the entire paper before writing comments.

*On your first reading, try to read
over sentence-level errors.*

- Address the student by name.
- Begin by specifically stating a major strength of the paper and pinpointing the nature of major weaknesses.

Treat cases of plagiarism with sensitivity

- List text-specific questions/suggestions for change. Note paragraphs and sentences that work particularly well.

*Select only the most salient/persistent
sentence-level errors to comment on.*

- Be supportive in tone.
- Phrase comments tentatively, where appropriate.

Be directive where appropriate, but not to the extent that the teacher-reader is doing all the problem solving.

*Pinpoint cases in which misreadings of background
texts have occurred and explain the misreading.*

- Close with encouraging remarks.

The third guideline addition again focused on error. Most of our comments would be crafted to help students revise conceptually. Detailed written comments on correctness issues would not be the most effective way to help students. Nonetheless, we decided to point out errors if they recurred throughout the paper or if they were particularly important for students to note.

Finally, it became clear that students sometimes misread parts of the passage because they did not have sufficient knowledge of American culture. When this happened, we would explain the author's intended meaning in our comments.

Visits to Schools by UCLA Students

During our small- and full-group discussions, it became clear that a sizable number of the 500 or so students who participated in the project each year did not yet have firm plans to go to college. It was also apparent that many of them had potential and promise. But they needed someone they could really identify with—someone closer to their peer group—to encourage them and help them believe in their abilities. What if UCLA students who had been ESL/bilingual students in Los Angeles schools could visit each classroom and talk about student life at the university? As a backdrop, they could also talk about their experiences in public school as ESL/bilingual students and their decision to go to college. And of course they would leave plenty of time for questions and answers.

The UCLA ESL service course coordinator, who was a member of our team, volunteered to find and coach second language UCLA students interested in visiting participating high school classrooms. These students would visit with the overt purpose of sharing their own high school to college experience and explaining how as second language learners they found the confidence to pursue a higher education. A more covert agenda was for these students to convince their high school peers that this was an attainable goal for them as well and that having English as their second language need not be a barrier. For the past several years we've considered these visits a highlight of the Analytical Writing program.

Curriculum Packets

When collaboration works, all feel that they've accomplished more than they ever could have alone. We thought that if pooling all the classroom lessons designed for the Subject A passage was so satisfying, perhaps each small group could design into-through-and beyond activities around selected short stories and poems that pair well thematically and that would be appealing to the interests and abilities of advanced high school ESL stu-

dents. Then everyone could return home at the end of the four-month collaboration with some stunning additions to the next year's curriculum. While time was short, motivation was high. With the help of an experienced table leader—and some guidelines for selecting appropriate literature—the groups chose their pieces, brainstormed, and assigned each member activities to plan. By the last meeting the end of May everyone could take home approximately six literature-writing units for consideration.

Nature of the Collaboration: Why It Works and Next Steps

The premise behind this UCLA-schools collaboration is that everyone brings expertise to the group. The leadership team itself is a combination of UCLA and high school teachers. UCLA group leaders are housed in three different departments: Center X within the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, UCLA's writing programs, and the department of TESL and applied linguistics. High school leaders are all California Writing Project fellows and include classroom ESL teachers and district ESL specialists. The rest of the group—the 20 to 30 teachers who sign up for the program each year—bring their own invaluable expertise. Dedicated professionals, they bring in-depth knowledge of their own students. They explain what these students already know and can do and search for ways to build on those abilities. They also share invaluable insights into the home cultures of their students.

Thus, no one has privileged knowledge. As director, I can bring insights from my years of directing the UCLA Writing Project. For years George Gadda, codirector of this collaboration, shared his knowledge of the UC Subject A Examination, for which he is chief reader. Lecturers in UCLA's department of TESL and Applied Linguistics¹ bring years of experience working with UCLA undergraduate and graduate students. Our school site leaders² bring intimate understandings of the high school ESL classroom plus an overview that comes with working for years with second language teachers in a variety of schools and districts.

As I look back on this multiyear program, it strikes me that what started as a one-way university-as-expert program has developed in exciting ways by becoming a true collaboration between university and high school teachers who share a common interest. The commenting model, the impetus to focus on ESL students, the realization that UCLA students might also have an important role to play, the addition of developing curriculum materials—these facets of the program were created because of ongoing conversations among the university and high school partners.

Our next steps are still unclear, but we know that we won't remain a

static program. This year we met at Pasadena City College instead of the UCLA campus so that teachers in the San Gabriel Valley would have an easier time participating. We've discussed starting a parallel project that focuses on middle school ESL students. The Subject A exam wouldn't quite do for sixth- to eighth-graders, so we'd need to find a new centerpiece. We've also discussed finding the time to publish the wonderful reading-writing lessons that have been created over the past five years. What we do know is that we'll continue our efforts to enrich the professional lives of all teachers involved and also provide in several small ways the extra attention that can make a difference for our ESL students.

Endnotes

1. The UCLA lecturers from the department of TESL and applied linguistics were Donna Brinton, Janet Goodwin, and Linda Jensen.
2. The high school leaders were Beth Winningham, Linda Sasser, Laura Ranks, and, new to the group, Adriana Reyes.

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