



Generous reading expands teachers' perceptions on student writing



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Generous reading was used as a tool for careful reading of student writing.
- Teachers addressed elements of writing that reflected a complex approach to instruction.
- Teachers envisioned instruction for linguistically diverse students.
- Student writing scores increased from August to April.

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ABSTRACT

Five fifth-grade teachers used generous reading to expand their perspectives on student writing beyond the rubric-based writing assessment. Their discussions were recorded and compared to discussions of four fifth-grade teachers who did not use generous reading. Writing test scores of 61 student were also analyzed. Qualitative analysis revealed the five generous reading teachers addressed additional elements of writing beyond those addressed by the other teachers. Both groups of teachers expressed more negative judgements of African American writing, while empathizing with English learner writing. A discussion of rubric assessment and linguistically diverse student writing includes implications for instruction.

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1. Introduction

"It made me think of what is possible," said one teacher. This generous perspective came about through discovering internalized voices of others and literary language in student writing. In this study, five teachers engaged in a process of generous reading; looking beyond superficial mistakes and language differences in order to discern possibilities for student writers. Generous reading is a process of reading student work carefully using dialogic and literary lenses. The goal of generous reading is for teachers to notice the ways in which students draw upon the voices of others and craft their language to convey meaning. The purpose of this study was to find out how teachers discussed student writing with and without generous reading.

Many teachers continue to grapple with how best to help students whose writing does not meet grade level expectations, who are reluctant writers, who are learning English, or who speak variations of English such as African American English. Teachers' attitudes toward language play a role in student experiences and academic achievement (Blake & Cutler, 2003; Smitherman, 1999). Therefore, it is essential to prepare and develop teachers who are sensitive to language variation (Ball & Muhamad, 2003; Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2013; Michael-Luna & Canagarajah, 2007). Such preparation can alter deficit views of language (Fecho, 2004) and the notion that teachers are the gate keepers of written and spoken English. Entrenched notions about language differences hinder teachers in providing an optimal learning environment for all students. Teachers must learn to perceive and acknowledge students' language and writing strengths through highlighting their knowledge and experience. This study adds to efforts to alter deficit attitudes and practices toward language and writing (Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, & Carpenter, 2006). In this

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study, the focus was on expanding teachers' perspectives on writing through applying analytic tools for generous reading.

2. Deficit based policies and writing assessment

Deficit attitudes and practices toward student writing persist in classrooms today as artifacts of the error-correction, product approach of the previous century (Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, & Valdes, 2004). Although in 1935 the National Council of Teachers of English condemned mechanistic and formulaic methods (Hawkins & Razali, 2012), prescriptive practices continue to influence writing instruction. Policies such as mandated writing programs and state writing tests arise from a view that writing deficiencies must be located and remediated.

High-stakes testing has led to standardization of writing instruction and scripted curriculum materials (Au, 2011) and a narrowed curriculum has emerged as a primary problem associated with the prevalence of assessment in education. High-stakes testing cultures generate constricted practices for the teaching of writing (Davis & Willson, 2015; Hillocks, 2005; Johnson, Smagorinsky, Thompson, & Fry, 2003). In one US survey, Applebee and Langer (2011) found that 85.7% of middle school teachers regarded the state exam as important or very important in shaping curriculum and instruction. This is not limited to the US. When a group of stakeholders in Canada met to discuss writing instruction and assessment (Slomp, Graves, & Broad, 2012) a major concern was the narrow focus that was being driven by the diploma exam program in grade 12 and the testing program in grades 3, 6, and 9. Because of these concerns, it is important to consider the implications of how writing is assessed.

Analytic rubrics for scoring writing are popular assessments that address reliability among scorers. However, a US study by Nauman, Stirling, and Borthwick (2011) demonstrated that different perspectives of readers influence decisions of what constitutes good writing even when using well-crafted rubrics, such as the 6 Traits assessment model (Spandel, 2008). Similarly, Spence (2010) showed how teachers' thinking about English learner writing was constrained by a state assessment rubric and influenced by the teachers' individual frames of reference. Although rubrics are intended to be widely applicable and consistent, there are problems with reliability and impact on writing achievement (Hollenbeck, Tindal, & Almond, 1999). Collopy (2008) showed that raters were significantly influenced by mechanical characteristics of the writing rather than the content, even when they used a rubric. Using rubrics may not improve the reliability or validity of assessment if raters are not well trained on how to design and employ them effectively (Rezaei & Lovorn, 2010).

Rubrics are used in many countries, however scholarship on the use of rubrics reveals varied results. Fifth grade students in Egypt benefited from using a rubric to guide their Arabic writing (El Sawafy, 2012) because giving students access to the rubric allowed them to write to fulfill rubric requirements. Similarly, a US study revealed that when students had access to a rubric with clear goals, it resulted in improved writing (Bradford, Newland, Rule, & Montgomery, 2016). It might be argued that these studies use the rubric itself as a measure leaving open the question of how well students perform in aspects of writing not included in the rubric. A study by Dutro, Selland, and Bien (2013) found that one US rubric positioned children as proficient or non-proficient writers through the scoring process. In that study, the state ratings were contradicted by the researchers' analysis of the children's writing.

Most rubrics fail to address sociocultural aspects of writing, such as content, context, culture, and linguistic diversity. Different disciplines require writing for a particular purpose and genre, for example in narrative and argument writing (O'Hallaron &

Schlepppegrell, 2016). Additionally, most rubrics are not designed to consider culture and linguistic diversity. Coady and Escamilla (2005) found that many rubrics are influenced by monolingual frameworks, which exacerbate deficit notions of English learners. Although Soltero-González, Escamilla, and Hopewell (2012) developed a writing assessment for English learner writers, they found that even with a rubric that includes bilingual strategies, teachers relied on individual interpretations of student work. Non-standardized varieties of English such as African American English and writing features typical of English learners unduly influence scorers (Johnson & VanBrackle, 2012). Therefore, it is important for teachers to understand how cultural and linguistic diversity impacts student writing (Hornberger & Link, 2012). These researchers call for ways to challenge and expand on current frames of reference for assessing writing. Teachers need support in resisting deficit-based prescriptive practices, a focus on assessment that narrows curriculum, and pre-existing notions of what counts in writing that position students negatively. One way of providing this support to teachers is through generous reading.

3. Generous reading of student writing

Generous reading was developed by Spence (2008) as a way for teachers to see past grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors in order to read student writing from a dialogic and literary perspective. In Spence's (2008) study, *voices of others* and *figurative or descriptive language* were among a variety of tools used to analyze student writing and were found to be the most useful in analyzing a corpus of 36 writing samples. These dialogic and literary tools are supported by strong lines of research. Generous reading draws upon this research and adds to it by providing professional development that helps teachers enlarge their current frames of reference for assessing writing and begin to see the ways in which students draw upon the voices of other people in their lives and media such as books, movies, and cultural traditions.

Generous reading has been used with English, Chinese and Japanese writing (Spence, 2014; Spence, 2016). Spence analyzed the Japanese and Chinese writing of an elementary student in Japan that revealed a sense of agency projected through her bilingual writing. She drew upon both Chinese and Japanese cultural traditions and literature to develop contemporary themes related to her life. In the Southwestern US, generous reading was used with English learners to reveal writing strengths that were obscured by rubric assessment (Spence, 2006). The present study took place in the Southeastern US. In these varied cultural settings, generous reading has uncovered nuances of student writing that illuminate how students draw upon their unique experiences as they craft their writing. *Voices of others* and *figurative or descriptive language*, the tools of generous reading, are described below.

3.1. Voices of others

Composition scholars, sociolinguists, and childhood educators have analyzed student writing to discover internalized voices of others (Canagarajah, 2013; Dyson, 2003; Freedman & Ball, 2004; García & Wei, 2014; Halasek, 1999; Ryan & Barton, 2014). This work acknowledges that multiple voices and languages become woven into what people say and write. Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) described all speech as dialogic because speakers incorporate the words of other speakers and writers to craft a new utterance for an intended audience. Therefore, student writing can be seen as an answer to others encountered in the student's life. Writing is inherently dialogic as exemplified in Dyson's (2003) US study of first grade students. This study illustrated how children used their peer relationships to negotiate their standing as writers and to

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