From assessing to teaching writing: What teachers prioritize

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ABSTRACT

In order to improve writing instruction teachers must be able to identify students' challenges with writing and to specify instruction that will address those challenges. This study examines the instructional priorities that U.S. high school teachers set based on both their typical methods of writing assessment and a think-aloud protocol (TAP) assessment that we designed. Five 9th and 10th grade teachers were interviewed twice about the writing performance of three of their students, the first time following their typical assessments and the second time following the TAP Assessment. After the initial assessment, teachers' instructional priorities were more product-than process-focused. After the TAP Assessment the teachers' instructional priorities included more aspects of the writing process although they still overlooked certain important processes such as analysis of source text. An implication of this finding is that professional development for teachers of writing should provide instructional strategies that enable teachers to act on writing assessment data in a way that addresses all facets of composing.

1. Introduction

An important component of effective writing instruction is good assessment practice: In order to help students develop as writers in the context of formal schooling, teachers must be able to identify the sources of difficulty that students experience with academic writing and use this information to design instruction that will address those difficulties. After so much attention to summative, high-stakes assessments in the past few decades, the U.S. has lately seen a renewed interest among educators and policymakers in formative assessment practices, with some arguing that students would be better served if more attention were paid to improving formative and diagnostic uses of assessment (Wylie & Lyon, 2012). Students' writing improves when teachers learn to give more specific recommendations for improvement (Parr & Timperley, 2010). And a systematic review of research on formative assessment has shown that formative assessment practices are especially effective in raising the achievement of lower-achieving students (Black & Wiliam, 1998). We share the sentiment voiced by the National Writing Project, a U.S.-based professional development organization concerned with developing teachers' capacity to teach writing and promoting authentic, student-centered approaches to instruction: "For teachers and students, assessment should have an instructional purpose, not simply an evaluative or administrative one" (Nagin & National Writing Project, 2003, p. 77).

Rubrics are arguably the most commonly used, and most frequently researched, tool for formative assessment. Rubric use has been shown to increase students' writing achievement (Andrade, Du, & Wang, 2008) as well as students' self-efficacy as writers (Andrade, Wang, Du, & Akawi, 2009). Rubrics are not without drawbacks, however; they have been criticized for restricting teachers' assessments of students' writing to a fixed menu of features (Spence, 2010; Wilson, 2007). Another limitation of rubrics is that they are designed to assess writing as a product, and therefore cannot provide insight into students' writing processes, nor the strategies that students employ within these processes. This limitation is significant, because we know that teaching writing strategies is the

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most effective way to address writing difficulties (Graham & Perin, 2007). As long as we lack methods and tools for assessing students' writing strategies, we will not be able to customize strategy instruction according to students' individual needs.

Mindful of the importance of formative assessment to instructional improvement, and the relative lack of tools available to assess students' writing processes, we developed a formative assessment tool called the Think-Aloud-Protocol (TAP) Assessment and investigated how the information teachers obtained from using this assessment differed from their typical approach to assessment. Having found that teachers learned more about students' writing processes and more about their strengths as writers from this new assessment approach (Beck, Llosa, Black, & Trzeszkowski-Giese, 2015), we now report on a second phase of the study that examines the types of instructional priorities that teachers set based on the information they gathered from these two different approaches to assessing their students writing.

2. Background

2.1. Formative assessment of writing and writing instruction

An assessment is considered formative when the information it produces is used to inform instruction (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Cizek, 2010). How teachers interpret and use the information garnered from assessments is a question that has gained increasing attention from researchers, two of whom have asserted that "teachers are the heart of using data to inform instructional practice" (Mandinach & Gummer, 2015, p. 2). Most of the research on how teachers use assessment to inform instruction has focused on teams of teachers analyzing school-level interim assessment data – i.e. assessments that are used for monitoring progress towards curricular objectives and/or summative assessments (Datnow & Hubbard, 2015). A synthesis of this research reveals that teachers often find it difficult to interpret interim data and therefore resort to other forms of assessment to make instructional decisions (Datnow & Hubbard, 2015). While interim assessments *can* be formative if the results are used to promote student learning, either via feedback to the student or through changes to the teacher's subsequent instruction, in practice this typically does not happen with interim assessments (Shepard, 2005) because they are usually designed for easy aggregation to class or school levels, and for the purpose of tracking students' progress towards standards (Datnow & Hubbard, 2015). When assessments are standardized and not mapped to the particular content and skills being taught in a classroom, teachers have trouble translating the data obtained from these assessments into instructional plans (Cosner, 2011). For example, Nabors-Oláh, Lawrence, and Riggan (2010) found that elementary math teachers were able to use interim assessments to prioritize topics for re-teaching, but were not able to glean from these assessments any information about students' conceptual understanding of math nor about the nature of students' errors and misconceptions, nor did they use the interim assessment data to address the needs of individual students. These same researchers also found that the changes these teachers made to their math instruction did not often relate to what they had learned from the assessments; rather, the teachers "seemed to draw from a set repertoire of instructional strategies" (p. 244). In order to make good use of assessment information, teachers need good knowledge of instructional strategies; this may be why Limbrick, Buchanan, Goodwin, and Schwarcz (2010) found that providing teachers with research-based descriptions of best practices for writing instruction was key to helping teachers make effective use of formative writing assessment.

Research on math teachers' use of assessment data has suggested that assessment data may only be useful insofar as teachers know how to address the conceptual misunderstandings that the assessments reveal (Heritage, Kim, Vendlinski, & Herman, 2009). An analogy of this finding applied to writing assessment would be that teachers need to know how to address students' conceptual misunderstandings related to genre, grammar and vocabulary. Knowledge of writing development can also help teachers link assessment information to instruction; Limbrick et al. (2010) found that such knowledge can allow teachers to construct learning trajectories for their students (Limbrick et al., 2010), to plan instruction and set benchmarks for measuring student progress (Parr, Glasswell, & Aikman, 2007), and to sharpen the focus of the feedback they gave students, leading to increases in their writing achievement (Parr & Timperley, 2010). Knowledge of individual student characteristics is also important; Callahan and Spalding (2006) found that working with a portfolio system enabled teachers to understand how different students required different types of instructional support in order to improve their writing.

While interim assessments are criticized as having little to offer teachers as an approach to improving instruction, contextualized qualitative analysis of a students' work has been shown to generate useful ideas for adapting instruction to meet students' needs. Pella (2012) found that when teachers subjected students' writing to close qualitative analysis, their instruction became more responsive to students' needs. In a similar vein, Ruiz-Primo (2011) describes the benefits of dialogic "assessment conversations" integrated within classroom activities, and argues that this method can be effective at allowing teachers to discern students' misconceptions, if teachers are able to link their observations to discrete learning goals, and in turn link those goals to broad learning outcomes. Likewise, Langer and Colton (2005) discuss how their professional development efforts with teachers have led them to conclude that focusing solely on quantitative school-level assessment data is insufficient to make meaningful improvements in instructional practice because it leads teachers to "overgeneralize and engage in uniform instructional and professional development practices" (24), assuming that the same reason accounts for all students' struggles with a particular aspect of writing. In their experience, large-scale quantitative assessment data is best used as a starting point for in-depth, qualitative and longitudinal study of particular students identified as representing specific types of struggling students and their learning challenges. Teacher collaboration around such study can lead to transformations in teaching approaches that address the needs of the student body in a more precise and differentiated way.