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Improving the writing skills of English learners: An impact on student learning analysis

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Key words: assessment, improvement, English learners (ELs), writing instruction

Abstract

In this action research project, English Learners' (ELs) progress is monitored with a variety of formal and informal assessment methods through the Impact on Student Learning Analysis (ISLA). The purpose of this ISLA is to: a) determine the effect of instruction; b) use assessment methods to guide instruction; and c) communicate the results to multiple audiences. As evidence of this, lessons centered on writing conventions were implemented, with formal and informal writing assessments to guide future lessons. Writing quizzes were given every week to determine the effect of the instruction. As a result of this analysis, how these formal and informal assessments methods worked for these ELs, was deduced. By directly focusing on writing conventions, all ELs showed an increase in writing convention knowledge and overall writing skills.

Context

The purpose of this action research is to refine and improve classroom practice, as it relates to the academic development and achievement of the students, through implementing an Impact on Student Learning Analysis (ISLA) (Sagor, 2000). This ISLA takes place in a sixth-grade English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classroom at a Title I¹ middle school in metro Atlanta, Georgia. The majority of the student population at the school is Caucasian and middle class. However, the students in this particular class are from Mexico, speak Spanish as their first language, and vary in ages from 12 – 13. There are three males and three females in this class. This class is divided with their

interests; while some like to read, others do not.

Another common thread in this class is their writing scores on the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State (ACCESS) test for English learners (ELs), which is Georgia's annual, federally-required language assessment for ELs, who actively receive English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services. The ACCESS test measures English language development in the language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and determines placement and exit from the ESOL program (Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2011). All ELs participating in this ISLA scored at a high Level 2/ Level 3 (high beginner – low intermediate level), out of a Level 1 (low-level beginner) to Level 5 (high advanced) range (WIDA, 2011).

Since these students scored low on the writing section of the ACCESS test, this class period is centered on writing: practicing and mastering writing conventions. The Georgia Performance Standard used for this unit was ELA6C1 (See Table 1).

Theoretical Foundations

The teacher conducting this ISLA holds the strong belief that all students deserve the opportunity to learn to the best of their ability and that all humans are created in the likeness of Christ and deserve to receive linguistically and culturally appropriate differentiated instruction. Therefore, she has chosen to approach writing instruction from a sociocultural perspective, as it allows ELs to learn language through interaction, observation, and experiences, which are representative of real-world interactions and the first-language acquisition process (Vygotsky, 1978). Presenting language instruction and practice through more natural language acquisition methods, provides ELs with opportunities to practice English in a less stressful,

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¹ Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended (ESEA) provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, (n. d., para. 1)

Table 1: Georgia Performance Standard ELA6C1

The student demonstrates understanding and control of the rules of the English language, realizing that usage involves the appropriate application of conventions and grammar in both written and spoken formats.

The student: ...

- c.) Identifies and writes simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences, avoiding fragments and run-ons;
- d.) Demonstrates appropriate comma and semicolon usage;
- e.) Uses common spelling rules, applies common spelling patterns, and develops and masters words that are commonly misspelled;
- f.) Produces final drafts that demonstrates accurate spelling and the correct use of punctuation and capitalization

(Georgia Department of Education, 2015)

less anxiety-inducing manner, which ultimately leads to more language acquisition (Krashen, 2003).

Due to the nature of this ISLA's pedagogical sociocultural foundation, instruction of writing concepts must be explicit, hands-on, engaging, and interesting for the students to increase motivation and scores (Cooper, 2014; Kember, Ho, & Hong, 2008). Such instruction provides the teacher with a means to build background and scaffold (or provided support for) correct usage of writing conventions and present writing in a manner that increases comprehensible input for the ELs (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

Comprehensible input is imperative in ESOL classrooms, as the literature suggests that ELs learn best when they are presented content and language in a comprehensible manner, including strategies like visual representations, hands-on materials, modelling, or graphic organizers (Krashen, 2003). From there, ELs are able to comprehend the scaffolded content and language, input it into their brains, and ultimately build upon it, which results in increased language acquisition and literacy development (Krashen, 1988, 2003).

It should be noted that academic writing skills are more difficult for ELs to develop than communicative listening and speaking skills and often require more time for mastery (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2011). This could be due to the sociocultural aspects of language acquisition, in which the ELs learn more communicative language (and less academic language) from the environment and cultural influences (Daniels, 2008).

Implementation

There is a large quantity of literature that highlights the benefits of differentiated instruction for ELs (Adesope et al., 2011). Research-based differentiation for ELs is supported with empirical evidence, but definitions vary for “*what* differentiated instruction actually looks like and *how* teachers can integrate it into their routines and procedures” (Baecher, Artigliere, Patterson, & Spatzer, 2012, p. 14). Because of this, a more concise definition of differentiation was developed and states that differentiated instruction is “generally tailored to specific subgroups of students rather than the whole class and involved the teacher in creating variations of the main activities of the lesson” (Baecher et al., 2012, p. 16).

The Pearson SIOP instructional model, which is followed by the teacher implementing this action research, explicitly includes language and linguistics in the methods of differentiation and presents language and content simultaneously (Echevarria et al., 2004). Because this ESOL small-group class consists only of sixth-grade ELs, this class tailors specific, language- and culture-based differentiated pedagogy to meet the needs of this 6th grade ESOL subgroup, adhering to the aforementioned definition of differentiated instruction. Therefore, all implemented strategies in the ISLA are differentiated and designed to meet the specific academic and language needs of the ELs.

At the onset of this six-week unit, the ESOL class only had access to laptop computers once a week, which was as often as the teacher could reserve them due to school policies. (Neither iPads nor ActivBoards/Smart Boards were available at the time of the ISLA.) Therefore, the overhead projector was frequently used (which the students enjoyed), as were handouts of proofreading symbols, practice writing samples, and a writing folder that the teacher assembled. This folder contained definitions, examples, and practice pages for each area of the writing conventions (i.e. capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and organization) and is where the students kept all writing assessments, including the pre- and post-tests. These resources allowed for modelling, explicit instruction, and addressing their prior knowledge of the writing process, which aid ELs in comprehending writing and new language (Echevarria, et al., 2004; Palmer, Shackelford, Miller, & Leclere, 2007; Townsend, 2009; Watkins & Lindahl, 2010).

Fortunately, during the third week of this unit, the ESOL department received an LCD projector, which completely redesigned the instruction in this class. Now, the teacher could use interactive writing and grammar websites filled with games

“*academic writing skills are more difficult for ELs to develop than communicative listening and speaking skills and often require more time for mastery*”

and activities for the students to participate in as a whole group. The ELs had a renewed excitement for this unit, as interactive websites became visual representations of the content as well as class competitions (Townsend, 2009). Whole-group and small-group games focused on writing conventions, and they allowed ELs the opportunity to work within the zone of proximal development where they were able to acquire more vocabulary and more complex language structures (Vygotsky, 1978). On days when the laptops were used in class, the students would continue to visit these websites to independently play the grammar “games”. Little did they realize, they were improving their writing skills.

All were engaged during the lessons because they were able to manipulate the screen using the keyboard connected to the LCD projector. For other exercises, ELs were able to interact with the projector by writing on the board or having races of who can find the correct writing conventions the fastest. The lessons and methods were fun, engaging, and used innovative technology (Park & Kim, 2011).

Research Design

Conducting an ISLA as action research provides teachers the opportunity to implement instructional investigation in the classroom, analyze the findings, and reflect on the effectiveness of the instruction. In educational research, quasi-experimental research designs, like the ISLA, are most commonly used, as there is neither a control group for comparison nor control of other variables (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Quasi-experimental research designs employ naturally occurring groups that are already in existence and do not employ random assignment of participants to groups (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Gall et al., 2007). This type of experiment is less disruptive and more convenient for the teacher, and the quasi-experimental design was developed to “explore causality in situations where one cannot use a true experiment” (Rovai, Baker, & Ponton, 2013).

Research Procedures

Throughout the nine-week unit on writing conventions, informal and formal assessments were conducted regularly. Students began the unit with a pre-test, which consisted of writing a paragraph on the topic of their choice. Using the one-group pre-test - post-test design allowed the teacher to determine the effectiveness of the writing intervention in a systematic manner (Rovai et al., 2013).

After analysing the pre-test, the teacher found the greatest areas of weakness were:

spelling, punctuation, capitalization, organization, paragraphing, and overall writing conventions. As a means of informally measuring progress, students would have weekly informal writing assessments, during which they would write one paragraph. Their writing would be collaboratively proofread and edited by themselves and the teacher, where they worked within the zone of proximal development to increase their writing knowledge through explicit, individualized instruction and linguistically-appropriate scaffolding (Adesope et al., 2011; Barr, Eslami, & Joshi, 2012; Olson & Land, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). Also, various proofreading activities and informal assessments, such as: whole group proofreading examples on the board, guided practice in flexible groupings, and again, explicit instruction of how to proofread and edit writing samples correctly, were modelled and practiced in order to introduce the students to the idea of reading through their work with the intent of correcting it (Olson & Land, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978).

Formal assessments, in the form of writing “quizzes”, were given once a week to monitor the students’ progress. All quizzes were graded with the same rubric, which focused on spelling, punctuation, capitalization, organization, and paragraphing. Writing topics were geared toward the backgrounds of the students, as they were provided an open-ended prompt and allowed to write a paragraph addressing the prompt while using their background knowledge on the topic. By allowing ELs to employ their background knowledge of the writing topic, they were able to produce more quality content, as they already knew applicable vocabulary and phrases (Echevarria et al., 2014; Ogle & Correa-Kovtun, 2010; Pacheco, 2010). By using the same rubric, students knew assessment expectations and were able to self-monitor their success, or lack thereof. After nine weeks, the post-test was given. The format was the same as the pre-test, and students wrote on a topic of their choice, which again allowed them to address their prior knowledge and vocabulary (Echevarria et al., 2004).

Assessments

Both informal and formal assessments were employed throughout this ISLA. Informal assessments were embedded throughout each lesson and consisted of group discussions, whole group activities using the LCD projector, group proofreading activities, individual work with the teacher, observations, and self-assessments. Their purpose was to provide the teacher with on-going data and the students with on-going feedback on their mastery of writing conventions, so that teaching and learning could be adjusted and improved when

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needed (Sleeter, 2005). Each informal assessment was designed to measure the ELs' writing skills progress and construct meaning by building bridges between their prior knowledge and writing experiences and new writing content (Colombo & Furbush, 2009; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). With these informal assessments, all language domains of reading, writing, listening, and speaking were addressed, which allowed ELs to better internalize writing conventions and the writing process as they talked about writing, read passages that addressed and modelled writing, and listened to the teacher and peers discuss how to improve writing.

The formal assessments used were different from a generic multiple-choice test because this unit focused on writing. For the pre-test, students created a writing sample (a paragraph in length) on the topic of their choice. By allowing them to select their own topic for writing, which would ultimately connect to their prior knowledge, they would be more likely to use vocabulary and grammar structures that were more familiar to them and appropriate to the content (Palmer, Shackelford, Miller, & Leclere, 2007). The post-test was conducted in the same way, but was directed to be longer in length. Like the pre-test, the post-test was allowed to be a topic of the students' choice as well. Both assessments were graded using the same rubric, which provided consistency, reliability, and alignment.

Because the formal assessments provide for a more authentic assessment, as they are representative of natural written communication, the teacher was able to appropriately and purposefully assess each EL at his or her respective language level. Such assessments are appropriate and needed for ELs, as the assessment allows the teacher to create a culturally responsive writing prompt that connects to ELs' experiences and background knowledge, allows for comprehensible input provided by the teacher, and permits the ELs to provide differentiated output (i.e. their written responses) at their current academic and language level (Howard, 2014; Parkay, Hass, & Anctil, 2010).

Grading Rubric

The rubric focused on six criteria: capitalization, punctuation, spelling, organization, and paragraphing. The range of performance for each category was measured in points. For no errors, the students received ten points, for one to two errors, the students received seven points, and for three to four errors, students received five points. If there were five to six errors in the category, students received two points in that specific category, and no points if there were seven or more errors. The students were able to receive up to ten points for

each category, giving them a total of 50 points, totalling 50 points out of 50 points, equalling a grade of 100%. If all ten points were not received in each category, the amount of received points was divided by 50 (the total number of possible points). Therefore, the grade was a decimalized percentage of points.

The purpose of this discrete rubric (Appendix A, p. 21) was to assess the students' improvement, or lack thereof, in writing conventions. It was differentiated based on the language proficiency levels of the ELs and what they are capable of writing at their respective levels (WIDA, 2012). The assessments linked directly to the standard used, and specifically addressed the problem areas of the students. The lessons and rubric were created after the pre-test was given in order to deduce which writing conventions needed to be included. Students were able to use any standard accommodations that were marked for them on their official accommodation forms, such as extended time, paraphrase directions, or using a word-to-word dictionary.

If the wording was out of order or impeded comprehension, this was addressed and included in the organization category of their rubric. Because organization was studied and assessed informally throughout the unit, the class practiced how to create organization through topic sentences and creating coherent flow of content throughout the paragraph with chronological order words, transition words, or how to provide support for topic sentences. This was another reason why students were allowed to write about topics with which they were familiar – they were able to more accurately discuss these topics in a coherent manner (Echevarria et al., 2004).

Results

Table 1 is a whole class summary of the results. It is shown that all students had at least a ten-point increase from their pre-test to their post-test. Student 5 led the class with a 78% increase or improvement from the pre-test to post-test. The least growth was achieved by Student 4, attaining a 19% improvement. On average, the class experienced a 39% increase in their scores. Each student was extremely proud of the growth from pre-test score to post-test score.

Analysing and Reporting Data

Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the whole group performance on the pre-test and post-test as compared to the tabulation (Table 1). All students had at least a ten-point increase from their pre-test to post-test. Only Student 6 scored perfectly on the post-test, though Student 5 showed the

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”

Table 1: Pre-test and Post-test Data

Student	Gender	Pre-test	Post-test	% Increase
1	F	66	90	36%
2	F	64	78	22%
3	M	44	64	45%
4	M	52	62	19%
5	F	46	82	78%
6	M	74	100	35%

Figure 1: Whole Group Data



“female students had higher pre-test and post-test scores. The female students also had more improvement between the two scores.”

greatest increase in score.

The class was divided into the two subgroups of male and female (See Figure 2 and Figure 3). Because all students are Hispanic, speak Spanish as their first language, are in the same grade, have the same socioeconomic status, and have extremely similar language proficiency levels, the students were grouped by gender, and it proved to be the category of greatest difference. After analysing the two graphs (Figure 2 and Figure 3), it is evident that the female students had higher pre-test and post-test scores. The female students also had more improvement between the two scores. This could be due to a greater interest in writing. Over the course of the unit, the females became extremely interested in writing, and they excitedly worked to create long, elaborate stories. This could be due to sincere interest in writing or to the fact that they enjoyed the praise and compliments that came with improved writing scores.

The male students, however, showed less interest in writing and were more prone to talk or create short, simple writing samples that required

Figure 2: Subgroup Data – Female Students

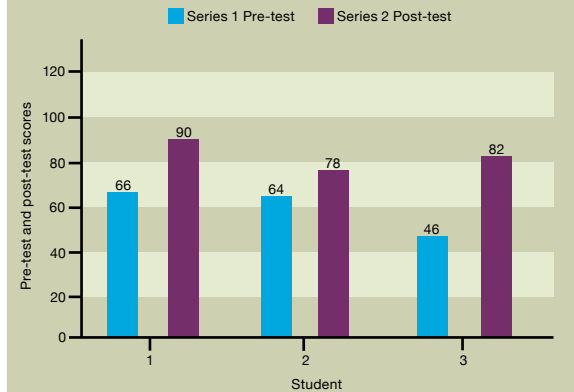
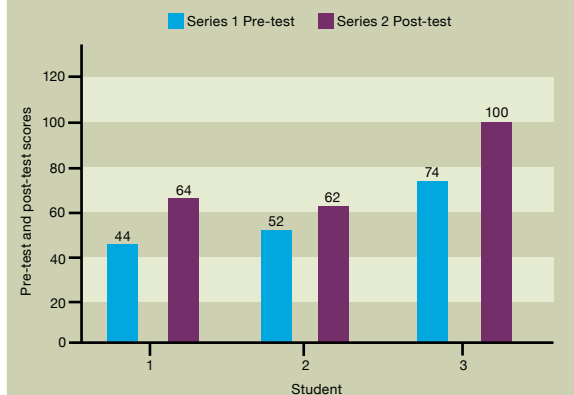


Figure 3: Subgroup Data – Male Students



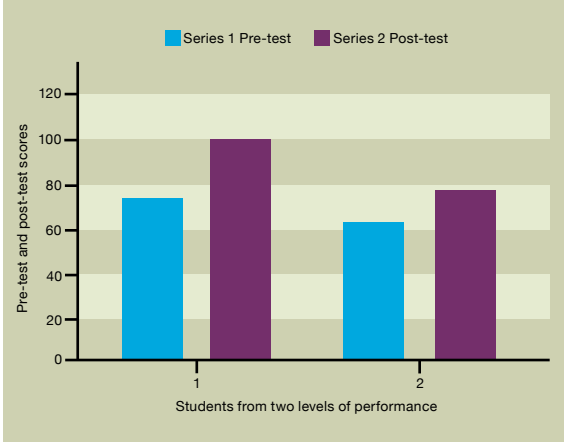
minimal effort. Even though they were able to select topics of their choice to write on, the majority of the male students have a low proficiency level in writing, making it more difficult for them to complete their task competently. From previous experiences with these male students, they showed less interest in completing tasks or working to improve something (writing or otherwise) when it is difficult for them to do.

Comparing two students

The two individual students in Figure 4 represent different levels of performance. Student 1 is a male student, and Student 2 is a female student. Student 1 does have a slightly higher proficiency level in the domain of writing. Therefore, his extensive growth and improvement in writing was expected and the final score of 100% commendable.

Student 2 is at a lower level in writing, and

Figure 4: Two individual students



occasionally shows signs of language transference problems between her first language of Spanish(L1) and her second language of English (L2). Also, she exhibits letter and phoneme confusion and consistently has a great deal of difficulty with spelling, despite the content or familiarity with the words. However, Student 2 did show a great deal of improvement because, over the course of this action research study, she became more aware of the writing and spelling errors she would typically make and grew to be more knowledgeable about how to correct them.

Reflecting on the Data

After analysing the data, it can be determined that this unit was successful in improving the students' writing abilities through explicit, engaging, and collaborative instruction. Because this unit focused on capitalization, paragraphing, punctuation, spelling, and organization, each student improved in each of these areas, and increased their post-test scores. As a teacher, though, there are always some improvements in practice for future implementation, especially since SMARTboards, ActivBoards, and computer resources are now more available.

While the students were able to easily grasp the concept of indenting a paragraph or when to capitalize words, one area that needs more emphasis is spelling. Students were able to use dictionaries, ask peers, ask teachers, and keep a list of their "problem" words, which did prove useful as students soon were able to memorize these words simply due to repeated exposure.

Along with this unit, a separate unit on spelling, including definitions, and how to utilize these new words into the writing samples should be taught. Having spelling tests or vocabulary quizzes (and

to encourage them to study the words) would be beneficial as well. The learning and achievement gaps within this class could possibly be decreased with this emphasis on spelling and vocabulary. However, the vocabulary would need to be differentiated by student to meet the needs of all ELs in the class and to challenge them individually.

The learning objective in which the students were most successful was the improvement in punctuation and paragraphing. They already had a strong grasp on capitalization and organizing their thoughts. However, separate assessments on organization could be performed, and rubrics could specify how the paper should be organized. Also, the teacher should include lessons on verb tense when this unit is taught again. This could be listed under organization on the rubric, or perhaps another category needs to be created on the rubric so that expectations are clear.

The instruction was hands-on and visual. The class often used the LCD projector to work together to proofread writing samples (either teacher-created, student samples, or found online) or to play grammar, spelling, punctuation, or other forms of writing games as a class. Students also worked with partners, in small groups, and individually when it came to editing and organizing writing samples. The students spent a great deal of time on their own writings, and would work with the teacher individually to proofread and correct. As a whole group, volunteers would correct errors in paragraphs written on the overhead. Students were extremely engaged in each of these informal assessments embedded throughout the unit because they were able to get up and move around. More excitement and engagement from the students during each lesson correlated to higher writing scores on each week's formal writing assessment.

Conclusion

As a result of this action research, the teacher deduced that the instructional strategies and informal assessments directly led to higher formal assessment scores, as measured by the post-test and its rubric. Throughout the course of the nine-weeks, all ELs received comprehensible input, scaffolding, appropriately-differentiated pedagogy, and interactive, engaging, and explicit instruction in a variety of flexible groupings that reflected real-world writing skills and communication (Echevarria et al., 2004; Krashen, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). These methods allowed students to not only work at their current academic and language level, but to build upon that level and improve their writing convention skills.

While the female student group performed

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at a higher level than the male student group, all students showed an improvement in their writing. As a teacher, taking the time to implement action research has been an invaluable experience. Reflecting on the data provided the teacher with the opportunity to conclude that explicit and engaging instructional practices were effective, particularly if the writing assessments (both formal and informal) were appropriately differentiated for students' language proficiency levels (Alber, 2017). With this information, the teacher can clearly and confidently construct the next writing objectives for these students. **TEACH**

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Appendix A

Conventions : Writing Conventions Folder

Student Name: _____

CATEGORY	10 Points	7 Points	5 Points	10 Points	0
Capitalization	There are no capitalization errors.	There are 1-2 capitalization errors.	There are 3-4 capitalization errors.	There are 5-6 capitalization errors.	There are seven or MORE capitalization errors.
Punctuation	There are no punctuation errors.	There are 1-2 punctuation errors.	There are 3-4 punctuation errors.	There are 5-6 punctuation errors.	There are seven or MORE punctuation errors.
Spelling	There are no spelling errors.	There are 1-2 spelling errors.	There are 3-4 spelling errors.	There are 5-6 spelling errors.	There are seven or MORE spelling errors.
Organization	There are no word order mistakes. The ideas are clear.	There are 1-2 word order mistakes. The ideas are clear, but there is some difficulty understanding what is being said.	There are 3-4 word order mistakes. Some ideas are clear, while others are difficult to understand.	There are 5-6 word order mistakes. The ideas are not clear and are confusing.	There are seven or MORE word order mistakes. The ideas do not make any sense and can not understand.
Paragraphing	All paragraphs are indented. Paragraphs are divided appropriately.	Most paragraphs are indented. Few paragraphs should be divided.	Some paragraphs are indented. Most paragraphs should be divided again.	Few paragraphs are indented. Paragraphs should be divided again.	No paragraphs are indented. There are no separate paragraphs.

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