The Impact of Teachers' Communication of Standards on Student Writing Confidence and Motivation

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Abstract

This study looked at the impact of the teacher's communication of standards on student writing confidence and motivation in one Singapore primary school English Language classroom. With the aim of developing self-directed learners in the area of writing, a writing rubric was used to communicate standards of performance for writing. This writing rubric was also used during writing lessons to build confidence and motivate writers. Findings show that the use of the writing rubric increased the students' level of confidence in writing. The authors also discuss the use of the writing rubric for teaching and learning purposes in the classroom. The possibility of the use of a writing rubric to develop a common language regarding writing and ensure effective communication in the area of developing writing skills was also being explored.

Introduction

Literature Review

Communication of standards

Saphier, Haley-Speca, and Gower (2008) emphasised the importance of explicitly sharing the standards of performance and criteria for success in an assessment task. Performance standards and criteria for success should be 'public, precise, prior, printed and presented in models of exemplary work' (Saphier et al., 2008, p. 438).

According to Saphier et al. (2008), rubrics are communication devices for setting criteria and standards. They replace grades with specific information about the performance of each student. In addition, the complement to a good rubric is a set of samples of actual student work that exemplify the different cells of the rubric, accompanied by explanations of why each sample exemplifies the level of quality claimed for it (Saphier et al., 2008).

Self-Efficacy

According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy is a belief in one's capabilities or skills to achieve a particular goal or exhibit a particular behaviour.

As evidenced by Bandura (1997), self-efficacy development is influenced by four main sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, physiological states (reduction in stress reaction and negative emotions), and social persuasion, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Sources of Self-efficacy Development

	Source	Understanding	Possible Implications & Considerations for this project
1	Mastery experiences	Interpreting one's own performance	Use of writing rubrics and levels of performance
2	Vicarious experiences	Interpreting the performance of others	• Use of samples of writing • Use of exemplars • Peer evaluation
3	Physiological experiences (reduction in stress reaction and negative emotions)	Interpreting one's physiological state.	• Understanding interest in writing • Hearing the voices of learners through surveys and group interviews
4	Social persuasion	Interpreting others' expressions of your capabilities	Providing feedback through the use of a writing rubric instead of just by marking the writing scripts

Writing Confidence and Motivation

Pajares (2003) and Pajares and Valiante (1997) found that students who were unwilling to express themselves in writing, lacked confidence in their writing abilities or had high writing apprehension were less likely to perform well in their writing.

Hansen (1998) argued that as students learn to evaluate themselves as writers, they also learn to set goals and strategies for improving their writing and for documenting their growth. This self-awareness helps students interpret their achievements in a way that will boost their confidence. Zimmerman (2000) postulated that self-efficacy motivates students to use learning strategies in their academic pursuits.

McLeod (1987) observed that because writing is as much an emotional as a cognitive activity, affective components strongly influence all phases of the writing process. She urged researchers to explore affective measures to help students understand how these affective processes might inform their writing. It seems clear that students' writing self-efficacy beliefs and the sources of information on which beliefs are formed should play a prominent role in such a theory.

Hence, the research question for this study was:

> *What is the impact of the teacher's communication of standards on student writing confidence and motivation?*

Methodology

Samples

The participants for this project were from one class of Primary 4 English Language mixed-ability students. This class consisted of 17 girls and 16 boys. Convenient sampling was used as this English

Language class was taught by a teacher who was also a team member in this project. One teacher and 33 students were involved in this study.

Intervention

Knowledge and Pre-Assessment of Learners

Samples of students' writing were analysed and common errors were noted prior to the intervention. A pre-intervention survey was also conducted to look at students' perceptions of writing and to gather some data pertaining to writing lessons. This process was carried out with the aim of knowing our participants in relation to writing and was expected to also help us better plan our intervention. A timeline cum schedule was also planned to guide the team to identify and pace the main stages in the intervention process.

Intervention Process

The first few writing lessons were planned by the team. The subsequent lessons were then planned based on the team's reflection on the progress of the writing lessons. A brief lesson outline for each writing lesson and some teaching resources to be used for the writing lessons were prepared. The intervention began in March 2015 when the criteria for success for writing were discussed and shared with the students through the use of a rubric during lessons. Opportunities were created during writing lessons for students to relate the descriptors in the rubric to the pieces of writing through self- and peer-assessment. These lesson plans by the team offered ideas on teacher modelling and how opportunities could be provided for the students to discuss the criteria for success and the exemplars or samples of writing.

Two versions of the writing rubric were used in the teaching and learning of writing skills during the intervention process. After the use of the first version of the writing rubric, one group interview was conducted with a group of students to explore the usefulness of this rubric in their writing. Based on the students' feedback and responses, the writing rubric was revised and a second version of the rubric was created and used for subsequent writing lessons. Another group interview was conducted with a group of students to explore the usefulness of the second version of the writing rubric. The lessons and writing rubrics used aimed to communicate standards of performance, criteria for success and the expectations of the learners in relation to writing. The writing rubric also served the purpose of motivating learning.

Data collection

The audio recordings of the two student group interviews reported above were coded to explore students' understanding of the standards of performance as well as to better understand the impact of the series of lessons and use of the rubric on the clarity in the communication of standards and expectations, writing confidence and motivation. The following are broad questions asked during the student group interviews, which were conducted by two of the team members:

- What makes a good writer? (Understanding the standards)
- Have you seen this writing rubric before? Has this been helpful to you? In what ways? How do you think we could make this better? (Usefulness of a writing rubric in communicating standards)
- Do you think that you have become a more confident writer? Do you think you are more motivated to write? Why do you say so? (Understanding confidence level and motivation)

After the intervention, there was also an analysis of the students' pieces of writing which enabled the team to examine if the students had shown progress in acquiring the necessary writing skills. A post-

intervention survey was also carried out at the end of the project to see the impact on students' perceptions, level of confidence and motivation in relation to writing.

Results

Quantitative Results from Survey

For the knowledge of the standards and expectations of a good writer (Question 1 in Table 2), all of the pupils (100%) indicated that they had gained knowledge of what made a good writer. There was an increase in the percentage of pupils who felt that they were confident writers (Question 7 in Table 2).

Table 2

Responses to the survey before and after the intervention

In my writing lessons…	Before Intervention				After Intervention			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
1. I know what makes a good writer and I can share that with a friend.	10%	66%	17%	7%	40%	60%	0%	0%
2. I like the writing topics.	27%	59%	7%	7%	40%	45%	15%	0%
3. I enjoy writing on the topics.	45%	41%	7%	7%	40%	50%	10%	0%
4. The things that I have written are important.	66%	14%	20%	0%	60%	35%	5%	0%
5. I have strong feelings when I am writing.	41%	27%	14%	18%	50%	40%	10%	0%
6. I try my best to write the best that I can.	52%	34%	7%	7%	60%	30%	10%	0%
7. I am a confident writer.	27%	34%	27%	12%	40%	50%	10%	0%

Note. SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree.

Based on the data collected from the pre- and post-intervention surveys, there was an increase in the percentage of students feeling excited about writing (Table 3). There was also an increase in the percentage of pupils who thought that they were good writers and a decrease in the percentage of pupils who perceived themselves as not being good writers after the intervention (Table 4).

Table 3

Emotional response to writing

		Before Intervention		After Intervention	
1.	Writing makes me feel…	Excited ☺	Bored ☹	Excited ☺	Bored ☹
		66%	34%	90%	10%

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Table 4

Student self-efficacy

		Before Intervention			After Intervention		
2.	How good do you think you are at writing?	Good writer	Ok writer	Not a good writer	Good writer	Ok writer	Not a good writer
		7%	48%	45%	35%	55%	10%

Qualitative Results from Group Interviews

The analysis of the group interview with 10 participants (consisting of higher progress, middle progress and lower progress learners) after the revision of the writing rubric showed the following:

a. *Communication of standards*. The students were able to articulate some of the terms used in the writing rubric and were able to explain what the terms meant and how they should be applied in their own pieces of writing.

b. *Use of the rubric for providing feedback*. Besides being used to communicate standards and expectations, the writing rubric was also used to identify gaps in students' writing and provide feedback. It provided specific information about each student's performance and the support for the identification of the strengths and areas for improvement.

S1	There must be no story gaps. If there are story gaps, the reader will not find it interesting and it confuses the reader. If the reader has many questions, it means the writing has story gaps.
S2	You find it more interesting. You make the reader like they want to read more.
S3	This one can tell us if a story is mundane and we can check on our errors, grammar and punctuation so that I can be more careful with grammar.
S4	Also you can see if you have poor sequencing and you can improve on it.
S5	Last time I got some relevant ideas at getting there and I know which part I should improve. Not just learning my strengths but what I need to improve in.

c. *Confidence to write*. With a knowledge of the standards and expectations, students felt that they were more confident to write and knew which area they should improve in and how they should improve, given the different levels of performance that were found in the writing rubric. The ability to check and evaluate their writing based on a set of criteria also helped them to develop their confidence to write. This also led to their motivation to write and improve. They showed interest in reading and linked that to writing. However, the lower progress learners were still a little fearful to write as they were worried about the grammatical errors they made. However, they were still willing to try.

S1	Yes, it makes me more confident when I know the rubric and know the questions that I need to answer. When I am not confident, it makes me scared and I may make more mistakes.
S2	Yes, I feel more confident because when I see this checklist, I will remember it in my head.
S3	Yes, it makes me more confident. When we read and we don't understand, we can use the dictionary and we can use them to write in our compositions.

Discussion

Communication of standards through the use of a rubric and its impact on motivation and confidence

The provision of a set of standards for writing through the use of a writing rubric has helped learners be more aware of their personal attainments, with better knowledge of their strengths and areas for improvement. In relation to Bandura's (1997) four categories of experiences, this assessment tool has provided both mastery and vicarious experiences. Creating opportunities for learners to share their feedback with regard to writing and the co-construction of standards has also reduced their anxiety and stress in developing their writing skills as the affective aspect of writing was taken into consideration. This tool has also enabled the learners to document their growth, given the different levels of performance in the rubric.

In communicating standards or success criteria, the rubric also helps to develop a common language for teaching and learning and, in this case, for writing. The use of a rubric can certainly serve the purpose of both communicating standards as well as developing a common language in the teaching and learning of writing. The learners' ability to articulate the standards has built up their confidence in writing. Having a common understanding of the terminologies and descriptors found in the writing rubric also needs scaffolding by the teacher. How the teacher scaffolds the learning and understanding of these terminologies is also a crucial aspect of the teaching and learning process. The team also sees a need to ensure consistent use of a writing rubric across levels so as to communicate effectively to our pupils in the area of writing. It is important for schools to identify and use the terms or words that pupils need to learn.

Limitations

The results of the study are not generalizable as the number of participants in this study is too small. Although the analysis of the interviews and survey indicated that there was an increase in the level of motivation and confidence, the teacher factor might have played a part in motivating the learners too. The improvement in student writing ability and skills or writing confidence and motivation could be the result of multiple constituents. Future research could explore these constituents and their impact on writing confidence and motivation.

Conclusion

There are many factors that influence the development of writing skills. The disposition to write, student motivation and confidence are important factors for English Language teachers to consider as these may all have implications for how we view writing and our teaching practices. More professional development or learning opportunities both for pre-service and in-service teachers should look at the effective communication of standards and at teaching practices that increase self-efficacy in students' writing or in the development of skills. It is also a good practice for teachers to reflect on their own perceptions and beliefs about the teaching and learning of writing as these will impact teaching practices in the classroom. Self-efficacy beliefs provide the foundation for human motivation, well-being and personal accomplishment. Unless students believe that their actions can produce the outcomes they desire, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties.

Effective teaching is the mastering of both the art and craft of teaching. This project relates a great deal to the teacher's roles as a reflective practitioner, facilitator and teacher researcher. Shulman (1987) identified categories of the knowledge base of teaching, and knowledge regarding the

curriculum and learners are two categories of that knowledge base. How much of our official national curriculum regarding learning outcomes do we know? How much do we know about our learners so that we can plan our instruction, with a knowledge of what they will need to achieve? Hence, in the crafting of the criteria for the writing rubric, it is good to make constant reference to our national syllabus and to align the criteria with the learning outcomes or objectives as stipulated in our 2010 EL Syllabus. Responding to students' learning needs is also important for a teacher researcher. The analyses of our students' writing and the constant gathering of data about learning have also highlighted our role as teacher researchers. One practice that works in one classroom may not necessarily work in another and that relates much to the job of educators as reflective practitioners. In the planning of these writing lessons, there is also a focus on the teacher as facilitator. Teachers in the classroom should not constantly tell and evaluate. How much have we allowed our learners to discover for themselves through the reading of a variety of texts and opportunities for classroom talk?

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