

What are the effects of the 6 +1 Writing Traits on the Attitudes and Writing Skills of Fifth Grade ELLs?

Abstract

In the Bahamas, ELLs consist mainly of Haitian descent students. Unfortunately, this demographic of students continuously score below their Bahamian counterparts in Creative Writing. This research examined the affects the 6 + 1 Writing Traits assessment had on the attitudes and writing abilities of fifteen, fifth grade, Haitian descent students.

Statement of the Problem

Haitian descent students represent a growing sub population of ELLs whose limited English Language proficiency presents a formidable challenge for Bahamian educators. Despite being an ELL, the Haitian descent student is mainstreamed into the general school population. In fact, many government schools on the island of New Providence record a student population of 50% to over 80% Haitian descent. The Haitian ELLs within the Bahamian education system are self-motivated students who are eager to learn. However, they continue to achieve limited academic success in Creative Writing. This is because ELLs exert their endeavor best to learn on pace with their NE speaking peers whilst simultaneously learning to be proficient speakers and writers in English. Additionally, because ELLs most often achieve lower scores in Creative Writing than Native English (NE) speaking students, they most often develop a dislike and apprehension towards writing. Consequently, this can lead to a cycle of failure in Creative Writing as well as failure in other Language Arts disciplines that can be carried throughout the ELL's Junior and High school years.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of the renowned 6 + 1 Writing Traits assessment on the attitudes and writing abilities of fifteen (15) fifth grade, Haitian descent students.

Literature Review

Many research studies have examined the effectiveness of the 6 + 1 Writing Traits Model yielding positive results. The Jennie Wilson Elementary Research (NWREL, 2000), was conducted for one year evaluating the pre and post writings of K-5 students using trait rubrics with growth determined by the differential. At end of the year, the data revealed K-5 students reporting gains in writing ranging from 40% -90% (Jarmer et al; 2000). Additionally, during the school year 2003-2004, the Estes Mc Doniel Elementary, a Clark County School District school in Nevada also implemented the Trait Based instructional program at the 3rd -5th grades. Fifty – seven percent (57%) of its student population was of a compliment of Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, African American and American Indian/Alaskan Native (Clark County School District, 2003-2004). Its main goals were to improve students' writing proficiency and scoring on the Nevada Writing Examination (NAWE) as the previous year's writing results yielded a marginal increase with only 6.6% of students scoring proficient or better. At the end of the 2003-2004 school year, the NAWE scores revealed a 20% increase in the percentage of students who now scored at the proficiency or higher levels.

Unfortunately, learning to write well in a second language is quite difficult and can seem like a mammoth undertaking for ELLs who often become discouraged and overtime can develop writing apprehension. Consequently, writing apprehension can lead to a negative attitude

towards writing resulting in predictable behaviors such as habitually late or never completed writing tasks (Steinman, 2007).

Research Methodology

This research was conducted from April - June 2014 at Columbus Primary school. The participants were a heterogeneous blend of 9 boys and 6 girls, ranging in age from 9 to 11 years old. They are students of a single fifth grade, level three who are deemed as 'average' to 'below average' readers and writers. A single seven item Writing Attitudinal Survey (WAS) was administered at the onset and closing of this research. Qualitative data were quantified and coded to discover any changes in the participants' attitudes toward writing. Secondly, a pre and post writing composition on a single topic was administered. A single Trait Based rubric was applied to measure any quantitative gains, retention or retardation in students' writing skills. After the administration of the pre WAS and the pre compositions, students participated in 15 Trait Based writing lessons for a total of 5 weeks of instructions. These writing lessons were a double period lasting for one (1) hour and focused on the traits of Word Choice, Organization and Sentence Fluency. All treatment lessons and pre and post interviews and writings were conducted within the comfort and familiarity of the students' fifth grade classroom and during regular school hours.

Results

All 15 ELLs achieved positive gains in their overall writing averages which now ranged from $\geq 50\%$ to $\leq 73\%$. As such, all 15 ELLs had also improved their letter grades. The post letter grade range was now from B to D and no students measured at the failing range of E. The majority of

students had maintained or gained 1-2 points in each trait measured. The greatest gains were seen in the Word Choice and Organization traits which garnered ratings of 4 on the 5 point rubric scale.

Students were also given some autonomy in assessing their own writings and their peer's writings. Requiring this additional involvement bolstered students' interest and participation in writing assignments. They were able to identify their 'trait weaknesses' and began to see themselves as 'better' writers. One participant was so confident, he entered the Centreville Poetry Contest, entitled, '*What I Love About My Country*,'. He placed 6th out of 55 entrants and was afforded the opportunity to meet Prime Minister of our nation. These positive, quantitative and qualitative gains support the effectiveness of the 6 + 1 Writing Traits as an instructional resource for ELLs and affirm the hypothesis of this research.

Implications

The data analysis from this research adds to the compliment of USA based investigations such as the Bellamy Research and The Clark County School District Report substantiating the effectiveness of Trait Based writing instruction and assessment. Trait Based writing instruction and assessment analytically measures writing improvements great and small building writing confidence and in turn writing ability. This research will be presented to the administration of Columbus Primary, as it provides a glimpse of optimism and convincing implications of how educators and those particularly this institution can improve the writing skills and writing attitudes of English Language Learners.

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