Real and Relevant:
Successful Approaches to Teaching Writing to Remedial Level Freshmen

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Here Jack Crowl and George Ann Gregory report the results of a pilot
study with remedial students at a southwestern community college
with a large Native American population. The purpose of the-study was
to see if the application of Whole Language approaches would increase
the success rate of students at this level. While the number of
participants was relatively small. the results support further analysis
of Whole Language applications with Native American adult learners.

Background

This study deals with remedial level adult learners in a southwestern
community college where most students are Navajo, female, single
heads of household, and most test at an eighth grade reading level and
seventh grade language level on the TABE (Test of Adult Basic
Education) upon entry into the college. Other ethnic groups at the
college include other Native Americans (non-Navajo), Anglos,
indigenous Hispanics, immigrant Spanish speakers, and other non-
English speaking immigrants.

At the college, remedial English Courses were taught in two
departments. The English department offered a remedial course
specifically designed to prepare students for college-level composition
courses. Students unable to meet the entrance requirements for this
course by writing sample were referred to the college learning center
for a sequence of language courses. The learning center's placement
system was based on the TABE. Still, the attrition rate in the English
department's program was approximately 50 percent .

The remedial level English course prescribed the use of two textbooks:
a writing text based upon the 18th Century rhetorical model of Blair,
Campbell, and Whately, and a grammar workbook. Students completed
a minimum of eight writing assignments per semester, which were
corrected in red ink, graded and given back. Students were not allowed
to rewrite. The teaching of grammar occupied the bulk of the program,
but no attempt was made to use grammar as an editing tool. Despite
the basically ESL nature of the majority of the population (87 percent),
no ESL methods or texts were used. The remedial level English course
made no attempt to either teach or use reading as a tool to stimulate
language or rhetorical growth. The exiting exam consisted of a
holistically scored composition.

The idea for a pilot study came from discussions on approaches which
promoted greater growth in literate language. Such a program needed to
include the integration of reading and writing, the integration of
grammar and writing, and the usage of oral language as a vehicle to
promote growth. While no complete agreement on methods was
reached, we did agree in principle about the basic contours of the
effort, and we worked together to keep records and share test data and
results. By doing this we hoped to promote a greater success rate at
the English 100 (remedial) level.

Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical foundations for the approaches used in the pilot study came primarily from works of Vygotsky, Luria, and their notions of concept formation and reasoning. Concepts are formed as the result of problem solving, communication (interaction), and through student use (Vygotsky, 1962; Hubbard, 1982). Reasoning essentially consists of being able to extend an already formed concept, or generalization, to any new situation (Vygotsky, 1962; Luria, 1976; Hubbard, 1982). Writing programs attempt to build reasoning through such strategies as analysis of important points of literature, integration of information from life experiences, reading, electronic media, etc. into one coherent piece, and the extension of learned grammar rules to students'
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written language. While reading may or may not build reasoning skills, writing apparently does (Scribner & Cole, 1981).
Moreover, Navajos, like other students, tend to learn most readily what they find most useful (Vygotsky, 1962; KIuckhorn& Leighton, 1974). That is, in order to bring about maximum learning students must be able to see some application to their own lives, what Goodman (1989) calls "real and relevant." Furthermore, stu¬dents cannot use what they do not understand (Hubbard, 1972) nor learn without stimulating development (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). In keeping with Vygotsky's observations, the writing development of students was neither linear nor predictable.

The Approach

Our cooperative effort began during the fall semester. We divided our efforts across fall and spring semesters. One of us taught an introductory remedial class at the university's learning center in the fall. The other taught English 100 in the spring. Students from the learning center planning to go on to English 100 were encouraged to take the two classes consecutively.

In the learning center, classes met twice weekly. Class sizes ranged from twelve to 22 students. Formal grammar instruction was deliberately delayed until students had gained confidence in their abilities to express themselves in writing (Murray, 1968). During the second class meeting, classes went to the library to find something to read on the topic of writing. In the library, students learned how to use the card catalog and Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature. For most students using the library was a completely new experience. Furthermore, despite the initial confusion, the use of the library to self-select readings proved to be an important ingredient for writing success.

The concept of essay was initially introduced the third class meeting through a cooperative writing session using students' ideas for the essay. All information was written on one board so that it remained available for further consultation. Ideas were discussed, and as the ideas seemed to group together lines were drawn from some items to others. The notion of "claim" or opinion statement was introduced; the class composed one together. It became the opening statement for the introductory paragraph. Once the introductory paragraph was completed, students were turned loose to experiment with essay writing on their own.

In addition to library accessing skills and shaping ideas into an essay, students were instructed in dictionary uses: a dictionary written for readers at the sixth to eighth grade reading levels was chosen to enhance their reading comprehension using part of the Hubbard Study Approach (1972). This approach not only includes the understanding of the correct definition but also includes the use of each new word in students' own created sentences, thereby insuring that the student can use the word correctly. The usage of the word insures complete concept formation (Vygotsky, 1962; Hubbard, 1972). To further insure student understanding, rationales were provided for each procedure. Having the rationale also allowed students some measure of control

over their own learning. These-three procedures represented the entire extent of instruction for the first half of the semester.

Students worked in groups of three to five, each group selecting a topic to "research." One full class time for each assignment was devoted to library searches; during the following class, students shared their information with others in their group. Possible writing topics were discussed, sometimes with instructor-input, more often not. At the end of the discussions, some students began to write while others preferred to wait to find some other environment than the classroom. The following class meeting was devoted to reading and listening to others' papers. Once this was finished, the papers were given to the instructor to read (not grade) and record as a completed assignment. The entire sequence covered three class meetings.

Admittedly, some groups worked better than others. In groups that worked well, papers were discussed enthusiastically. In others, participants merely read their papers without any comments from or by others in the group. However, the choice of a new topic, something done collectively, usually generated lively discussions and sometimes major disagreements.- Topic choices ranged from "fox hunting in England" to the "Native American Church and the use of peyote," with a cluster around topics concerning health and social problems. Most importantly students read and wrote about topics which they wanted to understand better. At mid-term grammar instruction commenced via sentence combining exercises with a few side excursions into mechanics. The introduction of new concepts was kept to a minimum. At the same time, students practiced each new concept extensively.
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Toward the end of the semester, students had the option of trying a more "traditional" English assignment of analyzing a piece of literature. About fifteen students, all who planned to take English 100 the following semester, took this option. The short story, "A Rose for Emily," by William Faulkner, was instructor-selected. Many students said that this assignment was the one that really solidified their concept of an essay. Final evaluation of the first semester consisted of a holistically graded essay with an additional usage correctness score (Brodkey & Young 1981) and an end-of-semester survey. (See one representative student's essay below).

From the original group of sixty, only seventeen were channeled into English l00 for a number of reasons:

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 In the story" A Rose for Emily" by Faulkner about Miss Emily in a decaying mansion and as the story progress, it becomes a horror story. In" A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings",by Marquez is also a tale about an angel living in a decaying chicken coop that becomes an annoyance in a very weird and unusual way. In both Faulkner and Marquez's stories the town people become infactuated with Miss Emily and the Angel, by watching them and never thinking that they might need help. Both Miss Emily and the Angel are definitely in their own worlds and the authors keep them in their craziness.
  The first indication these two stories are similar is when in "A Rose for Emily", by Faulkner, that the whole town went to her funeral, mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house. In" A Very Old Man with Enormous Wing" by Marquez, when the news of the captive angel spread, within a few hours there was a mob that was about to knock the house down.
  The next similarity are the smell that becomes unbearable but is never really questioned. In Faulkner's story is the smell from the mansion that they eventually sprinkle lime on for the cure. In Marquez's story is from the Angel himself that has an unbearable smell of the outdoors and also from the chicken coop that has been lived in and is decaying.
  In Faulkner and Marquez's story, they both like to describe the surroundings with old decaying buildings. Both stories have mansions that are moldy and growning old. In Faulkner's, its the mansion that

becomes an eyesore because of the surrounding of cotton wagons and gasoline pumps. Marquez's is the decaying chicken coop that collapse from the sun and rain. Also from Pelayo and Elisenda two-story mansion that begins getting older.

Both characters, Miss Emily and the Angel, are in their own world and will not be bothered by the people around them. Faulkner has Miss Emily ignoring town people who come to try and collect for property taxes. She holds her head high and ignores them when she is seeing Homer Barron, her lover, that is a mere laborer. Marquez has the angel taking part in his own act. The angel tries to get comfortable in his barrowed nest and will not stand up for the people that has come to see him and his wings.

The ending of both stories are bizarre. Faulkner has Miss Emily dying and the town people find Homer Barron decayed body that is murdered in their bed as if in an embrace, in a room that has not been open for forty years. Marquez has Pelayo and Elisenda driving the angel out of the bedroom with a broom Elisenda shouting that it is awful living in that hell full of angels. The angel becomes sick and he's eyes are foggy and is bumping into post' Pelayo threw a blanket over him and extended him the charity of letting him sleep in the shed. This is the angel that has brought them great wealth. Elisenda watches the angel trying to flyaway until she can no longer see him, and he is no longer an annoyance.

I believe both authors, Faulkner and Marquez, stun us readers with people's behavior toward these two characters by having no appreciation or concern of Miss Emily and the angel. Both had brought much to the town at one time or another, then they were disguarded just to be watched and talked about

SAMPLE, 1: One Student's Essay
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teaching assignments by the English department itself, student selection of alternative instructors, and prior fulfillment of language requirements. During the spring semester, these seventeen met twice a week in class and once a week for a two-hour lab. The instructor maintained a relaxed atmosphere where joking was encouraged and periods of silence were used to facilitate thinking through new concepts without "professorial noise" (Krashen 1982). Students were never pressured to "fill the vacuum."

Again students worked in self-selected groups of three to five to discuss outside reading assignments.

Topics for in-class essays were agreed upon during the previous week to allow time for library work. Given the experience of the previous semester, students no longer required class time for this activity. Initially, each group selected spokespersons, but as the semester progressed the reticence to speak became negligible. The need for a peer spokesperson was gone by midterm. While the instructor provided lists and checklists for students to use, all editing and proofreading of student papers were done in class by students working in groups. Additionally, students took complete responsibility for making decisions about all aspects of the class, including scheduling instruction on grammar. Grammatical and rhetorical problems, collectively identified, were reviewed with the entire class, This was the extent of instructor's lecturing. Like the previous class, students were given the rationale for assignments.

Lab time was used for a variety of activities, including the use of taped music while writing. Students also met in lab groups to work on special project;". For example, one assignment was to make posters on simple, compound, and complex sentences, indicating how these were to be joined and what punctuation rules applied. These posters were then hung on the wall in the lab. Instructor input consisted of providing materials. Lab time was also used for students to read aloud self-selected materials and collectively respond to published periodical information, such as writing letters to the editor.

Discussion of Results

Overall success of the pilot effort was measured by the number of students who passed the English 100 exiting exam. Of the seventeen who started the spring semester, fourteen completed. Ten of the fourteen who completed passed the exiting exam. The pre- and post-testing at the end of the fall semester showed 81 percent improved in overall writing growth and 64 percent exhibited growth in standard English usage. The student questionnaires indicated that 82 percent felt that their reading had improved and 91 percent felt that their writing had improved. The attrition rate for the fall semester was only 10 percent.

Success for the pilot is attributed to the implementation of approaches which embodied the notion of literacy as communication: The purpose of reading is to get meaning (Goodman 1982) and the purpose of writing to create it (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986. As students moved through the pilot program, they found their own "voice" (Ong, 1981).

While both of US maintained unique "teaching styles" and structured classes accordingly, we worked from the same basic premises. Ear:h time a student wrote, his/her concept of wriiting grew. Assignments were not "watered down" for remedial students, proving Vygotsky's premise that learning stimulates development and that instruction should be above the student's actual performance level (1962 _& 1978). The greatest expressed growth in concept formation was by those who attempted the assignment of analyzing a short story, providing further proof of Vygotsky's premises.

While the low numbers regrettably inhibit the generalization of results, the overall success does warrant further exploration of the application of more Whole Language approaches with adults.

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