Using "Non-Existent Student" Essays as a Way of Encouraging Student Revisions

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In their article "Investigating Reformulation as a Practical Strategy for the Teaching of Academic Writing," Allwright, Woodley and Allwright (1988) discuss the use of what they call a "reformulation strategy." This strategy is to take a student paper and then have a native speaker, who is neither the students' study skills teacher nor a prospective tutor, read the paper. The native speaker tries to understand the paper to the best of his or her ability, and then rewrites the paper "where absolutely necessary, in a form natural to the native speaker. This may involve making changes at all levels, but the point of any such changes must be to bring out the original writer's probable intentions, not to deliberately substitute a new set of intentions for them." Copies of both versions are made, and the anonymously authored papers are distributed to the entire class. The class then speculates collectively on the probable reasons *for* and effects *of* the changes by the native speaker. Allwright et al. (1988) state that the most important reason for engaging in this activity is to cause the students to reflect on their own writing and to consider the implications for future work.

A Modified Reformulation Strategy

I use reformulation strategies in my writing classes, but with several major differences from the method used by Allwright et al. This paper will discuss those differences and the techniques used in implementing these reformulations in an intermediate ESL writing class and in an ESL computer-assisted writing lab.

Teacher-Authored Essays

Allwright et al. use a paper written by a student in their class to reformulate. Initially, I used student papers in class; however, like Allwright et al, I found that students often volunteered or "confessed" their authorship. Even without the authors' volunteering their identity, many of the students recognized the writing of a particular student because of content or discussions with the author. This tended to put the authors in a position of defending their papers. They felt singled out and embarrassed. Often, they became very defensive or completely passive, feeling that they were obliged to make every change suggested. Although there was no evidence, I suspect that some students altered their comments in class when the authorship was known. Students can be ruthless or overly supportive when critical action is called for concerning peer work.

To alleviate the problem of putting authors "on-the-spot," I write several "non-existent student" essays. Some are native-speaker-like and some are written with common grammatical, mechanical, organizational, usage or construction problems that are typical of the class. This can help the teacher to focus on certain problems in a controlled environment. For example, using a native-speaker-like essay, paragraphs can be intentionally

written in the wrong order. This is particularly useful if the writers in the class are concentrating on surface level problems. If the students cannot find sentence level problems when asked if there are changes that they would make to the paper, their attention may be redirected to content and organization. A "non-existent student" essay can be constructed with both heavy spelling or grammatical problems along with organizational problems. This will allow the teacher to show how these surface level problems are of secondary importance in the initial drafting stages of an essay. The teacher can direct the discussion to uncover the organizational problems first and postpone attending to surface level errors. This will help the students to establish a hierarchical order of writing needs. The essay can be useful as well when it comes time for modeling final editing.

In-Class Reformulation

Allwright et al. (1988) have a native speaker reformulate the student essay; however, this may suggest that the only hope for the student is to have a native speaker rewrite the paper in order to "get it right" in regards to grammar, mechanics, and meaning. When students do the reformulating themselves, they learn that they are capable of "getting it right" themselves. The purpose for class reformulation is similar to that of Allwright et al.'s reformulation strategy in that it is designed to promote class discussion and investigate possible revisions. The carry-over helps the students to consider their own writing in light of the suggestions raised in the class discussions. The teacher can be used as a resource when students are confused; however, the students will often come up with a suitable solution in the open class discussion.

Medium of Presentation

The last difference between my reformulation strategies and that of Allwright et al.'s, is in how I present the essay for class discussion. Because my regular writing class and my computer-assisted writing class use different writing mediums, I use different techniques in presenting the essays. In my class where the writing medium is a pencil and paper, I present a "non-existent student" essay by making a transparency of the essay and projecting the essay on a screen using an overhead projector. (Allwright et al. hand out individual copies of the essays.) The overhead image causes the students to focus on the essay as directed by the instructor. The idea that the reformulation is a group effort is emphasized. Using an overhead transparency pen, I make comments on the transparency as suggested by the class. Particularly interesting or well-written parts are noted first, followed by areas needing development, deletion, or explanation.

In my computer-assisted writing lab, I write non-existent student essays on the word processor. I use one essay (a narrative) to model for the class using an overhead data display device. This device allows what is on the computer screen to be projected on a large movie screen so that the whole class can easily read the text together. If a data display device is unavailable, a large monitor will work. When the essay is displayed, the class reads the essay and then discusses revisions or changes that they would

make. This essay is written in native-speaker English. Since the story is deliberately constructed to be vague and skimpy in details, the class is encouraged to fill out the story and make it more interesting. As they make and agree on suggestions in the class discussion, I make the revisions from the keyboard. In this manner, students can see how easy it is to make deep content changes while revising on the computer. A second narrative essay is distributed, and students copy it onto the computer. Using this method, I have seen substantial content revisions, and considerable increases in the amount of text. In one narrative of 157 words, the average length of student revised text (n=14) was 467 words, an increase of 297%. One essay in my class of 14 was 703 words: an increase of 448% from the original essay. Below is the first paragraph of the teacher written "non-existent student" essay followed by two examples of student revision.

"Non-existent student" version:

Tom is leaving Hawaii Pacific University. He has just finished class and is free for the rest of the day. He wants to meet his friends in Waikiki. Tom's girlfriend is waiting for Tom at the bus stop.

Student A:

Tom is leaving Hawaii Pacific University. He has just finished his all classes and is free for the rest of the day although he has a lot of homework. However, he doesn't want to do it in that day because it's Friday. Why he has to stay home. there is no reason to stay. At first, he wants to meet his friends in Waikiki. Tom's girlfriend, Liz is waiting for Tom at the bus stop. Since they haven't seen each other for a long time, Tom misses Liz so much. When he finds her at the bus stop, he starts running toward her; however, he slipped on the ground and jeans are torn. Everybody laughs at him even Liz. Tom is embarrassed and he can't look up his face because he is shamed. When Tom comes up to Liz, she is still laughing, so Tom is getting angry. Tom seems to be so embarrassed, so Liz stops laughing.

Student B:

Tom was waiting the class would be over. He had been thinking of his pretty girl, Kathy. When the class was over, he rushed out the room to go to the bus stop in front of Long's Drug where kathy is waiting him for.

Although the second student's paragraph is shorter, the revisions include tense and exact wording changes. Revisions occurred at many levels. Some students seemed to stay with the basic story and add detail, while others completely rewrote the story with the text becoming quite elaborate. The "non-existent student essay" seemed to invite the generation of ideas, and promoted revision. I had to force my students off the computers when class was over.

A Follow-Up Activity

A follow up to this activity is to have students read each other's hard copy drafts, make written comments, and then, make collaborative revisions while on line. This activity helps the students feel less fearful of making content revisions on their own "real" essays.

Benefits of This Strategy

Teachers can use "non-existent student" essays to eliminate the pressure student authors feel when their essays are scrutinized, to focus on particular aspects of writing, to develop a sense of hierarchical writing needs in students, to build confidence in the students by showing that they are capable of "getting it right" by themselves, and to show students that reformulations are easily accomplished. Writing a "non-existent student" essay is easily done with a little practice, and the benefits make this strategy worth exploring.

Reference

Allwright, R.L., M.P. Woodley, and J.M. Allwright. (1988). Investigating reformulation as a practical strategy for the teaching of academic writing. *Applied Linguistics*. 9, 236-255.

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