Do Other People “Gape” at your Writing?

Jennifer L. Brown and Erinn Bentley

Abstract: The students who are struggling with K-12 writing are now in post-secondary school. Despite English composition completion during the freshman year, the majority of these students remain novice writers. Some of these novice writers will become elementary, middle grades, or secondary teachers upon graduating. The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of a mini-lesson unit on the students’ knowledge of common grammar, audience, and punctuation errors. The results of the pre/post research design revealed a significant increase in knowledge. Future implications include expanding the mini-lesson unit and assisting students with transferring the knowledge into their written assignments.

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Within America’s K-12 learning environments, adolescents are experiencing “a writing proficiency crisis” (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 11). Research indicates that no significant gains in student writing achievement have been made in the past decade (Applebee, Langer, Mullis, Latham, & Gentile, 1994; Applebee & Langer, 2009). In fact, a recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP) report reveals that 70 percent of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 are considered “low-achieving” writers (Persky, Danne, & Jin, 2003). This writing proficiency crisis is not limited to students in K-12 educational settings. According to ACT (2005), one-third of high school graduates are not prepared for college-level composition courses. As a result, enrollment in remedial composition courses within postsecondary educational settings has been increasing, suggesting a growing need for supporting students’ mastery of academic and professional writing skills in higher education settings. (Hoyt & Sorensen, 2001; Ignash, 1997)

Scholars (Coker & Lewis, 2008; Graham & Perin, 2007; Persky et al., 2003) concur: for adolescents to succeed in postsecondary educational settings and in the workplace, they need to be proficient writers. To ensure that all students achieve such learning goals, quality future writing teachers must be trained across grade levels and content areas. As stated by the National Commission on Writing (2003), “Writing is every teacher’s responsibility...Expectations for good writing should be universal among all teachers” (p. 32). To address current preservice teachers’ writing deficiencies and to better prepare them as future writing teachers, the purpose of this study was to determine the effects of a mini-lesson unit on knowledge of common grammar, audience, and punctuation errors among students enrolled in a teacher preparation program.

METHODS

Participants

The Department of Teacher Education is part of a four-year institution in the southeastern United States that is considered a master’s level school. Enrollment at the state university has increased over the past 5 years and has reached a maximum of 8,307 in the fall of 2011. The participants in this study were part of an introduction of teaching course, which was a requirement for admission to Teacher Education. The purpose of this course was to analyze the historical and philosophical influences that impact education in the United States, examine the legal and ethical requirements of the teaching profession, apply the various learning theories to classroom practice, and analyze effective instructional design, delivery, and assessment within the classroom setting. The pre-test and posttest assessments were matched for 12 students. Of the 12 students, there were 10 (83.3%) females and 2 (16.7%) males. In terms of racial classification, 9 (75%) students were white, and 3 (25%) students were black. The majority of the students had a declared major in early childhood education (n = 8) followed by special education (n = 2), secondary education: history (n = 1), and physical education (n = 1).
Data Collection

On the first day of class, the students were administered a 10-item pretest which contained four commas errors, two pronoun errors, and four audience errors (e.g., use of contractions), which were the most common errors within student writing. On the last day of class, the students were administered a posttest with the same 10 items. The pretest and posttest scores were compared to determine the effectiveness of the GAPE mini-lessons. As a follow-up, the students were asked to reflect on the GAPE mini-lessons on the end-of-the-semester course evaluation.

Intervention

The GAPE (Grammar, Audience, and Punctuation Errors) mini-unit was developed by the course instructor to improve grammar, audience, and punctuation errors within an introduction to teaching course. Written assignments for the course are expected to be without grammar and punctuation errors and presented with a formal writing tone based on APA (6th edition) Style Guidelines. However, student writing assignments collected over the past three semesters indicated that many students are submitting written work still containing numerous mechanical errors. As a result, the instructor developed an ongoing pedagogical strategy (GAPE) to address the most commonly occurring mechanical errors. At the beginning of each subsequent class, the students were given two sentences as a bellringer. These sentences were a representative sample of typical writing submitted for the introduction to teaching course. The students were directed to locate and correct the grammar, audience, and/or punctuation errors. If the sentence was correct, they were to write “correct”. The sentences were presented on the Promethean Board and within their daily class handouts. Then, the instructor reviewed each sentence by asking one of the students to come to the Promethean Board and correct the error. Afterwards, the instructor offered other variations to correct the similar errors (e.g., a run-on sentence can be correct with a period, comma and conjunction, or a semi-colon). The errors include similar issues placed on the pre/posttest.

- Ambiguous pronouns (n = 3)
- Coordinating conjunctions and comma usage (n = 4)
- Run-on sentences with two or more independent clauses (n = 5)
- Direct quotes within the text (n = 2)
- Use of contractions in formal writing (n = 3)
- Repetitive word structure (n = 1)
- Comma usage with introductory dependent clauses (n = 2)
- Noun/pronoun agreement (n = 2)
- Use of colloquial expressions (n = 2)
- Comma usage with series of three or more items (n = 3)

In addition, the bellringers addressed the following issues:

- Appropriate word usage (n = 4), such as effect/affect
- Essential and non-essential clauses along with comma usage (n = 5)
- Comma usage with compound predicates (n = 2)
- Beginning a sentence with a conjunction (n = 2)

RESULTS

A series of descriptive analyses were conducted to summarize the pre-test and posttest scores. The number of correct items on the pretest ranged from 1 to 7 with a mean of 3.7 and a standard deviation of 1.6. Considering the wide range of dispersion, the median was 3.5. On the posttest, the number of correct items ranged from 2 to 9, with a mean of 7.2 and a standard deviation of 2.3. The median was 8. (Note: Two students did not complete the backside of the posttest. On average, the students increased their recognition of grammar, audience, and punctuation errors by 94.6%. A paired samples t-test was conducted to determine if a significant change in knowledge occurred between the pretest and posttest. There was a significant increase between the two assessments, t(11) = 5.66; p < .001. Two of the reoccurring comma issues within the posttest were using a comma with two parts of a compound predicate and using commas with a series of three or more items. In addition, some of the students did not recognize formal writing avoids the use of colloquial expressions and onomonoporia.

When asked to comment on the GAPE bellringers on the course evaluations, the majority of students had favorable reviews of the mini-lessons. One student responded, “It helped me think before I write.” Another student said, “…they helped me remember things I’d forgotten and taught me things I should’ve [known] already.” The results indicate that the mini-lessons improved the recognition of common grammar, audience, and punctuation errors. It is hopeful that the quality of writing will improve as the students generalize the recognition into practice within their written assignments.
A decade ago, The National Commission on Writing (2003) urged our nation’s K-12 and postsecondary schools to participate in a “writing revolution” by doubling the amount of time students spend writing, teaching writing across the curriculum, and ensuring that all preservice and inservice educators are trained as writing teachers (2003, p. 11). Until recently, teaching writing has primarily occurred within English language arts classrooms and curricula. However, with the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2012), writing is now being integrated across grade levels and content areas. In the introduction to the Common Core State Standards (2012) the authors explain, “The Standards insist that instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language be a shared responsibility within the school.” As faculty education members, we understand the importance of providing all preservice teachers opportunities to learn best practices for teaching writing in their future K-12 classrooms. We also recognize, like other scholars and practitioners, that effective writing teachers are effective writers themselves. Donald Murray explains, “Teachers who write must pay attention to their craft” (2007, p. 179). Similarly, Tom Romano asserts, “Those who teach a craft ought to do a craft. When teachers of writing write...they develop their insider knowledge” (2007, p. 171). Writers (and teachers of writing) must learn from practicing their craft. Research indicates that simply teaching and assessing student writers using multiple choice texts is not sufficient (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Instead, students need time to develop and refine their writing while being provided with feedback and assistance from trained teachers.

We recommend education faculty continue to provide students support as they develop and refine their writing skills by employing best practices for teaching writing within these entry-level classes. Such best practices may include modeling the writer’s workshop, guiding students in peer review workshops, providing students with one-on-one writing assistance, and embedding writing mini-lessons within instructional time. As evident from this study, students need practice with transferring and generalizing the skills into other settings. We recognize that it is not feasible (or desirable) for education faculty to modify their course learning outcomes or content to the extent that these courses become “writing courses” per se. In order to help students receive the amount of writing support needed for them to improve their skills (and pedagogical practices), we recommend improving collaboration among English composition and education faculty members.
REFERENCES


