

“I Like Adventure but I Don’t Like Writing”: A Case Study of a Digital Native Fifth Grader in an ESL Classroom

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Abstract

Evident in classrooms today, it is not uncommon to have young learners skillful as technology users and game players who enjoy the hardship of taking part in challenging games and competitions, paradoxically, unwilling to deal with the challenges of the writing game. Perhaps it is logical to assume that the most convenient means to engage this group of learners in the writing process is to present them with instructional practices that they deem interesting and stimulating. To put this into practice, this study reports on the work with a digital native in an effort to develop a more positive attitude towards writing and with the ultimate aim of improving his writing performance. The foci of this study is three-fold: it explores the qualities that this learner has and brings to light the challenges he faces in the writing process as well as it looks into potential strategies and methods that might motivate him to become a better writer. Further implications and recommendations are suggested for teachers to engage such kind of learners in the world of writing.

Key words: ESL, instruction, motivation, writing, strategies

Introduction

In this globalized world of today, written English has become the predominant medium of international communication. In accordance with this view, developing students’ writing skills has become a key target in various educational fields and disciplines (Liu, 2011). In the realm of language teaching, for instance, emphasis is not merely placed on the development of the spoken language but learning good writing skills is now regarded central (Matsuda et al, 2011). This change in the nature of instruction was in fact powered by recent trends in the teaching writing in ESL environments.

Second Language Writing and Writers

The field of second language writing has received much attention in the last few decades. Many recent publications have added new perspectives on our understanding of “good” writing and instruction (Matsuda et al, 2011). Engaging students actively in the learning process entails creating a writing pedagogy in a vibrant and lively environment. It is possible to say that this happens when students, as the center of instruction, write about topics of their own selection, share their experiences and use their competencies: academic, linguistic and sociocultural to create a better world (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). Perhaps more important is another perspective that is evident in Bartholomae (1985) critique of some practices in teaching of writing. According to his viewpoint, the main goal of the writing instruction should no longer be to get students to produce error free pieces of writing, “a basic writer is not necessarily a writer who makes a lot of mistakes” (p. 522) but a successful essay is the one that has a discourse which is “natural, smooth and tidy” (p. 519) and has “the necessary syntax to glue the pieces together” (p. 523). Viewing content as the essence of the writing instruction, Matsuda et al (2011) take this further and elaborate on the kind of content most effective for second language learners in particular. Given that language learners come from diverse language and cultural backgrounds carrying with them different literacies, instruction need to be built on students’ competencies taking into account the existing literacy practices (Matsuda et al, 2011). This appreciation of students’ funds of knowledge and the acknowledgement of their intellectual capabilities (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994) would boost their confidence in writing and have a positive impact on their attitudes towards writing.

Motivation

In addition to employing learners’ competencies and literacies, several other methods can be used to increase students’ interests and involvement in the writing task as well. Baker (2001) lists a number of effective strategies for motivation that can be used with second language learners. Students’ need analysis is ought to be the base where decisions about the syllabus are to be made. The use of authentic materials and multimedia technology is crucial to increase the effectiveness of course content. Another point is about selecting varied and challenging activities. In fact, the element of the choice of challenging activities is also consistent with Gee’s principals of what creates good learning. In his research to study what engage players in video games, Gee (2007) suggests that schools need to incorporate elements that make instruction, similar to playing good video games, motivating and entertaining. In a learning environment, students need to feel a sense of agency when they explore, think, rethink and find solutions to problems. Therefore, teachers have the responsibility to understand the background and the experiences of learners and develop instructional practices to meet their needs (Matsuda et al, 2011).

The Purpose of this Study

The overall purpose of this study was to explore the characteristics and the interests of a struggling second language writer and to suggest instructional strategies and methods that could assist him to overcome and cope with the challenges of writing.

In the course of working with this participant, the researcher of this study was interested to find out how attitude and motivation towards writing have an impact on writing practices and development. She was also interested to examine the characteristics and interests that this participant has and value and analyze them to suggest strategies that could help him to be more willing to write. Yet, it is worthy to note that the individual is the most integral part in the learning process and that every learner has unique qualities and challenges that cannot be understood detached from their own perspectives, characteristics and interests.

Data Collection

Toward a more inclusive understanding of the participant characteristics and interests and his writing attitude and practices, several resources were used to gather data. These included semi-structured interviews and informal talks with the participant in the classroom and at home. The researcher also conducted interviews with the participant’s parents. Through these interview, she wanted to know his educational background before he came to the United States and his parents’ contributions if any in his writing practices at home. The data collection included looking at his writing in class notebooks, audio-recording and collecting information in individualized writing lessons as well as taking field notes of practices during writing tasks. These methods: interviews, observations, written documents helped in understanding the participant’s motives, attitudes, interests and writing practices.

Participant’s Characteristics and Needs

This overview of the participant’s characteristics guides our understanding of the learner and reveals the unique challenges that he faces in writing. The participant of this study, Adam (a pseudonym), was a fifth grader, ten years old, in an elementary schools in the United States. Coming from an Arabic speaking country, this *elective bilingual* (Valdes, 2011) had been in the host country for the last six months before the start of this study. Interesting is the fact that Adam had a strong oral fluency in English, yet, his writing skills were limited. His parents mentioned that in previous school reports, he used to get ‘A’s in most subjects at end of terms except for English. In parent-teacher conferences, the English teachers had always expressed their dissatisfaction with his writing skill (Parents, personal communication, February 2015). When was asked about his feelings towards writing, he said that writing was “boring” and “hard” because he often did not know what to write (Adam, interview, February, 2015).

Looking closely at Adam’s writing reveal a number of observations. His writings showed that he lacked basic skills in writing evident in the recurrent mistakes he made. Punctuation marks were usually missing especially capital letters and frequent misspelled words were also apparent. The writings were short and lacked coherence. Very often he wrote very quickly and did not like to check what he wrote.

The writing and interest inventory (see Appendix A) revealed interesting information as well. Like many of his peers, Adam enjoyed playing and talking about a wide range of competitive activities and games. He loved adventure and proudly expressed that he was good at video games, soccer and card tricks. At school, if he had had the choice of a project, he would have created a poster about soccer, a new game device or improve some existing ones. The only time Adam felt good about writing was when he wrote freely in his “genre”. When given a choice, he would prefer to write about fiction because he could be imaginative, “you can make up anything and it doesn’t have to be real”. He remembered one of the stories he had written in the past and said that his family liked it because it was “descriptive, long” and he had used many “advanced words” (Adam, interview, February, 2015).

His perspectives on ideal writing lessons provided valuable insights about his learning style. Three things he wished teachers would do in writing lessons: (1) reading interesting books and telling students to write about, (2) getting students to write stories in pairs, (3) having writing competitions at the end of each month where students read their books to the whole class. For him, writing would be good if he could think of ideas really fast and when he wrote using a computer or an iPad.

In the light of his interests, writing needs and his ideas about the ideal writing exercises, a lesson plan was built to report to what extent such a plan could help him to be engaged in writing. The following section gives details about the lesson and evaluates and reflects on the tutoring experience.

Lesson Plan and Tutoring Experience

The idea of this lesson was triggered by Adam’s interest in writing about the importance of video games. He shared in an earlier conversation that his parents did not encourage him playing video games and always asked him about what he got by spending hours playing video games. We agreed to have this topic for the lesson as it was authentic and Adam would have a real purpose in writing it.

Once the topic was decided upon, it was time to carefully plan the lesson: objectives, methods and procedure. Taking into account that the most difficult challenge that Adam faced was his perception of writing as a “hard” task because as he could not think of ideas, this lesson focused on the prewriting phase of process writing: brainstorming of ideas and organization. To meet this expectation, the plan included free writing to assist him with fluency (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013) and using graphic organizers such as essay maps to help him organize content so he had some input before writing. Furthermore, organization and focus in terms of keeping a list or notebook of ideas and using graphic organizers in writing is one of the Language Arts standards (5.4.1) for fifth graders according to the State standards.

Motivation was an important factor that needed to be taken into account in cases like Adam who did not like writing. The purpose was to engage him in writing for content and postpone dealing with accuracy for future lessons. Research reveal that “good writers concentrated on ideas first rather than on correctness.” (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013, p. 256). Another aspect that was considered to further motivate Adam was the use of electronic devices in the lesson. This was because Adam shared in the interest inventory that he found writing more

fun when he wrote using an iPad. Therefore, four activities in this lesson were to be completed by employing the iPad: freewriting, watching a video, completing an online essay map and writing the essay in Google Docs.

The lesson was framed on the basis of four objectives. It was expected that by the end of the lesson the learner would be able to discuss ideas prior to writing which would pave the way to freely write and generate ideas related to the topic. To organize these ideas, the learner needed to be able to complete an essay map to create a framework for the essay. With the purpose of engaging the learner and to arouse his curiosity and interest, appealing materials and resources were used. These included iPad with Internet access, a sample of an essay (persuasive essay), the essay map of the sample essay, a TED talk video about importance of video games and blank essay maps (online interactive tool) retrieved from www.readwritethink.org.

The lesson started by an opening activity (10 minutes) which was targeted to lead the learner in the lesson. Because he liked talking about video games, a good start was to involve him in a discussion about best video games and why he liked to play them. This was followed by getting him to freely write on a blank document on his iPad whatever comes to his mind about the topic without worrying about order, punctuation or spelling. Stimulation (15 minutes) took place by showing an interesting TED Talk about the same topic. A discussion about the new/interesting points that he got from the video was conducted.

The main teaching phase lasted for twenty minutes where the learner was given a sample essay and was asked to identify (underline and label) the different parts: introduction, body, conclusion, topic sentences and supporting details in each paragraph. The concept of mapping was introduced by giving an overview of the idea of essay mapping. This was strengthened by getting the learners to look at the essay map of the sample essay. In the practical part, the learner was given five minutes to complete electronically a blank essay map in www.readwritethink.net using the information from his free writing. He was reminded that he needed to select the key ideas and that he did not need to include everything.

In the closure (5 minutes) the learner was asked to talk about the components of the essay map that he completed. A discussion was followed with regard to how this framework could be used in writing the essay. Besides, he was provoked to talk about how practical he thought freewriting and essay mapping in assisting him with ideas and organization and that whether he would use this tool in class writing. Several activities followed this lesson. The learner was asked to try freewriting and mapping the topics that would be given to him in class by providing him with printed copies of blank essay maps from the same site. Moreover, as this was the first phase of process writing, the remaining phases were completed in the subsequent meetings. After this lesson, the learner was encouraged to write the first draft of the story by himself in Google Docs which was later edited and improved. The content of the essay was further improved by looking at strategies that could be used in persuasive essays.

The evaluation of the progress was completed in two ways. Informally, the achievement of the objectives were measured in the lesson by direct observation of the completion of the essay map. By oral discussion and free writing, the amount and range of ideas that he produced could be measured. Further evaluation included learner’s identification of the components of the

essay and the ones needed further development. The formal evaluation took place after the completion of the essay and could be seen in the learner’s ability to free write and map other topics.

Adam enjoyed the lesson as it was mainly about a topic of a great interest to him. He found essay mapping useful in helping him to plan the content of his writing. The least interesting part for him was brainstorming of ideas (free writing). He thought that the oral discussion prior to writing would be adequate in planning the content. Furthermore, noticing how excited Adam was in writing using the iPad, therefore, most activities in future lessons would include the use of iPad or other electronic devices or resources.

Instructional Recommendations

Prompted by current perspectives of teaching writing to second language learners and that writing activities need to be contextualized, authentic, engaging and should be based on accessible content (Reid & Kroll, 2006), the following could be thought of as potential strategies to motivate Adam to engage positively in writing. Though the attempt here is not to generalize but several other digital natives share some of Adam’s interests and writing practices, therefore, these could be some practical strategies to involve such students actively in the writing process.

Planning Topics

As the first hurdle for Adam is to come up with ideas, it is important to equip him with strategies for the prewriting stage in order to help him step into the world of writing with more confidence. His future teachers could encourage him to use mapping to help him in generating and planning ideas for writing (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). As he is fond of technology, a good resource could be using electronic essay maps. These are interactive graphic organizers that help in outlining the components of an essay: introductory statement, main ideas, supporting ideas and conclusion. Liu (2011) points out that in addition to helping learners with organization, the mapping process helps learners “facilitate and provoke top down and bottom up thinking, and enhance recall and memory as well” (p. 2556). Another strategy could be thinking of ideas by responding to a series of prompts. For instance, in a persuasive essay, he could write a complete essay by answering three questions: "Tell what I believe!" "Why do I believe this?" and "Do I have good reasons?" (Harris et al, 2006, p. 298).

Teaching Rules and Conventions

Explicit instruction about writing conventions, process and craft would be very effective in the case of Adam. This could include teaching a range of techniques and crafts, for example, showing not telling (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013) and conventions like quotation marks and sentence structure as well as analyzing model stories and essays. A further strategy could be showing him the “tricks of the trade” (Brame, 2011, p. 43) which are strategies used by proficient writers. Examples of these techniques could be derived from authors’ biographies, interviews in magazines and publications like Peter Elbow’s books about free writing. In these lessons, teachers could help the learner discover the strategies employed by proficient writers in the process of writing such as creating a writing space, drawing inspiration from nature, and crafting the texts. Presumably, showing him authentic writing experiences of successful writers would have a profound impact on his attempt to writing. As a math prodigy according to his teachers and parents (parents, personal communication, February, 2015) and an adept game player, he

becomes more engaged and creative when he is aware of the secrets and rules of the game (Gee, 2007) played by the professionals.

Journal Writing

Because most of the writing tasks in schools require formal writing, journal writing could be effective. This could be a good space for him to release his knowledge, talents and creativity in topics such as video games and soccer that are often not discussed in the classroom. Lewison et al (2015) point out that teachers should begin with personal in the writing instruction. Writing in journals would serve as an extended conversation of the literacies he is engaged in, histories and aspirations. Journals also show what he already knows, understands and believes (Lewison et al, 2015) which could be the basis by which decisions on the content and materials for the subsequent lessons be made.

Adam, who enjoys using electronic devices, would be more motivated in journaling when technology is integrated. Lin et al (2014) assert that blogging a journal did not only improve students’ writing skills but developed more positive learning attitudes. Since Adam uses google docs for his writings, this tool could be used for journaling too. I recommend using dialogue journals because as a fan of video games he becomes more engaged in interactive activities (Gee, 2007). In order to encourage him to continue writing, teachers’ responses need not to focus on form but on content and positive aspects (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). It is also important to know that Adam likes authentic purposes for negotiations. Posing questions that are critical with regard to his writing challenges and insights would most likely interest him. Examples of comments could be like asking him to reflect on the reasons of why he thinks so, the consequences of continuing to have the same belief system and the solutions that he could offer to develop his writing experience. Also, as Duffy (2014) argues, he needs to be aware of his own identity as a writer. This can be achieved by asking him in journal writing, for example, to reflect on the reasons to write, what kind of writer he wants to become and how he can use writing in his future. By directing his attention to think of the underlying assumptions that he holds about writing, he could become more conscious of the decisions that he makes with regard to his reaction to writing (Canagarajah, 2015).

Conclusion

Teaching writing to second language learners is not only about challenges but creating opportunities for the development of competencies. Deeply associated with this perspective is the use of students’ current literacy practices as a foundation for teaching (Matsuda et al, 2011) aiming to result in instructional practices that are more compatible with learners. In this view, also, the selection of strategies for individual learners should take into account their abilities, needs, interests and learning styles. To borrow Canagarajah (2015)’s terms “Blessed in my own way”, students would be more motivated when their competencies and funds of knowledge are valued.

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Appendix A

The items on this inventory are taken and modified from different internet sources

Informal Interest Inventory

1. What do you like to do in your free time?
2. Name 3 things you do pretty well?
3. What do you like to do on the internet?
4. What kind of books do you like to read?
5. What do you find interesting at school?
6. School would really be great if.....
7. If I had any choice of project, I would make or create.....
8. Three things I wish teachers knew about me.....

Writing Interest Inventory

9. Why do people write?
10. Is writing important to you? Why or why not?
11. What makes a good writer?
12. How do you feel about the writing that you do at school?
13. If you know someone was having trouble writing, how would you help that person?
14. What would the teacher do to help that person?
15. If you were a teacher, how could you have made writing more interesting for students?
16. Three things I wish teachers do in writing lessons.....
17. Writing would be really good if.....
18. How do you feel about yourself as a writer? Do you think you are a good writer? Why?
19. What type of writing is your most favorite and why?
20. What type of writing is your least favorite and why?
21. What is the easiest thing about writing? The hardest?
22. When you are writing in English and come to a point where you are having trouble, what do you do? Do you ever do anything else?
23. What do you think is good about your writing?
24. What I like about my writing....
25. Do you write at home?
26. Where do you get your ideas from?
27. Where is your favorite place to write?
28. I like to write

-Quickly	-slowly.
-with noise around.	-in a quiet place.
-anytime.	-at a special time.
-anyplace.	-in a special place.
-with a pencil or pen.	-on a computer.
29. What is the best thing you have ever written? Why do you like it?
30. What improvements would you like to make in your writing?
31. What would you like to learn to do better as a writer?
32. Do you see yourself as a famous writer in the future?