Perspective-taking in Young Writer's Descriptive Writing

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Abstract

This paper reports a perspective-taking strategy that assisted younger writers in representing the descriptive needs of their readers. There were 154 writers (78 5th-graders and 76 9th-graders) and 52 9th-grade readers that participated in the study. Three conditions were contrasted: a feedback only condition, a "rating other" condition, and a "reading-as-the-reader" condition. Readers' correct description-to-tangram matches made for each of three sessions served as the dependent measure. Repeated measures analysis revealed both the 9th- and the 5th-grade writers showed consistent significant improvement under the "read-as-the-reader" condition when revising their essays and when drafting anew. The results suggest that when young writers engage in a process that mirrors their readers' experiences, they can more accurately revise their descriptive writing to meet their readers' informational needs.

Theoretical perspective

Writing is simultaneously an individual struggle and a social undertaking (Dyson & Freedman, 1991; Fitzgerald, 1992; Florio, 1979; Flower, 1994). Writers face the individual cognitive task of selecting what information to communicate and how they will communicate it. Inseparably, writers consider who their readers will be and the context of their reading. Writing scholars (Traxler & Gernsbacher, 1992, 1993; Fitzgerald, 1992) theorize that to meet the informational needs of readers, a writer must coordinate at least three interacting mental representations: a representation of personal communicative intent (what do I want to say?), a representation of the text produced (what have I written?), and a representation of the reader's perspective (how will the reader interpret my writing?).

Establishing reciprocity between reader, writer, and text is the hallmark of experienced writing (Witte, 1992; Olson, 1994). Considerable research (e.g., Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Beal, 1996) has demonstrated that young writers are particularly challenged in learning this writer-reader-text reciprocity. Specific instructional conditions that foster "comprehension monitoring" (Beal, 1996; Fitzgerald & Markham, 1987) and "knowledge-transforming" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) can help young writers discriminate their intended message from the actual text they have composed, thus influencing *the textual quality* of their writing. Fewer studies, however, have outlined conditions that may help improve younger writers' awareness of their readers' possible interpretations. For example, Frank (1992) found that subtle manipulation of "audience specification" in writing prompts led fifth-grade writers to compose their newspaper advertisements differently for two separate audiences. The research literature (e.g., Bonk, 1990) remains unclear about instructional conditions that can help young writers view their text from the perspective of their readers, and thus improve *the communicative quality* of their writing.

To investigate how older students might become more sensitive to their readers needs, Traxler and Gernsbacher (1992, 1993) asked college students to compose and revise descriptions of tangrams for anonymous readers. The readers' task was to read each description and then select the matching tangram from a group of similar-looking tangrams. The writers who went through a revision process identical to that of their readers consistently wrote the most effective texts. Traxler and Gernsbacher (1993) concluded that the reciprocity between readers' needs, text, and writer could be successfully accomplished when writers read-as-their-readers, that is, when writers learn to take the informational perspective of their readers. If consideration of the readers' needs is critical to "good thinking during composition" (Fitzgerald, 1992, p. 345), then "reading-as-the-reader" may enable young writers to consider the descriptive needs of their readers. Reading-as-the-reader may be one strategy whereby young writers can coordinate "what do I want to say?" and "what have I written?" with "how will the reader interpret my writing?"

This paper reports on-going research (Holliway, 2000; Holliway & McCutchen, in press) that suggests "reading-as-the-reader" can improve fifth- and ninth-grade writers' ability to compose descriptive writing consistent with their readers' informational needs. Three questions guide the present paper: 1) Can "reading-as-the-reader" assist young writers in composing and revising descriptive writing that meets their readers'

informational needs? 2) What do the writers' post-experiment reflections reveal about three contrasting perspective-taking conditions? 3) How are the "readers' informational needs" reflected in the descriptive strategies used by these writers?

Methods

Participants

All participants came from four elementary schools and three high schools located in a large metropolitan area. There were 154 writers (78 5th-graders and 76 9th-graders) that came from regular language arts classes. The readers were a separate group of 52 9th-grade readers in advanced placement English classes.

Design

A written referential communicative paradigm was adapted from Traxler and Gernsbacher (1993). The writer communicated the details of Tangram to a reader who chose the "target-gram" from a group of similar-looking tangrams. There were three writing sessions each separated by one-week intervals. Each writing session was followed on a separate day of the same week by a reading session.

Materials

The tangrams that the writers described came from a collection of 72 figures (similar to those used by Traxler and Gernsbacher, 1992, 1993; Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986). Tangrams were counterbalanced across sessions and conditions.

Procedures for Writers

Session one

All writers were given a notebook with three tangram figures to be described. Writers had 30 – 35 minutes to complete their descriptions.

Session two

Writers in each classroom were randomly assigned to one of three perspective-taking conditions. The three conditions differed in how closely the writers' task mirrored that of their readers.

Feedback-only condition

Writers received a sentence for each description indicating whether their reader had successfully matched the description with the associated target-gram. Writers then revised their original descriptions.

Feedback + rating-other condition

Writers received a feedback sentence for each description indicating whether their reader had successfully matched the description with the associated target-gram, plus three descriptions written by another student. Writers rated the descriptions by considering the informational adequacy of each description (e.g., which description creates a clearer picture in your mind?). After finishing they revised their original descriptions.

Feedback + reading-as-the-reader condition

Writers received a feedback sentence for each description indicating whether their reader had successfully matched the description with the associated target-gram, plus three descriptions written by another student, and then they matched each description with tangrams, exactly as their readers had done. After they finished their matching, they revised their original descriptions.

Session three

After finishing their task-specific activity, all writers received a new set of three tangrams to describe.

Procedures for Readers

The readers received a notebook that contained typed versions of the tangram descriptions, and a scorebook wherein they made their description-to-targetgram matches. For the entirety of the experiment, the same reader scored the same three writers, each writer representing one of the three experimental conditions.

Results

Quantitative analysis

The dependent measure for the 2 (grades) x 3 (tasks) x 3 (sessions) repeated measures analysis was the number of correct description-to-"target-gram" matches that each reader made for each description they read (For Mean differences see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Means and standard deviations by Session, condition, and grade.

	Session 1			Session 2			Session 3		
Condition	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**N**	**M**	**SD**
Feedback									
9th-grade	18	2.17	.92	18	2.39	.85	18	2.28	.96
5th-grade	25	1.80	.76	25	2.20	.76	25	1.68	.95
Rate-Other									
9th-grade	26	2.23	.77	26	2.42	.76	26	2.42	.70
5th-grade	30	1.87	1.04	30	2.00	.95	30	2.27	.87
Read-as-the Reader									
9th-grade	32	1.75	.88	32	2.25	.84	32	2.47	.67
5th-grade	23	1.57	.59	23	2.13	1.01	23	2.26	.69

The between subject effect revealed a main effect of Writer, $F(1,148)=11.00$, $p=.001$. On average, the ninth-graders scored higher than the fifth-graders throughout all sessions and in all tasks. The within subjects effects revealed a significant main effect of Session, $F(2,296)=8.76$, $p<.001$, with session 1 ($M = 1.88$, $SD =$

.86) yielding fewer matches than session 2 (M = 2.22, SD = .87) and session 3 (M = 2.24, SD = .83). However, the session main effect was compromised by a significant interaction between session and condition, F (4,296) = 2.96, p = .019. Post hoc analyses (Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) approach) established that differences between session 1 and sessions 2 and 3 were significant only for the read-as-the-reader group (critical value = .375, p = .05). No other interactions reached significance (F <1). These results suggest that reading-as-the-reader helped both the 5th- and the 9th-graders in meeting their readers' informational needs more than the other two conditions.

Qualitative analysis

An analysis of the writers' open-ended free-writes about their "reading-as-the-reader" experiences revealed that the task was very useful for these writers. Students portrayed their writing experiences on a variety of levels, usually characterizing the task in some way as fun or boring, insightful or uninspiring. The student free-write responses were used to generate a general coding scheme that categorized their experiences as positive or negative, useful or not useful.

Based on the coding scheme, the percentage of students in each condition who characterized their writing experience positively was calculated. Not all students provided a free-write. Table 2 presents the number of students responding in each condition, as well as the percentage. The percentage of positive responses from students in the Feedback condition was compared to those in the Rate-Other and the Read-as-Reader conditions. Students in the Feedback condition were significantly less likely to characterize their writing experiences as positive, compared with students in the other two groups (Fisher's Exact = 6.787, p =.005).

Table 2: Actual number and percentage of students who responded positively to their experimental condition.

	Positive Responses	
	# Responding in each condition	% Who responded from each condition
Feedback	20	46.5%
Rate-Other	38	67.9%
Read-as-Reader	39	70.9%

To investigate the "readers' needs" a profile was compiled based on the readers' open-ended comments made at the end of each reading session. An analysis of their comments about what they needed from their writers revealed that *a global conceptual image* created by an analogy with a balance of *local shape and spatial elaborations* helped them discriminate and chose the "target-gram" from the group of similar-looking tangrams. For example, one reader commented: "The descriptions that were the best were very detailed in the shapes and what the figure looks like it's doing." The readers' profile revealed that the readers' informational needs were met more efficiently by writers who elaborated on the analogical referent with a balance of shape names (e.g., triangle, parallelogram, square), geometrical qualifications (e.g., zigzaggy, diagonal, pointy) and location descriptors (e.g., to the right, on its left, the left one).

A text analysis of the descriptions revealed that many writers, regardless of condition and grade, began their descriptions with analogies (e.g., "It looks like a running fox," "This tangram looks like a ghost flying.") These "spontaneous analogies" (English, 1997, p. 15) may be one way writers are attempting to establish a common perceptual ground with their readers. Writers varied, however, in the way they elaborated on the spatial and geometric qualities of the tangrams they described. Many writers used an "object centered" strategy that focused on the intrinsic details of each tangram. For example this writer's description represents a common strategy: "It looks like a goose. It has a long zigzagging neck. It has a small head and a pointed beak. Its body is kinda [sic] long and it has two feet on top of each other." At this point in the analysis it is not easy to identify changes in writing strategies and textual features due to enhanced reader perspective. Initial text analyses of the descriptive essays generated in this study reveal few structural differences that can be associated with condition.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

All three groups of writers received feedback indicating the accuracy of their reader's choice. The rate-other group also read and evaluated descriptive tangram texts written by other students. However, only the read-as-the-reader group was asked to take their readers' perspective in the actual task of matching descriptions to tangrams. Although the mean scores improved significantly from session 1 to session 2, the cognitive potency of the read-as-the-reader condition emerged most strikingly in the "transfer comparison" between sessions 1 and 3. It may be the case that the intervention duration was not sufficient in the second session to show a significant revision in the original descriptions. Perhaps more than one experience with reading-as-the-reader is necessary for younger writers to show the benefits.

An alternative explanation involves the nature of the writing task in session 3 compared to session 2. In the second session (revision session), writers may have been under the influence of the text they had already created; the actual physical text that they composed in the first session may have constrained the creation of a new text fresh with detail. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) suggest, "the original version of text, *because it is perceptually present* [emphasis added], has a direct claim on conscious attention. Unless the writer can deliberately bring alternatives to mind, the original text will win for lack of competition" (p. 87). The reading-as-the-reader condition had the greatest impact when students were given a chance to apply and recontextualize what they had learned from composing one set of texts to the composition of a similar, but new texts. That is, when writers drafted anew in the third session, unconstrained by an existing less-effective text, they were able to demonstrate what they had learned from "reading-as-the-reader."

The positive responses that students made suggests that "reading-as-the-reader" gave these writers a perspective on the effects of their writing that they otherwise might not have considered. One writer reflected "I like to read other kids' descriptions because sometimes if I read other kids [sic] descriptions I can get more ideas . . . because when I look back into the pictures I can't see the pictures they see." The analysis of the writer's comments from the read-as-the-reader group suggests that actually doing the task their readers did revealed to them the necessary information they needed to include and the unnecessary information they needed to exclude in their descriptions.

Further research might "directly probe the ways in which individuals cope with the items or task, in an effort to illuminate the processes that underlay item response and task performance" (Messick, 1989, p. 6). By conducting protocol analysis students' thoughts could be assessed to reveal the kinds of decisions that writers make and the kinds of information they chose to include and exclude, and ultimately, the kinds of discourse strategies that they chose to use in an attempt to meet their readers' informational needs. This is one approach we might take to better understand how reading-as-the-reader can assist younger writers in accomplishing the writer-reader-text reciprocity.

Educational Implications

This research contributes to a body of literature (e.g., Beal, 1996; Cameron, Hunt, & Linton, 1996; Frank, 1992; Oliver, 1995) that clarifies some of the instructional conditions that can help young writers envision how their readers' interpret the text they have written. Specifically, it contributes to our understanding of how younger writers can learn of the reciprocity between writing, reading, and text (see Witte, 1992). The study offers empirical support for the widespread classroom practice of peer editing and peer response. This study suggests, however, that peer response may be more effective when peers actually use the text in some way, because they are forced to confront the text's strengths and weaknesses in a concrete context, rather than the more abstract context of giving literary feedback.

Although the "referential communication design" has been traditionally associated with experimental psychology and spoken communication, similar activities and communicative processes are found in writing instruction literature. For example, an adaptation of the writing/reading exercise "reading-as-the-reader" might be added to a teacher's repertoire of "optimal environmental activities" (Daniles, 1990, pp. 118-121). Daniles suggests, "lessons about effective descriptive writing emerge from experiencing strategies in use" (p. 119). "Reading as the reader" is a perspective-taking strategy experienced when the writer attempts to create a specific description their readers can "see."

Another application of "reading as the reader" would be a perspective-taking strategy that can be added to a "writer's tool box" (Harper, 1997). Harper describes five revision tools that she suggests have worked for her as a practicing middle school writing teacher. One such tool is the "snapshot." Students compose written snapshots similar to a detailed photographic snapshot. Snapshots are writing activities that compel students to concentrate on the physical properties and descriptive qualities of various "objects." "Reading-as-the-reader" could be an instructional tool that writing teachers incorporate into his/her repertoire of classroom activities to help students become more efficient descriptive writers.

Finally, "reading-as-the-reader" may help students to make details explicit and assist students in recognizing other text creating approaches that could be used with other functions of writing. Composing concrete poems and descriptive essays and then "reading as the reader" are classroom experiences that may facilitate students going beyond their immediate personal and social circumstance (Cameron, Hunt, & Linton, 1996; Elasasser & John-Steiner, 1977; Florio, 1979). If "reading-as-the-reader" is a learning strategy that worked for younger writers in helping them develop a readers' perspective in transactional writing, it might also be a strategy transferable to other writing purposes. Not only does "reading-as-the-reader" assist writers in asking, "what do I want to write?" and "what have I written?" , more importantly, it may assist in addressing the more challenging task of, "How will the reader interpret my writing?"

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