CROSS-AGE TUTORING
IN A WRITING PROGRAM
FOR ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

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Introduction:

Writing instruction in elementary education generally focuses on handwriting, spelling and grammar. Language Arts textbooks conveniently provide teachers with a sequential approach to instruction whereby students progress through predetermined objectives which lead to the acquisition of writing skills. One example of this approach is the widely used Language Arts textbook SERIES E: Macmillan English. This program (Thoburn and Cox, 1982:v) for elementary students

assumes

to help children use oral and written English effectively. For children to achieve this goal, they must first understand the basic structure of language. SERIES E emphasizes the instruction of grammar and the related language skills of usage, mechanics, vocabulary and spelling.

The use of such textbooks has encouraged teachers to stress the fragmentary components of written language. Current research, however, (Graves, 1975; Zamel, 1983) seems to indicate that the traditional standards educators have been bound to regard as benchmarks for student writing may, in fact, be more arbitrary than accurate when considering
competency in written discourse.

It is the contention of much of the recent literature on writing instruction (Newkirk and Atwell, 1982; Thaiss and Suhor, 1983) that teaching methodologies based on specific guidelines and grammatical acuity are misconceptions because they fail to address the issue of how students develop skill in expressing their own thoughts in written form. Researchers in writing (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1983) have begun to observe and document the behavior of students in the process of "actually doing the writing, making words fulfill their intentions" (Graves, 1983:250). These investigations have revealed approaches to the writing process that are content centered. In such process-oriented writing programs student writing is the focal point; and effective communication of ideas is the goal. Many of these programs use conferences as a vehicle for editing and revising the student writing.

The Writing Conference:

Newkirk and Atwell define the writing conference as "a structured collaboration where the teacher (and other students) ask questions and model procedures that the student, sooner or later, will internalize" (1982:3). Conferences provide the occasion for the teacher and student to focus on the student writing and through dialogue "create and negotiate meaning" (Farr, 1983:141) as they
revise and edit the written text. Even questions about spelling and grammar take on a communicative significance because they occur in a meaningful context (Graves, 1983). As the student reads his text to the teacher or to other students he is made aware that he writes for a purpose and an audience (Golden 1980), and he develops a sense of responsibility for his own writing (Bissex, 1982).

Cross-age or cross-grade conferencing offers students an appropriate situation (Adams, 1984) in which to develop their writing skills. Within the conference the students are actively participating in at least four activities: (1) reading, (2) listening, (3) discussing and (4) rewriting. The older student benefits by having to find the means of verbalizing his understanding of the process as he explains things to the younger student. This also provides an occasion to assess the degree of internalization that has occurred in the older student. Both students learn to deal effectively with each other in a task oriented setting; and this involves making decisions about language and about the organization of time and task. The younger student, whose writing is the focus of the conference, experiences the older student as helper and guide in the process of writing.

Purpose:

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects
of cross-age tutoring in an elementary writing program. The focus is on the writing conference, a procedure which allows students to demonstrate their use of and response to the writing program.

The motivation for this project is a matter of professional interest. The author, a certified teacher with ten years of experience, was invited and encouraged by the school principal to develop a writing program to supplement the grammar-based program required by the school district.

The first objective was to discover the degree to which sixth grade facilitators and first grade authors could sustain on-task behavior when working independently. The second objective was to determine to what extent the facilitators had internalized the writing process. This would be observed in the questioning strategies they employed in the writing conferences. The third objective was to investigate the instructional language used by the facilitators. It was thought that analysis of instructional language would provide insight into thinking and communication styles that would have implications for classroom instruction.

Methodology

Setting:

This study was conducted in a public elementary school in Sheldon Point, a Yup'ik Eskimo community in Alaska.
Sheldon Point is 280 kilometers south of Nome on the Yukon Delta. The total Native population of Sheldon Point is seventy-eight. There are thirty-three adults (ages 20-65), thirty-nine students (ages 4-19) and six preschoolers. Based on the Language Assessment Questionnaire (December 1984) used by the school district for the Bilingual Education program, 18% (6) of the adult population speak only Yup'ik and 82% (27) of the adult population speak English and Yup'ik. At Sheldon Point, as in other Eskimo communities along the Yukon River, Yup'ik is no longer spoken as a first language by most of the young children (Krauss, 1980). The bilingual classes at Sheldon Point teach Yup'ik as a second language. In this community, 69% (27) of the student population speak only English and 31% (12) use English and Yup'ik in their homes. The main language spoken by the children is "Village English." It is characterized by grammatical and syntactic patterns that reflect Yup'ik language patterns as well as English usage common to the area (Category E of the Bilingual Education Act). It should be noted that the use of standard English and nonstandard English were both accepted in the school context.

There are a total of five non-native adults (3 females and 2 males) and two non-native students (boys) at Sheldon Point. The non-native adults were hired by the school district to teach at Sheldon Point School. The teaching
staff consists of two certified elementary teachers, two certified high school teachers, one certified principal and ten classified employees.

The elementary school has two multi-grade classrooms. There are a total of nine students in Room 1, kindergarten through third grade. A total of eleven students, grades four through six, are taught in Room 2.

Subjects:

The first grade students from Room 1 were selected to participate in this study as "authors" because they were described as "eager learners" by their classroom teacher. There were four Native students (3 boys and 1 girl) and one non-native student (boy) in the first-grade. These students (ages 6-7) were reading at or above grade level in the Houghton Mifflin series prescribed by the school district.

Two sixth grade students from Room 2 (1 boy and 1 girl) volunteered to participate as facilitators in this study because they wanted "to work with the smaller kids". Both students were reading at grade level in the reading program. It should be noted, however, that all of the Native elementary students scored at or below the 40th percentile in reading on the standardized tests (SRA) used by the school district.
Procedure:

In the second quarter the teacher in Room 2 began to instruct all of the students, grades four through six, in a process approach to writing. The program involved generating topics, group discussion, reading of student writing to the teacher or group, and editing based on further discussion in small group conferences.

During the third quarter the school principal trained the two sixth grade students to act as facilitators for the first grade students in the writing program. The training involved six 30-minute sessions over a three week period. During the first three sessions the trainer modeled questioning techniques and encouraged the students to generate questions about each other’s writing. In the last three sessions the student facilitators were videotaped while conferencing with each other. The students and trainer reviewed these videotapes together and discussed questioning strategies.

During the fourth quarter the facilitators met with the first grade authors in one-on-one writing conferences. The purpose of the conferences was for the sixth grade students to facilitate further development of the first-graders’ stories.

The first grade students in Room 1 selected their own topics (e.g., hunting, berry picking, snowmachine rides ...) for
their stories. The students discussed their topics and then wrote for approximately 10 to 15 minutes. After the stories were written each member read his story to the group. The teacher typed the stories using standard orthography. It was found that it was easier for the students to reread a copy of their story using standard spelling rather than rereading the original copy with the students' inventive spelling.

A typed copy of the first grader's story was given to the sixth grade facilitator. The facilitator read the story and formulated questions about the story that he or she could ask the first grade author. A typed copy was also given to the first graders so that they could practice reading their stories.

Time was then provided by the teacher in Room 1 for the author and the facilitator to work together in a writing conference. During the conference the author read the story to the facilitator. The facilitator listened and then led a discussion that encouraged further development of the story. If editing occurred, the facilitator introduced editing techniques to guide the first grader in the revision process.

Data Collection:

The subjects participated in writing conferences held during the fourth quarter of the school year. They worked
together at a table in front of a video camera. There were no time restrictions, and the subjects could decide when to end the conference. The students worked independently and at no time did the researcher intervene in the writing conference. The sessions were videotaped and reviewed by the researcher and the principal. Transcriptions were made of selected conferences. Data was compiled through an analysis of the transcriptions and videotapes.

Corpus:

Data for the analysis consists of statements made by the facilitators and the authors in the writing conferences. Five conferences involving five different authors and two facilitators were selected as representative of the program.

Analysis

The dyads consisted of an author and a facilitator. During the conference the author read his story to the facilitator. The facilitator listened to the story and:
1. discussed the story to help the author clarify what he wished to say
2. guided the author in the editing process

Student statements were tallied under three categories:
1. task-related and not task-related;
2. type and frequency of statements made by the sixth grade student;
3. type and frequency of statements made by the first grade student.

Task-related statements deal with the content of the story or the editing process. (e.g., How big was the rabbit? ...Where you'll put that?) The number of task related questions is an indicator of the effective use of the conference. Not task-related statements are not directed to the content or form of the written text. (e.g., I mark my bellybutton... see)

The type of statements made by the facilitator were divided into three categories:
1. content questions, (e.g., Who went with you guys?)
2. editing questions, (e.g., Where could you put that?)
3. instruction/illustration. (e.g., You have to use a caret thing.)

The type and frequency of statements can be an indicator of the degree to which the student has internalized the writing process. The student's statements also demonstrate his technique as a facilitator.

The type of statements made by the first-grade author were divided into three categories:
1. responses to content questions, (e.g., We went over that way.)
2. responses to editing questions, (e.g., Show me how.)
3. questions. (e.g., Right here?)

The author's statements indicate whether he is an active, involved participant in the dialogue with the facilitator. The type and frequency of the author's responses illustrate whether he shares in the writing task or is being "taught". Questions asked by the younger student show to what degree he looks upon the sixth grade student as a helper in the writing task.

The instruction/illustration statements of the facilitator were divided into eight sub-categories:
1. Technical advice (e.g., You have to use a caret thing ...)
2. Reread the text (e.g., Took a boat ride ... took a)
3. Repeating a phrase the author wished to add to the story (e.g., and we pick berries.)
4. Spelling (e.g., [facilitator sounds out] p-i-c-k)
5. Placement of added word or phrase (e.g., You could put it here.)
6. Correction (e.g., No, no, no, no. Like this.)
7. Response to question (e.g., I don't know.)
8. Approval (e.g., Good boy.)

The sub-categorization of the instructional language of the
facilitator provides a profile of the teacher-learner relationship that develops within the conference. This profile is a graphic example of the older student’s approach to learning/teaching. It demonstrates his understanding, organization and use of classroom instruction. Analysis of this information can provide the teacher with insights into what a student learns and how he learns it.

Results and Discussion:

**TABLE 1: Task-Related and Not Task-Related Statements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conference</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task-Related</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Task-Related</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task-Related</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Task-Related</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task-Related</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Task-Related</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Statements</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statements made by the students in the conferences were categorized as Task-Related or Not Task-Related. Table 1 shows the distribution of statements of both types as they occurred in the five conferences. Of a total of 304 statements 294 (97%) were task-related. Only 10 statements
(3%) were not task-related. The high frequency of task-related statements is a quantitative indicator that the students in these videotaped conference were, to an impressive degree, able to attend to their assigned activity. Time on task is an essential element for the success of any learning experience.

**TABLE 2: Type and Frequency of Statements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conference</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitator</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Question</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing Question</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction/Illustration</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Content</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Editing/Inst.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 illustrates that of the 154 statements made by the facilitators 47 (30%) were content questions and 21 (17%) editing questions. These questions (content + editing = 47% of all statements) indicate that the facilitators have internalized the techniques of the writing process to the degree that they can frequently engage the first grade author in making decisions about his own writing. Instruction/illustration statements (53%) measure the frequency with which the facilitators assumed the role of "teacher." Overall there is a close balance between the roles of facilitator and teacher; however the variation of the pattern in the different sessions would seem to indicate that the two facilitators adapted their approach to fit each conference.
The 47 responses (37% of all author statements) to content questions show the frequency with which the author made decisions about the content of his written text during the conference. Involving the writer in this process encourages clarity of thinking and expression. The remaining 63% of the author’s statements were comprised of responses (45%) to editing questions or instructions, and questions (18%). The total number of author statements in these two categories (81) compared to the total number of the facilitator’s editing and instruction statements (107) indicates that a large percentage (76%) of the facilitator’s editing statements were verbally responded to. Although response does not guarantee comprehension, it does imply communication. It suggests that editing the text was accomplished through a dialogue in which the first grade author was an active participant. This is important for developing the perspective that writing, like speaking, involves a process, and the goal is communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conference</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Technical Advice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reread Text</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Repeat Wrd/Phrase</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Spelling</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Placement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Correction</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Response to Ques.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Approval</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Total</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 provides an interesting profile of the relationship that arises in the conference when the older student assumes a "teacher" role. This role was frequently (17) manifest by the facilitator Repeating Words or Phrases that the author stated as responses to content questions. Generally the facilitator repeated these words to help the author as he (the author) added them to his text. Of equal frequency were Approval statements (17). Together these categories indicate that 34% of the facilitators statements were supporting or approving the decisions made by the author. Success is an excellent motivator in any learning situation.

Spelling assistance through sounding out words made up 15% of the total instructional statements. This is not a very high percentage for a first grade student. Fourteen percent of all instructional statements were a Rereading of the text. This was done primarily to refocus the author's attention or to clarify a content question. This also is a kind of reinforcement because it provides the occasion for the younger student to listen to his writing being read by someone older.

Placement statements (14) were sometimes preceded by the author asking where he should place a word or phrase. Sometimes the suggestion involved Technical Advice (5%) such
as how to use a caret. The one situation in which the facilitator seemed to dominate the conference was when correcting the author. Correction (12) sometimes involved the older student taking the text and making the changes himself. Some of these instances could be interpreted as modeling the editing process.

Overall, then, the facilitator's approach to being a "teacher" is this: 12% of the time the teacher makes corrections for the student, and 19% (Placement+Technical Advice) of the time the teacher tells the student how to make corrections. Twenty-nine percent (Spelling+Reread) of teacher statements help students discover an answer. Finally, 34% (Repeat+Approval) of instructional language reinforces or gives approval to the student's actions. To some extent the facilitator's approach to the conference may be attributed to teacher directives and example. The presence of the television camera undoubtedly produced something of a Hawthorne effect. However, the data still provide a profile of the way in which the sixth grade student has organized and utilized instruction. It also illustrates his approach to learning and teaching.

Conclusion:

The data provided significant insights into cross-age tutoring in an elementary writing program. It was found that while in the writing conference the first grade author and
sixth grade facilitator could maintain a high percentage (97%) of on-task statements. The fact that 47% of the facilitator’s remarks were directed toward eliciting from the author a decision about his writing is a strong indication that the facilitators had internalized the process approach to writing. The data compiled on the facilitator’s instructional language, although encouraging, raise more questions than they answer. There are a number of factors to be considered in analyzing the instructional strategies of the facilitator—classroom background, training, presence of the television camera, student ability, conference environment. The small numbers of staff and students available for this study prevented the exploration of most of these issues. But each one of these factors would be worth investigation in comparative studies.

The greatest limitation of this study was the small number of students involved. However, the entire first grade population and half of the sixth grade students currently enrolled in the school did participate in the study. The school size and the fact that the cross-age tutoring was initiated during the last three months of the school year resulted in a small number of conferences from which to gather data. Furthermore, there was not the opportunity to compare the students in this program with those in another approach to writing.
The study was primarily concerned with the sixth grade facilitator, and little attention was given to the responses of the first grade author. Closer analysis could be made of the author's verbal and written replies to the facilitator. And because the focus was on the sixth grade student, the study evaluated his performance as a facilitator by scrutinizing his use of the process; no analysis was made of the student writing. A longitudinal study would have to be conducted with the first grade writers in the program to determine the true effect of cross-age tutoring.

When the researcher views this study from the perspective of a teacher in a multigrade elementary classroom the results are very promising. Students working independently for periods of 7 to 16 minutes maintained on-task dialogue while engaged in developing thinking and communication skills. Although there is need for further development, the writing program studied here has already provided sound educational experiences for young writers.