
Research for the Classroom

One of the most challenging aspects of the teaching profession, at all levels, is to identify and illuminate assumptions—our students' and our own. This phenomenon is evident in the following account of how three members of the Hudson Valley Writing Project at the State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz worked closely with the National Writing Project's Analytic Writing Continuum (AWC) to explore the question, "What if the writing rubrics we use don't make sense to our bilingual students or their teachers?"

Lost in Translation: Assessing Writing of English Language Learners

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Fabiola Lieberstein-Solera

Our team—two bilingual teacher consultants (Martha and Fabiola) and a writing project site director (Tom)—began with a measurement conundrum. The Hudson Valley Writing Project (HVWP) at SUNY New Paltz had been involved in a research project designed to help us understand the impact of our bilingual writing program for migrant youth, nearly all of whom spoke Spanish as a first language. Consistent

with the instructional philosophy of the program, and based on our understanding of literacy research, we believed that young writers could develop fluency in *both* English and Spanish and we encouraged the students to consider their lives and language as resources for regular daily writing (de la Luz Reyes and Halcón; Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez). We urged students to code-switch and use Spanish words that held particular meanings that need not be translated, for instance, *mami* (mommy). When writing personal narratives, we encouraged bilingual writers to use the language that matched the moment of the memory. For example, if a student's memory about a first bicycle occurred when the writer was exclusively a Spanish speaker, then writing the narrative in Spanish may be more appropriate than writing in English. In sum, we did not believe that writing in a first language would deter learning in a second language and that some of the writing processes and satisfactions could transfer to subsequent learning (Pérez).

When our study began in 2006, we had rich data indicating that the program was important for the students. Not only had we observed the classes, but we had also collected students' drawings,

surveys, and sample writing from their portfolios. Additionally, we interviewed teachers, students, and program administrators. Nonetheless, we knew little about the majority of the students' pre- and post-writing samples, which had been independently scored at a national scoring conference. Students who elected to write in English scored poorly, averaging between 1 and 2 on the holistic, six-point Analytic Writing Continuum (AWC) scale. Complicating matters further, we had no results for those who opted to write in Spanish (the majority) since their writing samples went un-scored. The English writing results were not flattering to our program and we knew nothing about what happened when bilingual students opted to write in their first language, something that we encouraged them to do.

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We were disappointed that the Spanish writing had not been scored; however, we understood that accurate scoring required readers who were both knowledgeable about assessment and fluent

in Spanish. We began to wonder what would have happened if we had translated the original writing samples from Spanish into English and then had them scored. Quickly, though, we surmised that many of the nuances of communication and culture would be lost in translation and lost on the readers looking at the writing through the lens of a rubric designed for the scoring of writing produced by “L1” American students whose first language was English. We came to believe that if we translated the NWP’s AWC into Spanish before scoring any of the Spanish writing, we might end up with more valid scores.

Making a Rubric

With a goal of making conceptual instead of literal translations, we translated the AWC into Spanish using a method called “back translation.” Martha translated the analytic and holistic AWC rubrics from English into Spanish. This meant that she aimed to capture the main ideas within the rubric without holding herself to word-for-word translations since certain words and concepts do not translate. She kept a journal chronicling translating issues that arose. For example, what descriptors would adequately capture increasing competence? In English we might be comfortable with “never,” “rarely,” “sometimes,” “often,” and “always.” Built into the AWC, though, is an effort to define what is accomplished in any piece of writing rather than using negative terms about what is missing. What frequency words would be adequate

in a second language? With six traits on a six-point scale, sometimes we found ourselves at a loss.

Next, Fabiola’s job was to translate the newly created Spanish rubric back into English. Like the game “telephone,” which reveals to children the challenge of conveying information clearly, we were eager to see how closely Fabiola’s English “back-translation” would match the original AWC. Like Martha, Fabiola kept a journal, noting decisions she was making or questions that she had about certain words and concepts. Here is a sample entry from her journal that shows her wrestling with what unit of analysis—the sentence or sentences—an assessor should consider:

I had to stop when I read “*fluidéz de la oración.*” I’ll have to come back to this term and look at it more critically. I wonder if this refers to the sentence structure and variety as one sentence flows into the next—in that case it would be “*fluidéz de las oraciones.*” Or does it refer to the overall flow of the writing which would be “*fluidéz de escritura*”? Either way I will have to consider this carefully when translating this section back to English.

As we analyzed the three versions of the rubric, we paid close attention to the words for which the translation either seemed amiss or raised questions. We worked with a Spanish/English dictionary and thesaurus. At each meeting we took time to write about what we were doing, learning, and thinking about as it related to our conceptions of assessment, writing, rubrics, translations, etc. We kept track

of words that could be translated but seemed to be idiomatic and more reflective of US writing cultural values such as *formulaic* and *rambling*. Take the example of *formulaic*. We realized that that word held cultural values about “good” writing and instruction—asking scorers to consider whether or not writing is “formulaic” seems to assume that students have learned formulas for writing, maybe “hamburger” paragraphs or “five-paragraph” essays. It also seems to assume that students’ formulaic writing is less sophisticated than writing that transcends formulas. As we stopped to consider *formulaic*, we wondered, What sort of formulas or values do writers learn and use in other cultures? For instance, writing deemed “rambling” or “circular” by one set of readers may be embraced for recognizable patterns of language and organization by readers from another culture.

Response and Revision

After a winter of work, we shared the Spanish-translated AWC with bilingual educators to determine how they viewed the rubric and the assessment of Spanish writing. Our professional development work often took a similar form. We began by asking participants to write in response to the question, “What are the qualities of good writing?” After sharing and recording the group’s collective traits of good writing, we gave participants a sample of Spanish writing and asked them to determine how/if the traits of good writing were illustrated by the piece. Eventually, we looked at,

discussed, and scored three pieces of Spanish writing using traits from the AWC-Spanish analytic version. The three de-identified samples reflected a wide range, including a piece produced by an emergent writer and one by an accomplished, published writer. We were intrigued by the participants' reactions, especially to the published writing, a short piece by Julio Cortazar called "Instrucciones para llorar" ("Instructions for Crying"). Certainly not "formulaic," this three-paragraph piece of writing challenges some of the values embedded in the AWC.

During one of our days piloting the professional development, a participant who spoke English as a second language initially described her skepticism for the Spanish-translated rubric. She explained that teachers like her had well-developed *English* skills and language to use during instructional interactions. However, later in the day, we noticed that she elected to speak in Spanish when explaining one of her scoring decisions. And, although she had copies of the AWC in English and in Spanish, she elected to use the *Spanish* language version when discussing the merits of a particular piece of writing.

Scoring the Work

Eventually, after making final edits, the three of us were ready to use the Spanish version of the AWC rubric to score the un-scored Spanish writing from our summer program. Our results? Bilingual students electing to write in Spanish averaged scores between

3 and 4 on the six-point holistic scale, much better than those students who elected to write in English. Even so, we believe that the low scores assigned to the English writing obscured the risk and courage bilingual writers took to write in a second language. Who is to say that a bilingual student who elected to write in English may not have scored better in Spanish? Moreover, in our ideal world, students would be making strides communicating in *both* languages.

What Did We Learn?

In our extended 18-month process, the three of us were learning the AWC, how to use it, and how to make sense of the values embedded in it. All the while, though, we were closely checking our understanding of the language we created in our translation, modifying it as necessary.

The project enabled us to articulate and think deeply about our ideas about writing and its assessment. In our attempt to come to agreement on particular aspects of the rubric and its application, issues regarding consistency and inter-rater reliability arose. Our understanding of the criteria had to be solid before we could introduce the rubric to larger, more diverse groups of educators. Our discussions also led to the realization that good writing had to be defined as did our expectations of writing from different contexts representing different writing tasks and different moments of development.

The process of sharing the rubric led us to believe that the translated language within it

could prove useful as a tool of "access" to Spanish-speaking teachers trying to instruct in a US educational setting that may value a different set of writing conventions than those they know in their bones and valued in their earlier instruction.

For Spanish-speaking students learning English, the fact that a rubric is translated into their mother tongue may hasten their ability to learn the discourse related to writing and writing achievement. Ultimately, though, even if more students had access to the new rubric, students' performance would probably hinge on their teachers' ability to facilitate conversations like those we had: conversations in which we discussed the qualities of good writing while studying samples of writing and then conversations about writing through the lens of a rubric.

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Perhaps most importantly, we developed a reflective scoring process that helped us refine the Spanish-translated AWC before using it to score writing from HVWP's Bilingual Youth Writ-

ing Program. This is a process that we would recommend to others interested in writing assessment and professional development:

1. Read sample work aloud.
2. Individually score and write observations about any trait(s) that the scoring sample illuminated.
3. Structure discussion of scoring decisions and reflection.
4. Create an illustrative set of student writing pieces and accompanying commentaries to help future scorers under-

stand the traits and varying levels of performance.

The study of the English and the Spanish-translated AWC rubrics created opportunities for our learning and also for rich teacher reflection on student writing, writing instruction, and writing assessment. Given the contemporary pressures to improve student writing for college and career readiness, we envision great promise in using these materials to foster discussion about writing in professional development settings and classrooms. 

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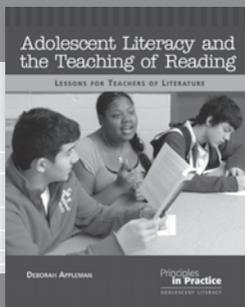
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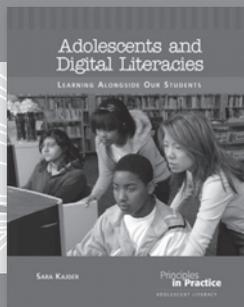
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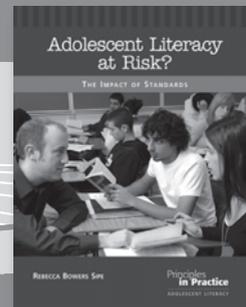
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