

Using Qualitative Assessment Data to Help Primary Students Make Progress in Story Writing

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When teaching and assessing students' short story writing, teachers commonly focus on three aspects:

1. content (plot development, creativity...etc.)
2. language (the use of tenses, the use of adjectives and adverbs to enrich ideas, the use of connectives to connect ideas...etc.) and
3. organisation (paragraphing and the flow of ideas)

In my experience of working with a team of passionate primary school teachers in exploring ways to use the data collected from students' writing to improve teaching and learning, we found that both quantitative and qualitative data were of equal significance. While quantitative data such as students' marks gained in the three aspects mentioned above gave the teachers a rough idea on students' general performance, the qualitative data allowed teachers to track students' actual production of ideas and language, pinpointing students' specific strengths and areas of improvement.

Procedure of Collecting Qualitative Data

The following shows the procedure of collecting qualitative data and compiling them to inform instruction.

The teachers first grouped students' writing into 'High', 'Mediocre' and 'Low' levels according to their performance in the three aspects. They then recorded students' performance in the following aspects, which were the learning targets for story writing:

Content:

1. The climax: how did students create the highest tension?
2. The ending: how did students end the story? What kind of resolution did they design for the characters?

Language:

1. The use of adjectives: what adjectives were commonly used?
2. The use of verbs: what verbs were commonly used to describe the actions?

Next, teachers teaching the six classes studied the qualitative descriptions of the students' performance in the content and language domains and then summarised and categorised them as follows.

Ability /Domain	High	Mediocre	Low
Content	Students were able to describe the interesting details of the story events and create an interesting ending with creativity.	Students described what they could see in the pictures accurately and wrote logical endings that have been discussed in class.	Students used only one sentence in a simple S-V-O structure to describe each picture. The ending was flat and lacked creativity.
Language	Students used a variety of verbs to describe the characters' actions. Besides using the advanced-level adjectives taught, the strongest students were able to use the 'Show, Don't Tell' technique and moved on to sketching the characters' personalities and feelings through their speeches and actions.	Students used mostly the core adjectives and verbs that have been taught in class. They also used simple adjectives like 'happy' or 'excited' to describe the characters.	Students used some of the adjectives and verbs that have been taught in class, but had difficulty in spelling them correctly.

Practical Suggestions for Follow-up Work

Upon analysing the qualitative data, teachers explored and designed different follow-up tasks and activities that helped each group of students understand their own strengths and weaknesses, appreciate their own work and the work of their peers as well as complete tasks that helped them actually improve their work. For the weakest group, they were instructed to do proofreading on spelling and tenses under the guidance of teachers. Labelling the pictures in a question with pictorial clues might also help weaker students add details to enrich their story. For the mediocre group, students were given the pieces written by stronger students to read and learn from. Teachers highlighted certain strengths like the use of advanced vocabulary items and the 'Show, Don't Tell' technique that they believed the mediocre group could also handle. Teachers then guided them to refine their own piece. As for the strongest group, teachers stretched their ability further by exposing them to writings with figurative language and creative beginnings and guided them to discuss and refine their own story.

One key strategy that could encourage students to make refinement is giving students the opportunity to edit their original writing using a pen of a different colour instead of having them use a correction pen to erase the original sentence then replacing it with a new one. Teachers made sure students understand that evidence of improvement were valued by telling them these editing done in different colours would be reviewed and additional marks would be given if they were done with effort. Another strategy is to design the curriculum in a way that students would be given a second opportunity to write a similar piece of writing on a different topic. Having written the first piece, edited it and received feedback from their peers and teacher, students were much more confident and skilled in approaching the second piece.

Closing Remark

While it is true that doing all the above takes up plenty of lesson time, it is important for us as educators to help our students not see their work as their final destination, but cultivate in them a growth mindset and the confidence that they can always progress from their yesterday-version.

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