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First-Year College Writing for Multilingual Speakers

Assessing Students' Understanding of Instructions



Assessment Questions



- What are students' metacognitive understanding of instructions for writing assignments?
 - How do students interpret writing assignment instructions, such as “analyze”, “discuss”, “evaluate”?
 - What are students' understanding of the expectations for their writing assignments?

Classroom/Learning Assessment Technique



- Minute Case Study 1
 - Multiple-answer questionnaire
 - Example:

What does it mean to analyze an essay?

 1. To tell what the essay is about
 2. To describe how a writer conveyed the meaning of his/her story
 3. To explain what strategies a writer used in his/her essay to achieve the purpose of the essay
 4. All of the above

Implementation of Minute Case Study 1



- Informed students
 - What is the purpose of the activity?
 - What do the students need to do?
- Explained procedure
 - Step-by-step clear instructions
- Implementation
 - 5 minute class activity before a writing assignment

Analysis



- Compare multiple-answer survey (Minute Case Study 1) to students' writing samples
- Identify where students' answers from the Minute case study match their performance in a writing assignment
- Identify where students' answers from the Minute case study don't match their performance in a writing assignment

Analysis results

What does it mean to analyze an essay?

1. To tell what the essay is about
2. To describe how a writer conveyed the meaning of his/her story
3. To explain what strategies a writer used in his/her essay to achieve the purpose of the essay
4. All of the above

Student performance (Sample writing-summary)

In this essay the author talks about....

In the third paragraph the author cites...

The author has authority because the essay is published....

Classroom/Learning Assessment Technique



- Minute Case Study 2

Fill-out index cards

- What do you think you need to do when you are asked to “analyze an essay”?
- What do you think you need to do when you are asked to “discuss an issue”?
- What do you think you need to do when you are asked to “evaluate the writer’s position”?

Implementation of Minute Case Study 2



- Informed students
 - What is the purpose of the activity?
 - What do the students need to do?
- Explained procedure
 - Step-by-step clear instructions
- Implementation
 - 5 minute class activity before a writing assignment

Analysis



- Compare multiple-answer survey (Minute Case Study 1) to students' writing samples
- Identify where students' answers from the Minute case study match their performance in a writing assignment
- Identify where students' answers from the Minute case study don't match their performance in a writing assignment

Analysis results



what do you think you need to do when you are asked to “analyze an essay”?

Students’ answers
(summary):

Student responses were very brief and mostly related to retelling the essay. Some students noted that analysis means talking about authority, currency, objectivity, and accuracy. However, none of the responses demonstrated that they clearly understood the expectations of an assignment that requests analysis of an essay.

Students’ performance-
Sample writing (summary):

In this essay the author talks about....
In the third paragraph the author cites...
The author has authority because the essay is published....
This essay is accurate because the information in it is true.

Intervention



- More detailed instructions with clear expectations
- Example: In this writing assignment you are asked to analyze an essay by John Smith. In your analysis, you are expected to address the following:
 1. What is the essay about?
 2. Did the author use ethos, pathos, and logos? If yes, provide examples and explain how the author chose to do it and whether he did it effectively.

Closing the Loop



- Informing students of findings
 - Explain the whole procedure
 - Show examples
 - Point out the differences/progress
 - Show the learning curve
- Formative modifications
 - Revision of those instructions that students showed they struggled with while interpreting what the expectation of an assignment are

Summary of results



Before

Students were not sure what the expectations of assignments were nor what steps they needed to take if the instructions consisted of vague language-- words like "analyze", "discuss", "evaluate". Their writing focused mostly on retelling and it did not demonstrate in-depth analysis of an essay in terms of recognizing and evaluating strategies used in the essay. Students struggled with reaching the minimum page requirement because, as they reported, they didn't know what to write about. Finally, they showed little or no confidence and authority over their writing.

After

Students understood better what they were expected to do and what steps they needed to take when asked to analyze, discuss, or evaluate an essay. Their writing was richer in content and they had less difficulties reaching the page minimum. Students also demonstrated more confidence and authority over their writing and they responded much better to my questions and comments during one-on-one conferences as they moved from draft to draft.