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<u>09 SES 03 B</u>, Assessing Spelling and Written Composition

Paper Session

Time:2013-09-10
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Room:D-310

Chair:Sarah Frahm

Contribution

Assessment For Learning - Form And Substance In Writing Lessons

The research questions addressed in this paper relate to the Assessment for learning (AfL) strategies New Zealand teachers of Years 7?9 students (11?14 years) use in their writing (written language) lessons.

- Which AfL strategies are evident during writing lessons?
- How are these strategies implemented?
- What gaps are apparent in teachers? AfL practice?

Contemporary literature depicts AfL as an everyday practice whereby learners work in partnership with teachers and peers as together they seek, reflect upon and respond to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that promote student autonomy and enhance ongoing learning (Klenowski, 2009; Swaffield, 2011). No longer are students ?the objects of their teacher?s behaviour, [rather] they are animators of their own effective teaching and learning processes? (James & Pedder, 2006, p. 28). They are expected to take ownership of the goals for learning and to monitor their progress in achieving these goals through strategies such as peer feedback and self assessment. The role of the teacher is to provide opportunities for, and support students, as they take control over their learning. The overall aim of AfL is for students to become autonomous, self-regulating learners (Willis 2011). Butler and Winne (1995) have described self-regulating students as those who are able to ?judge performance relative to goals, generate internal feedback about amounts and rates of progress towards goals, and adjust further action based on that feedback? (p. 258).

It is generally agreed that AfL encompasses the following strategies: the promotion of learner understanding about the goal(s) of learning and what constitutes expected performance; generation of feedback about the

relationship between current and desired performance; learner engagement in peer feedback and self-monitoring, and the taking of action to bring about desired performance (James & Pedder, 2006). Teachers? ready adoption of individual strategies such as goal setting and feedback has been attributed to the ease with which they can be attached to class programmes and the lack of disruption this attachment causes to prevailing practices and roles (Dixon, 2011; James & Pedder, 2006). Although itemised individually, these are neither stand-alone strategies nor sequential steps. Rather, each strategy feeds into and from the others in an iterative manner. All are necessary, with no one strategy being more or less important than any other ? all contribute to supporting and furthering students? learning. AfL is therefore more complex than teachers adding strategies onto existing class programmes (James & Pedder, 2006; Willis, 2011). Furthermore, the critical factor in terms of students? learning is not the presence of these strategies - what is important is how goals and criteria are framed, the nature or type of feedback that is given and the role afforded to students in relation to their learning. The full potential of AfL can only be realised when all strategies are present, to a greater or lesser extent, within a learning-teaching episode, *and* when students are given opportunities to take responsibility for their learning.

Method

Eighteen teachers used an Observation Guide during the sixth of seven reciprocal-peer observations to gather evidence about peers? AfL practice. Designed to help teachers identify areas of teaching strength and features for improvement, and to provide researchers with samples of classroom practice, the Guide had four sections, each section having up to five areas for observation. Where varying degrees of a criterion were to be noted, continuous descriptive rating scales were used with the majority of areas employing rating scales of up to four points, with each point defined by a verbal description. In some cases, the points on the scale were treated as discrete entities with only one point being marked, in other cases each point could be ?marked? several times to reflect frequency of an action. Space was also provided on the Guide to record evidence in support of judgments. Reciprocal-peer observations were carried out at the mid-point of the writing unit, a time when students were expected to be conversant with lesson goals and what constituted achievement of these goals, and they would be re-crafting their work in the light of feedback. Teachers had developed shared understandings of Guide descriptors, over time, through usage-in-context (Sadler, 1987).

Expected Outcomes

On the surface, it appeared that all teachers, with one exception, had successfully incorporated AfL into their writing lessons. However, while all shared goals for learning with students and all but one communicated what counted as successful achievement, they struggled to articulate goals in terms of literacy learning and to convey the substantive aspects and quality expected in students? writing. Given the nature of the goals and success criteria, and their role as points of reference for feedback, questions are raised about teachers? subject knowledge and the potential of feedback observed to further students? writing. In addition, teachers controlled the feedback process, telling students what had been achieved, what needed improvement and how to effect this improvement. There was little evidence of teachers and students jointly constructing or ?messing? with text (Ward & Dix, 2004) in a recursive manner ? a process critical to successful revision and the development of self-monitoring writers (Keen 2010; Parr, 2011). Despite AfL?s promotion of learner autonomy, few teachers afforded students focused opportunities to take a meaningful role in their learning through the appraisal of their own and peers? writing and the joint construction of feedback.

References

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