Seeing writing right and righting writing: An investigation into teacher writing proficiency

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Abstract

This study investigates the level of writing proficiency of 15 Anglophone Caribbean teachers of English. This is a purposive intact sample consisting of practising teachers who are currently students at The University of the West Indies (UWI). The study is a combination of quantitative and qualitative data whereby two pieces of analytical/persuasive academic writing, from each student, are evaluated against a weighted criteria checklist in the categories of introduction, body, conclusion and stylistics. The results are compared to the university's grading system to determine success/failure. The result is that the majority failed in most categories. It the reasons behind this failure that I principally choose to explore, while looking into the implications arising for teacher training, classroom pedagogy and teacher evaluation and making recommendations for improvement.

Keywords*: teacher proficiency, teacher evaluation, academic writing, writing perspective*

What should happen to teachers of English who do not use Standard English grammar correctly in their own writing, and who do not handle the technical aspects of writing well, like paragraphing, presenting strong evidence and employing topic and supporting sentences? I am here referring to teachers who 'see' themselves as native speakers of English. "Seeing writing right and righting writing" attempts to answer these questions and others while investigating Caribbean teachers' level of writing proficiency, exploring the view that the teachers' perspective of writing and of self as writer, can pave the way for improving writing, and considering (1) the implications arising from the study (2) recommendations for improving their writing. I believe this project timely in light of the debate about the falling standards of English in the West Indian context. Very little world-wide has been written in this area, so that a web search of the term "teacher language proficiency" yields other search terms like "teacher competence", referring to teacher's general curriculum knowledge and classroom management skills.

I believe this is because most of the texts even remotely related to this issue are written from a North American and European perspective, where teachers are expected to take tests regulated by the State/ National Assessment Board, so that issues like linguistic deficiency would be easily spotted and handled appropriately. However, in the Anglophone West Indies, it has been the custom that teachers of English could leave secondary school and teach the language as long as they had the requisite regional certification. No training or further education was required. Today, a teacher of English does not need to be trained as a teacher. The purpose of this work therefore is to analyse samples of English language teachers' academic writing to determine if it satisfies the criteria I established for good academic writing (Figures 1 &1.1). To begin, I will explain my rationale for this kind of research; I will then describe the ethical issues associated with it, and from there account for the methodology and its limitations. I will then present and discuss the findings, and finally, consider the implications borne from the questions and issues previously articulated, while offering recommendations to address some of these issues.

Rationale

I undertook this research primarily because of my previous research findings. Based on that research about teacher *linguistic* proficiency, I concluded that "most of these teachers are not proficient writers of the English language" (Denny, 2007:519). This was in reference to their performance at the levels of phonology, lexico-semantics and morpho-syntax in their writing. In light of these findings, I decided to further investigate teachers' writing proficiency from a technical perspective (constructing and employing thesis statements, paragraphing, structuring ideas, integrating literature, presenting evidence etc.). This was not the only reason. I was also motivated by an absence of systematic research to substantiate claims made by fellow Caribbean linguists. Some well known Caribbean scholars (e.g., LePage, 1968; Cassidy, 1969; McCourtie, 1998; Simmons-McDonald, 1994) contend that Caribbean teachers are not proficient in English. These comments were based on personal observations as opposed to systematic study and though I had similar suspicions I felt a need to provide a sound basis for the claims I made.

I also hoped the research would initiate a discussion about this sensitive, yet critical issue of teacher language proficiency. Another reason for this research relates to what I deem an alarming practice espoused by the teacher language proficiency, but rather to teacher evaluation policy of Barbados. This policy allows for teachers to be evaluated in a content area *of their choice*. The document actually states that at the pre-conference the appraisal team meets with the teacher "to discuss the proposed lesson plan and the area of focus chosen by [t]he teacher" (Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs & Sports, 2006:8). This means that some teachers at the primary level, who teach several subjects (Maths, English language, Health Science etc) might never choose to be evaluated in Language Arts, specifically, composition. I therefore wanted to explore the implications of a poorly proficient writing teacher who perhaps will never be assessed in this content area. I must however now define the central term of this study, 'academic writing'.

Definition

My definition of this term draws upon the definitions of two experts in the field of composition. Winterowd (1969:1), an outstanding scholar in composition theory, defines an essay as "that literary form which analyzes, explains, and interprets, which allows the individual writer to put his personal viewpoint before the public". Additionally, Rozakis (2007) specifically describes a research paper as that which "argues a thesis, the writer's proposition or opinion. It is an analytical or persuasive essay that evaluates a position" (pp. 3-4). Despite the time gap, there are striking similarities between these descriptions. Firstly, tertiary level academic writing is not simplistic narration, but rather analysis. Secondly, the writer must offer a viewpoint/opinion, so that there is a sense of both voice and audience conveyed throughout the writing. For the purposes of this study, I therefore submit tertiary level academic writing to mean a logically organised analytical/persuasive piece of writing with a voice so central to the work that the unfolding position taken becomes increasingly clear to the audience with whom the writer is intending to communicate. With this definition in mind, I started to formulate the methodology.

Method

Starting from the deductive hypothesis that Anglophone Caribbean teachers of English do not write academic language well, I was able to construct a suitable research design which allowed for use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. I wanted first to test this hypothesis, determine the implications of my findings, and make recommendations for further improvements and so I formulated these research questions to guide me:

1. How well do my students, who are teachers of English, write, and what do I mean by 'well'?
2. What, if any, are the implications of my findings?
3. What can be done to continuously improve teachers' standard of writing?

Participant selection

My hypothesis required me to find a very specific sample for this pilot project. I first had to find Caribbean teachers of Language Arts, for whom essay writing would be part of their teaching portfolio. I also wanted this sample to comprise students of Linguistics, to get an idea of how those who majored in a language oriented field handled the language, and finally all of these teachers needed to have completed the university language course which would have taught them paragraph and essay writing skills in exposition and argument, the fields of academic writing which I was primarily testing. The reason for the latter was because I felt it necessary to judge their work against criteria in which they already received training. Because I wanted this sample to be so specific, I determined that it needed to be purposive, and so I chose an intact sample of 15 students who were taking a course with me at the university at the time of the research. I understood that it would be difficult to make strong quantitative inferences from this sample, but this was not my primary intent, as I wished to look beyond the data/figures into the reasons behind the results, whether positive or negative.

Instruments & Procedure

The deductive hypothesis also helped to identify the variables and subsequently the methods necessary to conduct the research. The variables were teachers' academic writing and the criteria checklist against which this writing would be assessed. I therefore required at least two pieces of teachers' academic writing because I felt it more difficult to judge technical criteria on the basis of one essay. I mean that students have bad days while writing essays for all kinds of reasons, and so I rationalised that if the same technical issues were emerging in both essays then it might be easier to argue that there is a technical writing flaw. I also required that the essays be submitted over the course of a semester, preferably, one from my course and another course, and preferably a clean copy, as I did not want grades and comments to influence my evaluation. These could be take home assignments or those written under exam conditions. Those of the latter should be written in my course, as it would be easier for me to access my own examination scripts, and easier to get students' approval for their use without having to involve other lecturers or examination officials.

I must say here that some might argue that tests and take home assignments are very different, but while I acknowledge that there are some minor differences I contend that in teaching students the process of writing we are asking them to apply that process to best suit the conditions under which they are operating, so that the type of essay is not the issue, but how students manage the process to create the best product is. The other variable, the criteria checklist, was constructed after much research into the area of writing assessment. I surfed many academic websites, read several writing manuals and adapted my own essay assignment criteria to design a fairly comprehensive checklist. I continued to revise the checklist until it resembled what I tend to look for when correcting students' analytical/ persuasive academic writing at university level. The criteria was measured against a standard where 4= very well demonstrated, 3= well done, 2= fairly well done, 1= not well demonstrated, and 0= not demonstrated.

There were four main categories, intro, body, conclusion and stylistics which were divided into subcategories. The scores for each main category were tallied to determine level of success within the category and then the totals were tallied to establish the score for the entire essay (figure 2). The success or failure in each category and the overall essay was tied to the university grading system (table 1), for insight into how students were measuring up to the academic requirement. Naturally emerging categories, based on the analysis, helped to formulate inductive hypotheses. These hypotheses are further developed in the discussion and implications sections, but relate to one's perspective about writing and how that influences writing success/improvement. The other implications for this study involve classroom pedagogy, teacher training and teacher evaluation.

Limitations

This method of data collection presented certain kinds of challenges which I hope to rectify in the larger study. Some students opted to submit both types of essays, while others submitted two of the same kind, as I had not made any stipulations. Also, some of the teachers were part-time students, registered for only two courses that semester, mine and another. In the other course they were not required to write full essays and so they submitted two essays from my course on different topics. I did not have a major issue with this, as it would have been pointless to make judgments on a single paragraph or short answer questions simply because the writing was in another field. The central issue for me was analysing two pieces of extensive academic writing.

Ethical concerns

I cannot complete this section without first acknowledging the ethical challenges I faced. I felt morally burdened yet justified in withholding the entire truth from my participants. Telling teachers of English that I wanted to analyse their level of writing proficiency could have been regarded as an insult; thus, creating barriers to obtaining the data and jeopardizing the project at the pilot stage. I tried to ease my conscience by saying that students' participation was voluntary and that I had informed them that their essays, though not anonymous to me, as it carried their identification numbers, (for follow-up interview if necessary), would be kept confidential. I would not allow others to work with the data, name the students, nor report my findings so that they could be easily identified. Interestingly, I later interviewed these teachers for another part of the project, which required me to discuss what I had previously hidden; they were very eager to talk about the issue.

Findings and Discussion
Overview

In this part of the study, I present and examine the data which help to answer the three research questions. I will first acknowledge that there is widespread disagreement regarding assessment of writing. What some might regard as good writing others might find mediocre or poor. Belanoff (1991) however sees no shame in disagreement, viewing it is as testimony to the vitality of words. Greenberg (1992:18) concurs, admitting that readers "will always differ in their judgments of the quality of a piece of writing", so that if we accept "that writing is a multidimensional, situational construct that fluctuates across a wide variety of contexts, then we must also respect the complexity of teaching and testing it". Still the question remains: "If we are not likely to reach agreement through the prism of standards...how do we recognize when the outcomes have indeed been reached" (Harris, 2006:122)? Agreeably, there needs to be at least minimum standards as to what teachers will accept as an essay. I determined my standards, assessed students on those bases and these are the results. Based on the analysis of data I can report that my students do not handle the technical aspects of writing well, which has many pedagogical implications and so I will make a series of recommendations aimed at improving the writing process and the writing perspective. However, I will now explicate the answer to research question one as to how well my students write.

Introduction

I studied this data methodically. I first asked myself: "What would I, or anyone else, expect to see in the introduction of an essay written by a university student?" Naturally, I expected that there would be a topic, but a topic can be very general and wide ranging, so I also expected to see some aspect of that topic clearly presented. For example, writers can speak of 'self' as a topic, but they can also concentrate on one aspect of 'self' as a writing interest. They can speak of their physical characteristics, their personality, their goals, or their emotional self as a single aspect of that topic, or all of these things as aspects of this one topic. However; they should, due to time and word constraints in the educational setting, narrow down this broad topic by clearly introducing some aspect or aspects of the topic. Only 13% (figure 1 &1.1) managed to do this very well in essay one, though the majority were successful in essay two. This lack of aspect in essay one, I believe, translated into an unclear thesis statement. Those who introduced the aspect of the topic very well also produced a clear thesis statement. This is not coincidental, for constructing the thesis statement is a process that connects the topic and the aspect chosen by means of a stance (position writer takes on aspect of the topic to be developed).

Topic ◀──────▶**stance** ◀──────▶aspect

I also believe it is the construction of this view/stance which proves most problematic for my students. They have been taught that research is objective and offering a view-point subjects the information to bias. As a result, they include only the view of experts, or published writers on the issue, without considering their own. These students are rarely taught to value, own and articulate their own views, so that they are unaccustomed to formulating a position in their own writing.

As I look at the same issue with regard to essay two, some of my conclusions are confirmed, others rejected or at least, reshaped. I noticed that over 70% introduced some aspect of the topic very well, yet only 20% did similarly with regard to the thesis statement. I had difficulty disconnecting the link between aspect and thesis statement so I started to examine the way the questions in essay two were constructed in comparison to essay one. I noticed that there was no significant difference in terms of the instructions for both types of essays. Words like critically assess, discuss, explain, analyse, examine, compare and contrast were used to give instructions in both essays, so that students were being given specific directives in both cases. However, I observed that the instructions were much more detailed and hence longer, in essay two, so that within the topic question, the specific aspect of the topic to be dealt with was already introduced for the writer. In other words, the students simply had to reintroduce the aspect of the topic by reviewing the question. This could explain why they did so well in introducing the aspect of the topic in this essay. For example, one question about the topic 'Reading', asked the writer to identify and discuss the characteristics of an effective reading teacher, so that the aspect of characteristics relating to an effective, as opposed to an ineffective teacher was already introduced into the research. This can be contrasted with an exam topic like 'Grammar', where the question asks: "Is there an ideal way to teach grammar? Justify your answer".

The student is now required to formulate an aspect of this topic while answering the question asked. I pondered whether the way in which topics were constructed either helped or hindered students in quickly and effectively developing a clear thesis statement. The fact that so few did very well in writing a clear thesis suggests that a key writing element was proving problematic to manage. In asking the question why, I hypothesized that perhaps students did not see writing as a structural building process which requires a strong foundation in order to take shape, but rather as scripting words and ideas. I also hypothesized that having believed themselves to have written a clear thesis, they still disconnected its value from the rest of the essay. I further theorised that perhaps some understood the significance of the thesis in theory, but in practice, found the task of constructing the thesis too difficult and taxing, so that writing became the task rather than the purpose. Whichever way I theorised, the data kept reiterating that perspective, how students viewed writing and perhaps themselves as writers, was a requisite for success.

I wish to return to this view of finding the task of constructing the thesis too difficult as a reason for failing to do so well. Arguably, one should know the importance of the thesis in shaping not just the introduction but the entire essay. Behrens and Rosen (2000:85) call the thesis a 'one-sentence summary of a paper's content'; whereas, Rozakis (2007) expects that it should state the main idea, show the purpose of the essay and the direction of the essay. While these expectations make sense in theory, the reality sounds quite daunting in terms of having to construct a single perfect sentence to crystallise the point of many hundreds of words. I envisage students labouring on constructing this sentence, then not having the mental energy to expound on it. A single manageable sentence can hardly achieve all of what is expected from an entire essay.

These students do not seem to be aware of the importance of neighbouring sentences in helping to 'grow' the thesis statement to build a strong introduction. In coming to this understanding, they can be helped to feel less pressured to create the perfect sentence, which only serves to stall and frustrate the drafting process of writing. There was a disproportionate amount of passes for the introduction in essay two when compared to essay one. The graph indicates that 50% more passed the introduction section of essay two than did essay one, but I might be able to explain this. I imagine that *time,* more so than skilled or strategic manipulation of the writing process, accounted for why there was a greater percentage of passes in essay number two, the take home assignment. Time allowed these students to tinker with the writing structure, so that writing in this setting was seen as a process; whereas, in the exam, under time constraints, students focused on writing as a product (getting knowledge/facts on paper). I think this happened because students are not familiar enough with the writing process to manipulate it under exam conditions, as good writers should be able to.

I therefore support Robitaille & Connelly's (2002:31) sentiments that "good writers adapt the process to fit the time available", and Fassler-Walvoord's (1982:12), that essays written under exam conditions "are not a matter of quantity but of quality….The problem facing the student is simple: how can that quality be achieved"? Perhaps students cannot see that quality can be achieved in a short space of time, as they associate quality with time and time with process. Therefore, the students' view of quality essays as time bound, rather than process bound might be negatively influencing how they approach the writing task and even their choice of writing strategies. In short, if the students' perspective about writing is negative or even improperly shaped it can cause them to adopt strategies simply to get the 'job' done, but which work against their writing success. This theory has compelled me to investigate how perspective of the writing task influences the approach, choice of strategies and ultimate success of that task.

Body: Structure
Paragraphing. Students encountered the same kinds of paragraphing challenges, and I imagine for the same reasons, in essays one and two. Why is this significant? Paragraphs develop new but related ideas and students seemed simply to be drafting general information rather than segmenting and then cohesively fashioning specific ideas about some aspect of the topic. This appears to be a case where students are stuck at the drafting stage (writing it all down) of the writing process, and cannot seem to move through to the revision stage shaping and structuring). Tompkins (2005:136) sees this as typical, claiming that students "often break the writing process cycle as soon as they complete a rough draft, believing that once they have jotted down their ideas, the writing task is complete". She further adds that the writing process is perhaps the most important writing project in which students will engage because "the writing process is a tool" (ibid, p. 145). I started thinking that a tool has the purpose of making a task easier to approach, which took me back to perspective about writing. As regards this data, I realised that if these students see writing as the task rather than the tool, then the task of writing can easily become a burdensome one and the purpose of writing becomes skewed, even unrecognizable. If there is no purpose for writing beyond writing then there is little motivation for writing well, and level of motivation can determine level of success which feeds back into level of motivation, so that the cycle continues with no real improvement in attitude or writing skills.

Additionally, the length of students' paragraphs revealed certain structural deficiencies. Generally, a very short paragraph can speak to underdeveloped ideas and insufficient evidence/details. A paragraph which is too lengthy could be the result of superfluous information (not necessarily evidence), poor organisation of ideas or redundancy. Robitaille & Connelly (2002), posit that a solid paragraph should comprise a clearly identifiable topic sentence and at least three strong supporting points, which Wingersky, Boerner & Holgun-Balogh (2009) translate into about four to eight supporting sentences. If I accept this to be satisfactory, then well over 85 % in both essays failed to accomplish this well. In this regard, I am convinced that a properly developed paragraph within the body of the essay is an indication of clear thinking about relevant and related points to the thesis statement, as paragraphs in the body should progressively support that thesis. The fact that many of the essays lacked a central idea (thesis) to guide them could account for why the paragraphs were poorly developed, for if there is no clear guide, there will hardly be clear progression.

Topic sentences. Many did not write clear concise topic sentences, which has implications for the entire essay. I find it necessary to explain that I wrote outlines of each essay to help me calculate the number of clear topic sentences. For example, if a student wrote eight paragraphs and half had clear topic sentences then that student did fairly well. The result was that just below 75% failed to do this well in both essays. This could be related to the fact that the majority did not craft clear thesis statements. Topic sentences after all do carry on the work of supporting the main idea (thesis). If the thesis is unclear or nonexistent it will be difficult to ascertain the type and level of support required by the topic sentences. This conclusion appears to be made more robust by the data.

Those who did fairly well to well in this category of topic sentences, performed similarly with relation to the thesis statement, though they were some anomalies. LtA, C and G, for example, performed poorly in creating the thesis statement but did fairly well in relation to topic sentences, which was puzzling. However, on review, I noticed that LtA launched straight into the discussion which was a review of an article, having no introduction, but treating the entire essay like the body, so that she attempted to use topic sentences for what appeared to be new paragraphs. On the contrary, LtC and G did not have a thesis in the introductory paragraph, but created one in the second paragraph, so that they *did* have a guide. In this section of the analysis I came across what I considered other kinds of anomalies. I thought at first that many participants were constructing topic sentences for each new 'paragraph', but soon I was differently persuaded when I perceived that less than 20% was linking all the topic sentences to a thesis, given the nature of their interdependence. What I was therefore identifying as topic sentences might simply have been the introduction of newly related but irrelevant ideas.

To illustrate, of those six who scored well/very well in the thesis statement, four were downgraded in the topic sentence section, and five in the topic sentence supporting the thesis subcategory. This indicated that there was not necessarily a direct relationship between clear topic sentences and topic sentences supporting the thesis. That is to say, topic sentences might have been clear for the paragraphs they introduced, but they did not directly link back to the thesis. Setzler (2010: np) actually describes what I was observing more clearly than I am attempting to, when he says that "[t]ypically, when an essay is beginning to lose focus, you will find yourself starting your paragraphs with topic sentences that refer mostly to the content of the immediately-preceding paragraphs rather than back to the paper's thesis statement". This is what I seem to be observing; the paragraphs were related to each other but not to the main argument. This information seemed to demonstrate that students write what they know about the topic, without consideration for shape or form, i.e. logical structure. Essay writing seems to be content and knowledge-based, rather than content and knowledge-based *within a coherent structure.* I am therefore struck by how this issue of writing perspective continues to return to sharp focus.

Body: Skills

Presenting evidence. Around 33% of the participants cited evidence to support their claims, which is problematic. There were even examples where students wrote a purely descriptive essay, having made no claims. This could be grounded in the fact that there was little or no evidence of research. So for example, students did not critique and evaluate what the literature proffered; they merely replicated it in quotation form. At the highest level of education, there was little proof of providing and supporting evidence in writing and I asked myself why. Fenton (2010:7) in offering an answer concludes that this is the result of 'poorly structured thinking'. I concur, as I accept that students are not being overtly taught to read and think critically about their writing. Wink (2000) moves beyond these concepts into what is termed 'critical literacy', whereby teachers and students ask fundamental questions about knowledge. This concept is interesting in light of what I have observed about the classroom culture in the Caribbean. A good Language Arts class is a quiet class. Students are not allowed to question the knowledge from the teacher; they accept it as valid, just as they have come to accept as valid the knowledge from the texts they read at school, without questioning. The child who questions, probes or dares to disagree is seen as a "trouble-maker". Thus, the skills of assessing and critiquing are not honed in this school environment but yet, are expected to grow in the student and be at the ready in time for tertiary level education.

There was little or no analysis of the literature, summary or synthesis, which suggests that students are not thinking critically about what they read or about how this reading facilitates their writing. Behrens & Rosen (2000) implicitly offer one reason why writing might be void of literary analysis when arguing that critical reading necessitates becoming involved in the reading. This is what Leacock, Warrican, and Rose (2009:50) describe as "analytical involvement"; whereby, students do not merely report what others say. Nida (1992) offers a different, but equally compelling reason why students might not be integrating the literature as well as they should. This relates to the "complexities of the syntax and discourse structure" (p. 478) of some research articles. Structural complexity can inhibit clear mental processing of the material; therefore, students find it hard to digest or even summarise the main ideas to make sense of the reading. I can attest to having read many articles of this nature and struggling to come to a conclusion. Additionally, I understand that synthesis encompasses summary, and so I begin to understand why some in this study might have avoided its use if they found summarising the ideas particularly difficult. Students would first have had to summarise these ideas and then analyse them; skills of which they did not demonstrate high levels of proficiency in their own writing. However, I contend that students will continue to *report* on their readings, even when they understand them, if they continue to distance themselves from the writing process.

This is to say, that as long as students continue to see themselves as passive observers merely relating already published material, rather than active participants, offering their perspective on the topic, they will not engage with the reading.

Conclusion

The type of conclusion chosen could perhaps account for certain successes in this category. Those who did well tended to restate or summarise the main points in the body. Of those participants attempting to draw a conclusion, only one did so well in essay one, and two in essay two. I did notice that of this small number who drew a conclusion, one did not do well with the thesis statement, and the other scored fairly well in that subcategory. Nevertheless, these students (LtC & L-essay 2 & LtF-essay1) did fairly well and well in the body of the essay in areas like critiquing, reasoning and connecting literature, where most students were doing poorly. This finding might seem to imply that drawing a good conclusion is based on employing critical thinking skills (Pirozzi, 2003) related to the evidence presented in the body of the essay more so than some strong connection with the thesis statement and the introduction, as some would claim. I am referring here to composition theorists like Behrens & Rosen (2000) who espouse the claim that the conclusion is the introduction worked in reverse, or Robitaille & Connelly (2002) who assert that the conclusion should be a restatement or a reminder of the thesis and how its major details developed. While I partially agree, this writing technique simply demonstrates the students' ability to identify the main points in their writing, which admittedly is some indication of understanding, but summation alone does not give the teacher insight into what students conclude about the aspect of the topic developed and what thought processes they used to arrive there. Such insight could provide opportunities for teachers to help students learn to shape controlled responses to their writing, rather than come to conclusions based on emotions.

Stylistics

Stylistics is how the writer communicates with the audience, the use of the writers' voice in the form of language, register, tone etc. Academic writing presents the opportunity to hear the writers' voice through their rationales, arguments, counterarguments, observations, experiences, evaluations and so on. As previously stated, many of the participants appeared distant from the writing, reporting rather than evaluating the topic. Only two persons (LtF & L) appeared sufficiently cognisant of the weight of voice and audience in writing. It is interesting that these two, who scored highest in the body of the essay, where critical thinking skills are most on display, are the same who demonstrated the keenest sense of these two stylistic elements. I opine that critical thinkers anticipate the needs of the audience and attempt to respond to those needs, so that the audience is always foremost in mind when reasoning, rebutting, critiquing, submitting evidence; in short, when employing critical thinking. The audience might very well be the catalyst for how the writer shapes the material. This negation of audience could be the reason the majority failed to give shape to their overall essays. In failing to give shape to the audience, they negated the role of the co-communicator and the role of communication in their writing, so that what resulted in many instances was a voiceless, directionless piece of writing.

To my mind, there can be no separation of writing and audience. Writers need readers, so they must keep this need in mind. If writers never feel the need, or are unaware that they are communicating with anyone, the writing can reveal this. I believe this to be the case in many of these examples. It seems that my students were scripting words on a piece of paper, either because they felt the audience was an already knowledgeable tutor, or because they did not consider an audience at all. Rozakis' (2007) proposes that audience be created by the writer's need to ask: "Who will be reading this?" However, this is not always plausible for a group of university students who only tend to see the already knowledgeable tutor as the audience, and who, having such a perspective, will not be inclined to modify their writing style. Possibly, a better question might be: "What category of persons would have an interest in this topic?" Based on this discussion about audience and voice, I submit that if my students do not consider an audience in their work, they are in fact not making their voices heard. If they see writing as a communication process, they can be helped to fashion their writing as dialogue to suit their audience, which will make the reading more interesting and the act of communicating the message more successful.

Concluding remarks

The reality is that the majority of my students in this study, who are teachers of English, and therefore writing, do not themselves, write well. They specifically do not demonstrate critical thinking skills in their essays. The question therefore becomes what does this all mean, and how can they be helped to improve? With these in mind I turn to answering research questions 2 and 3 in the implications and recommendations section.

Implications and Recommendations

One of the obvious implications is related to a personal observation. I require too much from my students' writing, particularly in the body of the essay. I ask of them what I do not even demand of my own writing. For instance, I reviewed some of the criteria and did not fully comprehend what I was asking. As teacher educators we need to ask some hard questions: "Do we know precisely, or superficially, what we expect from our students' writing? Can we clearly articulate and more importantly, justify these expectations to ourselves and our students. The answers will determine the course will follow. This does not mean that I am rejecting the use of a criteria checklist, though Biggs and Collis (1982) have reservations about this arguing that it negates writing as a tool for meaning. While this might be true to a certain extent, a point by point criteria system still helps those students who like to be guided in their writing by expectations. Some students feel more in control if they know what is required of them in a specific task, to determine how closely they came to accomplishing the goal set. Specifically revealed weaknesses, as identified by the checklist, can help students determine what they need to do to improve certain aspects of their writing.

In other words, the criteria checklist can be used as a guide for self-evaluation and teacher assessment for improving writing that feeds into a grading system rather than simply a grading system. These criteria can also help teachers and students understand the vocabulary associated with the assignment. Robitaille & Connelly (2002:34) give some good examples in this regard. While I do not support the rejection of the checklist, I do however favour making it less cumbersome/detailed, as it makes meeting the standard more attainable. Another implication coming out of this research is the need to do more with less. Noguchi (1991) applies this thinking to his own theory of writing as it relates to grammar teaching. He advises teachers to make "less grammar do more" (viii). Regarding this specific issue of writing essays well, means that teacher educators must help teachers find strategies to move themselves and their students from the drafting stage to the revision stage without teaching them everything about writing. I mean that teachers teach all the structural, stylistic and mechanical elements of writing along with all the elements about the process of writing (brainstorming, semantic webs, drafting, etc).

They then tell their students to go away and put the parts together to construct an essay, but they never show them how it should be done, only what is needed to get it done. Teachers need to be taught writing strategies, like critical thinking (Fisher 2001), which help them and their students weave these elements together seamlessly in their writing. Constructing logic and building evidence then become central to shaping the information. An inadvertent but positive outcome is that an awareness of audience of voice should naturally flow out of this need to present evidence logically and convincingly. This natural outflow should result in having to teach fewer writing elements, but learning and retaining more about writing, as I hope to convey in graphic form (table 2). Teachers of English should be evaluated in the area of writing. Teachers who are poor writers and poor teachers of writing need to be made aware for their own benefit and those of whom they teach. The implication is that teachers cannot simply choose the area of English in which they will be evaluated, as is being done in Barbados. There must be mandatory areas of assessment within each field, of which one should be composition writing.

In doing this the concerns about the poor level of students' writing voiced by many within and outside the education system (Fields, 2006; Alber-Morgan, Hessler & Konrad, 2007; Lynn & Vermeer, 2008) begin to be addressed. I therefore recommend bringing teachers face to face with their own writing flaws. This might be best achieved through compulsory pre-service and in-service training whereby the writing assignments on teacher education programmes are made very difficult (Reid, 2009). I especially appreciated this recommendation after reading a comment from Susan, a teacher who had been enrolled in such a writing programme: "I thought I had written a relatively well-organised and clear argument for my position, and [my peers'] comments suggested I wasn't quite as organised or systematic as I needed to be. The horror! I'm a writing tutor!" (np) Perhaps this is the issue many teachers of English face. They are classified and classify themselves by labels and expectations, so that they *are* X/Y and certain expectations come along with that. When these expectations are not met, the language ego takes a battering. This is why Reid's comment about "growing" (np) writing teachers is so appropriate. Cultivation implies challenges, set-backs and continuous development, but it also implies harvesting the fruits of that labour. In this way teachers are not X/Y but are always striving towards the goal of X/Y in writing.

Finally, I recommend that writing teachers become writing researchers. Academic/research writing is used in the real world supposedly to inform some segment of the population that a problem exists and perhaps how best to address it. Investigating how best to develop their students' writing skills and knowledge, will help teachers to become familiar with the language of research and how to evaluate research to inform their own.

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When teachers accept responsibility for doing action research in writing they begin to see writing as a tool used to carve out language as a means of communicating with an audience. In this way, writing is moved out of the school realm as a subject on the curriculum into the real world as a tool for survival, so that when their perspectives are properly enhanced, teachers start to 'see' writing right, and so the journey of righting writing begins and continues for the teacher.
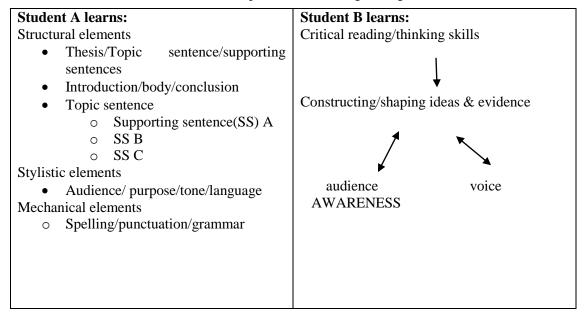
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Table 1: UWI grading system

UWI grade	My rating	Interpretation of rating
67-100 (A-/A+)	Very well	• demonstrated consistently in highly competent and effective way, therefore clear to the reader
57-66 (B-/B+)	Well	• demonstrated competently most of the time; some deviations but very few
47-56(C-/C+)	Fairly well	• demonstrated competently sometimes, writer is not consistent in using the feature correctly or effectively
40-46 (D-/D+)	Not well(NW)	• attempt made to use feature but it is ineffective, not very clear to the reader
Below 40	Not done/demonstrated(ND)	• not done/demonstrated: feature not used although it is a rudimentary for good essay.
	*	• shows that a specified amount of the criteria in the option section have been met and therefore the feature marked by an asterisk* is not necessary to acquire points in that section.

Table 2: Comparison of teaching strategies

Student A learns:	**Student B learns:**

Structural elements
 • Thesis/Topic sentence/supporting sentences
 • Introduction/body/conclusion
 • Topic sentence
   o Supporting sentence(SS) A
   o SS B
   o SS C
 Stylistic elements
 • Audience/ purpose/tone/language
 Mechanical elements
   o Spelling/punctuation/grammar
	Critical reading/thinking skills
	
	 ↓
	
	 Constructing/shaping ideas & evidence
	
	 audience voice
	 AWARENESS

Figure 1: Criteria checklist & scores: Essay 1

INTRO: essay 1	Lt A	LtB	Lt C	Lt D	LtE	LtF	Lt G	Lt H	LtI	LtJ	Lt K	Lt L	Lt M	Lt N	Lt O
introduce clear topic	FW	VW	VW	W	VW	W	W	NW	FW	W	W	VW	FW	FW	W
into specific aspect	NW	VW	W	W	W	NW	W	NW	NW	NW	NW	VW	FW	FW	
make claim about topic	ND	VW	VW	W	W	ND	NW	ND	ND	ND	ND	VW	ND	ND	W
make claim debatable	ND	W	VW	W	VW	ND	NW	ND	ND	ND	ND	VW	ND	ND	W
clear thesis	NW	VW	VW	W	VW	NW	NW	ND	ND	ND	ND	VW	ND	ND	W
connect thesis and topic	NW	VW	VW	W	VW	ND	NW	ND	ND	ND	ND	VW	ND	NW	W
define key concepts OR	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	W	ND	NW	NW	ND	ND	ND	ND
define contested terms OR	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	*	ND	*	*	ND	ND	ND	ND
define versions	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	*	ND	*	*	ND	ND	ND	ND
List key points OR	ND	VW	ND	ND	VW	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	*	ND	ND	*
give overview/preview	ND	*	ND	ND	*	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	VW	ND	ND	W
TOTAL	**5**	27	24	18	**27**	**5**	10	5	3	5	5	28	4	5	21
BODY															
new point new paragraph	NW	W	NW	FW	NW	FW	FW	NW	NW	NW	FW	FW	NW	NW	W
Indent/block	NW	FW	FW	W	VW	VW	VW	NW	NW	FW	NW	W	NW	NW	W
write adequate length par	NW	FW	FW	W	W	NW	FW	NW	NW	NW	FW	NW	NW	NW	W
clear concise topic sentences	FW	W	W	FW	W	NW	FW	NW	NW	NW	ND	FW	NW	NW	W
id strong reasons	FW	FW	NW	FW	FW	FW	NW	FW	NW	NW	FW	NW	NW	NW	NW
offer sufficient details	NW	FW	FW	NW	W	FW	FW	NW	NW	NW	NW	NW	NW	NW	NW
cite evidence	ND	FW	FN	NW	ND	ND	ND	NW	NW	NW	NW	W	NW	NW	NW
use several relevant egs	NW	FW	FW	W	W	NW	W	NW	NW	NW	W	VW	NW	NW	W
balanced vs bias source	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	NW	NW	NW	NW	NW	ND	VW	ND	ND	NW
critical readings	ND	ND	NW	ND	ND	ND	ND	NW	NW	NW	ND	VW	ND	ND	ND
quotations adding weight	NW	ND	ND			FW	NW	NW	NW	NW	ND	ND	ND	ND	NW
deductive/inductive reasoning	ND	FW	NW	ND	ND	W	ND	ND	NW	ND	ND	FW	ND	ND	NW
defuse counterarguments	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	W	ND	ND	NW	ND	ND	W	ND	ND	ND
id self bias	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	NW	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND
show superiority of argument	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	FW	ND	NW	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND
Know field of study	ND	FW	FW	NW	ND	W	ND	NW	ND	ND	NW	W	ND	ND	ND
connect lit to debate*	ND	FW	FW	NW	NW	W	NW	ND	ND	ND	ND	W	ND	ND	ND
Critique/evaluate	ND	FW	F	N	FW	W	N	ND	ND	ND	ND	W	ND	N	ND

	Max	LtA	LtB	LtC	LtD	LtE	LtF	LtG	LtH	LtI	LtJ	LtK	LtL	LtM	LtN	LtO
issues*				W	W			W					W			W
assess competing argument*		ND	ND	D	ND	ND	W	N/W/N	ND	ND	ND	ND	W/N	ND	ND	ND
note ambiguity/limits*		ND	ND	D	ND	ND	ND	N/W	ND	ND	ND	ND	N/D	ND	ND	ND
critique sources*		ND	ND	D	ND	ND	W	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	N/D	ND	ND	ND
id weak/strong theory*		ND	ND	D	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	N/D	ND	ND	ND
apply text argument*		ND	ND	D	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	F/W	ND	ND	ND
use connectives		ND	NW	W	W	W	W	FW	FW	ND	FW	N/W	V/W	W	FW	W
logically order		W	FW	F/W	FW	FW	VW	N/W	FW	N/W	N/W	W	W	FW	N/W	W
All SS support TS		FW	FW	F/W	N/W	FW	FW	N/W	FW	ND	FW	F/W	F/W	FW	N/W	W
All TS support thesis		N/W	W	W	FW	FW	NW	N/W	ND	ND	ND	ND	F/W	ND	N/W	FW
TOTAL	**92**	**16**	**34**	**39**	**24**	**31**	**49**	**25**	**19**	**18**	**15**	**19**	**54**	**16**	**14**	**30**
CONCLUSION																
summarise key debates OR		ND	*	N/D	ND	*	*	*	ND	*	ND	*	N/D	ND	ND	FW
main points in TS		ND	W	N/D	ND	*	*	*	ND	*	ND	N/W	N/D	ND	ND	*
restate thesis OR		ND	*	N/D	ND	W	*	*	ND	*	ND	*	N/D	ND	ND	*
recap key stages OR		ND	*	N/D	ND	*	*	*	ND	*	ND	*	N/D	ND	ND	*
draw conclusion		ND	*	N/D	ND	*	W	N/W	ND	N/W	ND	*	N/D	ND	ND	*
TOTAL	**4**	**0**	**3**	**0**	**0**	**3**	**3**	**1**	**0**	**1**	**0**	**1**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**2**
STYLISTICS																
address audience		ND	FW	F/W	ND	FW	W	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	W	ND	ND	ND
project voice		ND	FW	F/W	FW	FW	W	FW	ND	ND	ND	ND	F/W	ND	N/W	N/W
TOTAL	**8**	**0**	**4**	**4**	**2**	**4**	**6**	**2**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**5**	**0**	**1**	**1**
Answered ?																
TOTAL	**4**	0=ND	1=NW	2	0=ND	2=FW	1=NW	0=ND	0=ND	0=ND	0=ND	0=ND	3=W	0=ND	0=ND	0=ND
OVERALL TOTAL/140		**21**	**63**	**69**	**44**	**67**	**64**	**38**	**24**	**22**	**20**	**25**	**90**	**20**	**20**	**54**

- *In the body means that participant should demonstrate at least 5/7 skills to receive full 20 marks

Figure 1.1 Criteria checklist & scores: Essay 2

	LtA	LtB	LtC	LtD	LtE	LtF	LtG	LtH	LtI	LtJ	LtK	LtL	LtM	LtN	LtO	.
INTRO																
Essay 2 introduce clear topic	VW	VW	W	VW	VW	V/W	V/W	V/W	V/W	V/W	W	V/W	W	V/W	W	
into specific aspect	VW	VW	F/W	VW	VW	V/W	V/W	V/W	N/W	V/W	N/W	V/W	V/W	V/W	W	
make claim about topic	FW	FW	F/W	FW	VW	F/W	N/D	W	N/D	F/W	N/D	W	W	W	F/W	
make claim debatable	FW	FW	F/W	FW	VW	F/W	N/D	W	N/D	F/W	N/D	W	W	W	F/W	
clear thesis	FW	FW	F/W	FW	VW	W	N/D	W	N/D	F/W	N/D	W	W	W	F/W	
connect thesis and topic	FW	FW	F/W	FW	VW	W	D	W	D	W	D	W	W	W	W	

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define key concepts OR	FW	ND	N/D	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	F/W	N/D	W	W	W	V/W	V/W	N/D	W
define contested terms OR	*	ND	N/D	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	*	N/D	*	*	*	*	*	N/D	*
define versions	*	ND	N/D	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	*	N/D	*	*	*	*	*	N/D	*
List key points OR	ND	ND	*	ND	ND	V/W	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	*	N/D	N/D	N/D	*
give overview/preview	ND	ND	F/W	ND	ND	*	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	V/W	W	N/D	N/D	V/W
TOTAL	**18**	**16**	**15**	**16**	**24**	**22**	**8**	**22**	**5**	**19**	**7**	**32**	**27**	**22**	**21**	**32**

BODY

new point new paragraph	NW	FW	W	FW	FW	W	N/W	N/W	N/W	F/W	N/W	N/W	W	F/W	F/W	F/W
inden/block	NW	VW	W	FW	W	W	N/W	N/D	W	F/W	V/W	W	W	W	W	N/W
write adequate length par	NW	NW	F/W	NW	FW	W	N/W	N/W	N/D	N/W	N/W	F/W	W	F/W	F/W	F/W
clear concise topic sentences	W	VW	F/W	W	FW	W	N/W	N/W	N/D	N/W	N/D	N/W	W	N/W	N/W	F/W
id strong reasons	NW	FW	N/W	NW	FW	W	N/W	N/W	F/W	F/W	N/W	N/W	W	F/W	F/W	F/W
offer sufficient details	NW	FW	F/W	NW	W	W	N/W	N/W	F/W	N/W	N/W	F/W	W	F/W	F/W	F/W
cite evidence	ND	ND	F/W	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	N/D	F/W	N/D	N/D	W	W	F/W	N/W	F/W
more than 1 eg	NW	FW	F/W	FW	W	W	N/W	N/W	F/W	D	N/W	F/W	W	W	F/W	F/W
relevant egs	NW	FW	F/W	FW	FW	W	N/W	N/W	F/W	N/W	N/W	F/W	W	W	F/W	F/W
balanced vs bias source	ND	ND	N/D	ND	ND	N/W	F/W	F/W	F/W	F/W	F/W	W	W	F/W	F/W	F/W
critical readings	ND	ND	N/D	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/W	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/W
quotations adding weight	ND	ND	N/D	ND	ND	N/D	N/W	F/W	N/W	F/W	N/W	W	W	N/W	N/W	N/D
deductive/inductive reasoning	ND	FW	F/W	NW	FW	N/D	N/D	F/W	N/D	N/D	N/D	W	W	N/D	N/D	F/W
defuse counterarguments	ND	ND	N/D	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D
id self bias	ND	ND	N/D	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D
show superiority of argument	ND	ND	N/D	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D
Know field of study	NW	NW	W	NW	ND	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/W	F/W	F/W	W	W	W	N/W	F/W
connect lit to debate*	ND	ND	F/W	NW	ND	N/D	N/D	F/W	N/W	F/W	F/W	W	W	W	F/W	F/W
Critique/evaluate issues*	NW	FW	F/W	NW	FW	N/D	N/D	F/W	N/W	N/W	N/W	W	W	N/W	N/W	F/W
assess competing argument*	ND	ND	N/W	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D
note ambiguity/limits*	ND	ND	N/D	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	W	N/D	N/D
critique sources*	ND	ND	N/D	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D
id weak/strong theory*	ND	ND	F/W	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D
apply text argument*	ND	ND	N/D	ND	ND	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D	N/D
use connectives	ND	W	F/W	FW	FW	F/W	F/W	F/W	N/W	N/W	N/W	N/W	V/W	N/W	F/W	F/W
logically order	ND	FW	W	NW	FW	N	F	F/W	N	N	N	W	W	N	F	F

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	Max															
All SS support TS		ND	FW	FW	FW	FW	NW	NW	NW	NW	NW	NW	W	NW	NW	FW
All TS support thesis		FW	W	FW	W	NW	FW	ND	ND	NW	NW	NW	VW	FW	FW	FW
TOTAL	**92**	**13**	**32**	**40**	**24**	**27**	**18**	**22**	**21**	**21**	**22**	**23**	**57**	**34**	**29**	**34**
CONCLUSION																
summarise key debates OR		ND	*	*	*	*	*	ND	ND	*	ND	ND	*	*	*	*
summarise main points		ND	*	*	W	*	*	ND	ND	*	ND	ND	*	*	*	*
restate thesis OR		ND	*	*	*	VW	*	ND	ND	FW	ND	ND	*	*	NW	FW
recap key stages OR		ND	W	*	*	*	*	ND	ND	*	ND	ND	*	W	*	*
draw conclusion		ND	*	W	*	*	NW	ND	ND	*	ND	ND	W	*	*	*
TOTAL	**4**	**0**	**3**	**3**	**3**	**4**	**1**	**0**	**0**	**2**	**0**	**0**	**3**	**3**	**1**	**2**
STYLISTICS																
address audience		NW	FW	FW	NW	ND	ND	ND	FW	ND	ND	ND	W	NW	ND	ND
project voice		FW	FW	FW	NW	ND	ND	ND	FW	NW	ND	NW	W	NW	ND	ND
TOTAL	**8**	**3**	**4**	**4**	**2**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**4**	**1**	**0**	**1**	**6**	**2**	**0**	**0**
Answer?	4	0= ND	1=N W	1	0= ND	1=N W	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	0	1
Total overall/140		**34**	**56**	**63**	**45**	**56**	**41**	**30**	**47**	**29**	**41**	**31**	**102**	**68**	**52**	**58**

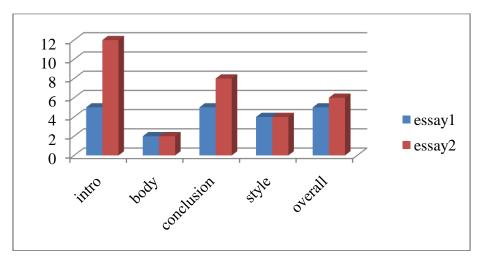- *In the body means that participants should demonstrate at least 5/7 skills to receive full 20 marks

Figure 2: Teachers who passed