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SOME EFFECTS OF CULTURE-REFERENCED TOPICS ON THE WRITING PERFORMANCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

ABSTRACT: This study analyzes the effects of culture-referenced essay prompts/topics on the writing quality of eleventh- and twelfth-grade high school students who participated in a collaborative project between Temple University's Writing Program and four Philadelphia public high schools. Trained raters scored 711 essays holistically. The students were also tested on a Cooperative English Reading and Writing Examination which the University administers to all of its entering students. Essays of twenty-five students who tested in their junior and senior years were analyzed using an analytical scale. The results suggest that the culture-referenced topics elicited better quality essays (i.e., in terms of fluency, coherence, organization). The findings indicate that culture-referenced prompts do make a difference in the writing performance of African American students.

Introduction

... one could argue that the kind and degree of writing ability assessed by a specific prompt may be determined by the nature of that prompt, particularly by its cognitive, linguistic, and rhetorical demands and by the nature of the social context in which the prompt places the writer.

Karen L. Greenberg

Mastery of language affords remarkable power.

Frantz Fanon

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The importance of topics and prompts to the writing performance of students has been emphasized by many composition theorists and researchers (Brown, Hilgers and Marsella; Gabrielson, Gordon and Engelhard; Greenberg; Hoetker; Hoetker and Brossell; Huot; Keech; Ruth and Murphy; Smith, Hull, Land, Moore, Ball, Durham, Hickey and Ruzich; White; and Williamson). Many researchers have also implied that the modes of discourse and rhetorical specifications in essay topics and prompts affect students' writing performance (Brossell; Engelhard, Gordon and Gabrielson; Murphy and Ruth; Oliver; Prater and Padia; Quellmalz, Copell and Chou; and Ruth and Murphy). Oliver further stated that writing topics may also "affect students in ways which are often difficult to predict or control. Ethnic or racial background may influence the writers' perspective regarding the writing task. However, how writing assessment affects specific groups is not at all clear" (426). In addition, other researchers suggest that the writing performance of African American students may be affected by certain language and communicative incongruities in the writing tasks (Brown; Fox; Hoover and Politzer; Taylor and Payne; Taylor and Lee; and Vaughn-Cooke).¹ Taylor and Lee questioned the "incongruities between the communicative behavior or language (context and content) of the tests and test constructors and the students who take the tests" (67). They point out that

African American students are faced with a two-fold challenge: a) performing required tasks and b) demonstrating abilities on the tasks by manipulating communicative and language codes which are frequently different from their indigenous systems.² Because of these language and communicative incongruities, African American students are frequently assessed invalidly. Either they fail to demonstrate the desired cognitive, social or linguistic behavior because of flawed (or low) expectations or of their misinterpretations, or they fail to demonstrate the desired behavior within the communication and language frameworks demanded by the tests [topics and prompts]. (80)

Greenberg reported that the research evidence did not clarify the connections between specific features or dimensions of writing prompts and students' writing performance. There is relatively little consensus among researchers and practitioners about what constitutes an effective writing prompt—for either instruction or assessment ("Prompt" 5). The effect of the cultural reference or cultural context of the wording of essay topics has not been investigated. Consequently, this study was designed to examine directly whether (and how) culture-referenced topics affect the writing of African American students. Ruth

and Murphy suggest that the topic functions as a springboard—a prompt. Thus the “meaning potential” of any given task is relative to linguistic, cognitive and social (cultural) reverberations set off in the respondents (413).

Much of the research in composition during the past two decades has focused on some aspects of students’ writing proficiency and writing performance; yet considerably few studies have examined the effects of essay prompts or topics on the writing performance of students (Brossell and Ash; Conlan and Chambers; Greenberg; Hoetker and Brossell; Hoetker; Murphy and Ruth; Ruth and Murphy; Smith, et al.) and on the rhetorical specifications in topics (Brossell; Engelhard, et al.; Oliver; Prater; Quellmalz, et al.). This research has been influenced directly by the large-scale writing assessments used to place students into basic writing and freshman composition courses. Millward noted that while acknowledging the need of placing students in their proper courses, many of us remain concerned about the ways in which the testing situation affects writing performance. There is concern, too, that these exams have a greater impact than simply determining proficiency levels (100). Even though various studies have examined the writing performance of African American/Black students (Ball; Chaplin; Cooper; Cunningham; Fowler; Norment; Scott; Smitherman and Wright; Wilson; and Zeni and Thomas), none has investigated the direct effects of essay prompts or topics on their writing.

Since it is accepted that any prompt or topic used to elicit writing samples will give some students an advantage, and that no one prompt or topic significantly influences the writing performance of students at different grade levels, and in different modes of discourse, this researcher proposes that topics designed to incorporate positive culturally oriented references may develop and enhance self-esteem and thus build confidence in African American students to produce more proficient writing samples. Throughout this paper, the term “culture referenced” will be used to describe any topic or prompt that incorporates values, attitudes and information relevant to African American culture. Furthermore, culture referenced includes a combination of culturally, socially, linguistically and historically determined aspects of African American culture.

Rationale

Although there may be some difficulty in determining the degree to which linguistic patterns and culture³ correlate, there are some direct effects of culture on the language and knowledge of a particular group of individuals.⁴ That is, culture is not just shared, it is intersubjectively shared, so that everyone within a particular cultural group assumes that others within the same group see and interpret

objects, concepts, or experiences in similar ways. According to Geertz "culture is an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (89). Modes of communication among members of a particular group can mark an unconscious linguistic process that permits individuals to interpret and describe their experiences and form the basis of a world view in common with these individuals; yet we ought to be able to determine when linguistic patterns and cultural references, beliefs, or experiences converge in the production of written language.

Nobles defined culture as "the process which gives a people a general design for living and patterns for interpreting their reality; it implies that there are cultural laws which are consistent with the requirements of the people's cultural deep structure" (23). We can think of these "cultural laws" as creating structures and concepts of family and institutional roles, ethics, behavioral norms, and historical information. Nobles continues, "The African worldview comprises the fundamental assumptions, beliefs and attitudes toward life, all of nature, and the universe that characterizes African [American] people, and thus constitutes the philosophical — ideological basis of African [American] culture" (53).

Essay topics that, through cues embedded in the text, are constructed to refer to African American cultural heritage and identity may promote positive self-esteem and self-image and, in turn, affect the writing performance of African American students. Research by composition specialists and linguists suggests that aspects of African American culture are reflected in the grammatical, stylistic, and discourse features of African American students' written language (Ball; Chaplin; Cooper; Cunningham; Fowler; Linn; Lipscomb; Norment; Smitherman and Wright; Scott; Wilson; and Zeni and Thomas).⁵ Cooper reported that cultural and dialectal differences affect the writing styles of African American college students in several ways. Culturally-based stylistic aspects of their writing are indicative of cultural history and values.

The present study differs from previous research on the writing ability of African American students in several ways. First, it addresses the gap in both qualitative and quantitative research since, although there has been research on the effects of Black English Vernacular (BEV) dialect on the quality of African American students' writing, no research has been conducted on the effects of culture/ethnicity referenced essay topics contributing to their written language performance. Second, much of the research on the characteristics of African American students' writing has focused primarily on the effects of grammar/mechanical errors.^{6,7} Third, most of the research has classified

African American students as basic, remedial, or inexperienced writers.

The Present Study

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of culture-referenced essay topics on the quality of writing produced by African American students in the 11th and 12th grades within the context of an urban university placement examination. Culture-referenced topics establish a context framework for African American students' responses in which a common linguistic, cultural, and social frame of reference is shared. This study examined specific characteristics of the writing tasks: (1) the overall quality of writing produced by the students (e.g., development, content, usage and mechanics) and (2) the content, structure, and task of the topic. The specific research questions addressed were as follows:

Question 1: Are there interactions among the prompts and topics that incorporate African American culture-referenced content and the quality of students' writing samples elicited within a university placement examination?

Question 2: Is there a relationship between the prompts and topics that incorporate African American culture-referenced content and the syntactic complexity, organization, and length of essay in 11th and 12th grade students' writing elicited within a university placement examination?

Based on a review of literature related to the effects of prompts and topics on students' writing performance, it was expected that the quality of writing would be different for each grade level and that female students would receive higher ratings on each of the variables. It was also expected that the level of writing quality on the university's placement topics would range from pass to fail, that the cultural-referenced writing prompt would be the most frequently chosen by the students, and that these essays would receive the highest scores. Finally, it was expected that the 12th grade students would receive higher ratings than 11th grade students, regardless of the writing task.

Method

Subjects

Seven hundred and eleven African American students from four Philadelphia high schools participated in the study. More than 95% of the students in each of the participating high schools are African Ameri-

cans from various socio-economic backgrounds. Subjects included male and female students in the 11th and 12th grades. Five 11th grade classes from three high schools (62 females and 41 males) and four 12th grade classes from two high schools (52 females and 39 males) were included in the sample the first semester. Four 11th grade classes from four high schools (84 females and 73 males) and four 12th grade classes (60 females and 48 males) were included in the sample the second semester. Seven 11th grade classes from four high schools (73 females and 58 males) and four 12th grade classes (72 females and 49 males) were included in the sample for the third semester.

Essay Topics

The writing prompts were designed and piloted by the researcher. The culture-referenced topics incorporated characteristics presented in the research literature (Brossell and Ash; Conlan and Chambers; Greenberg; Hoetker and Brossell; Hoetker; Ruth and Murphy; Smith, et al.) and research related to language patterns influenced by cultural and linguistical contexts (Ball; Chaplin; Cooper; Carson; Eller; Fowler; Hoover and Politzer; Linn; Norment; Park; Scott; Smitherman and Wright; Wilson). The culture-referenced topics selected for use as placement examinations adhered to similar guidelines suggested by Conlan and Chambers, who recommended that topics should be: 1) clearly stated, using language familiar to the audience, 2) appropriate to the population being tested, 3) reasonable for the allotted writing time, 4) suited to the purpose of the test, 5) accessible to the broadest range of students, 6) interesting to write about, and 7) capable of producing writing across the range of student abilities. For the purpose of the study, culture-referenced essay topics were defined as those related to the African American cultural knowledge base. The writing placement examination also included nine prompts not identified as African American culture-referenced. The prompts/topics appear in Appendix A.

Testing Procedures

The testing supervisor and proctors from the Measurement and Research Center (MARC) administered the university's English Composition and Reading Placement Examinations at each participating school site.⁸ The same testing and scoring materials and procedures used to test entering freshmen at the university were used in this study. Students were notified by their teachers of the purpose and requirements of the examinations. They were asked to consider the testing procedure as a pre-testing situation similar to what they would experience for placement at college. Temple University agreed to accept the results of the scores (if students enrolled at Temple) as valid assessment of their reading and writing levels for placement into freshman courses. Information about the writing and reading tests was distributed to each class one week before the test date. Two forms of

essay topics were distributed at testing sessions, the English Writing (essay, usage and mechanics) and Reading tests were administered during test sessions (one hour for the essay, 35 minutes for usage and mechanics, and 30 minutes for the reading test).

Scoring Procedures

Analysis of Essays

All placement essays were read by a group of six senior readers who were experienced teachers of composition trained in the assessment of writing. All essays were scored holistically; the test reader assigned a number that indicated his/her overall judgment of the quality of the essay, taking into consideration such things as the student's ability to handle ideas logically, to write in a style appropriate to the audience and situation, and to use standard grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Two trained readers gave each essay a numerical score from one through six, based on a set of specific criteria (see Appendix B) used to score the essay holistically. Readers made no marks or corrections on the essay. The scores given by the two readers were first added together, giving a total that ranged from a low of two to a high of twelve. Any essay that readers scored more than one level apart (for example, an essay given a 3 and a 5) was third-read by another reader, and the score was adjusted as appropriate. Throughout the year, the readers' scores on essays were selected randomly from the total sample of approximately 5,000 students and were checked for inter-rater reliability. The overall reliability scores (coefficients) of ALPHA for readers' ratings ranged between .87 and .92.

Analytical Scoring of Essays

A modification of Diederich's analytic scale was used to measure writing quality. The scale consists of seven features or qualities of writing: ideas and details, organization, syntax, vocabulary, style and tone, grammar and usage, and spelling and mechanics. An essay could receive a low score of 10 or a high score of 50 for all items on the scale. (Contact the author for more information on the scale.) The first three features—ideas and details, organization, and syntax have twice the number of points as do the last four features. An essay that received a high score in ideas and details, for example, had a clear focus and appropriate ideas with relevant explanation or development, whereas an essay with a low score lacked focus and development. Similarly, a high score for organization indicated a discerned pattern of development, whereas a low score indicated no discernible logic or organizational pattern. A high rating for syntax suggested a command of sentence construction/structure; a low rating indicated sentences that were often rudimentary or unclear. A high rating for vocabulary indicated word choice/diction relevant to the topic; a low score indicated limited vocabulary and misused words. A high score for style/tone re-

vealed the writer's individuality; a low score indicated language without any recognizable "voice." A high score on grammar/usage indicated adherence to the conventions of standard written English; a low score indicated a high frequency of errors. Similarly, a high score for spelling/mechanics indicated correct spelling and appropriate punctuation; a low score indicated many misspelled words and misuse of punctuation. Three of the senior experienced raters who scored the essay holistically were trained to score the essays of the 25 students who wrote on topics in the eleventh and twelfth grades.

Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the scores that the sample received on the Cooperative English Test Writing and Reading.

Table 1: Cooperative Reading and Writing Placement Results for Four High Schools

	COOP Writing Examination		
	N-Tested	Mean	SD
H.S.: 01	131	23.12	8.12
H.S.: 02	167	28.47	8.36
H.S.: 03	89	33.67	8.03
H.S.: 04	354	30.97	8.40
	COOP Reading Examination		
	N-Tested	Mean	SD
H.S.: 01	128	10.69	5.10
H.S.: 02	165	13.01	6.35
H.S.: 03	35	17.34	5.98
H.S.: 04	249	13.73	6.45

Examinations

The mean scores for the Writing Test ranged from 23.12 for H.S. 01 to 33.67 for H.S. 03. The Reading Test means ranged from 10.69 for H.S. 01 to 17.34 for H.S. 03. For the 711 students who took the Writing Test, the standard deviation was 8.21. For the 577 students who took the Reading Test, the standard deviation was 5.97. Table 1 reveals a significant difference among the scores reported for the high schools on each of the Writing and Reading Examinations.

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Essay Pass/Fail Ratio by Sex and by High School

	N-Tested	Number Passing	Number Failing	% Passing	% Failing
H.S.: 01					
Males	49	5	44	10.2	89.7
Females	81	9	72	11.1	89.1
Total	130	14	116	10.7	89.2
H.S.: 02					
Males	68	10	58	14.7	85.3
Females	75	18	57	24.1	76.1
Total	143	28	115	19.5	80.5
H.S.: 03					
Males	32	8	24	25.2	75.2
Females	57	16	42	28.1	72.1
Total	89	24	65	26.9	73.1
H.S.: 04					
Males	159	45	114	28.3	71.7
Females	190	78	112	41.2	59.1
Total	349	123	226	49.3	50.7

The pass/fail ratio by sex and high school of 711 students who took the Essay Placement Test are presented in Table 2. One hundred and eighty-nine students (26.6%) passed the University's Placement Examination. A score of 6 places a student in the Basic Writing course; a score of 8 places a student in Freshman Composition; and scores of 10 or higher exempt the student from taking writing at the university. At each high school more female students participated in the study than male students. Of the 308 males, sixty-eight (22%) received a passing score. One hundred twenty one (30%) of the 403 female students received a passing score on their essays.

Table 3 shows the frequency of topics selected and the percentage of pass rates for each topic. Twenty-three percent of the students (161) wrote on the topic (quotation 3B) by Malcolm X; twelve percent of the students (89) wrote on the topic (quotation 2E) by Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr.; and twelve percent (83) wrote on the topic (quotation 3C) by Marcus Garvey. The Writing Placement Examination included nine prompts that were not identified as African American culture referenced. Six percent of the students (46) wrote on the topic (quotation 2B) by Epictetus; four percent (33) wrote on the topic (1B) about free tuition for all high school graduates. In total, thirty-four percent (244) of the students selected the nine non culture-referenced topics and sixty-six percent (467) of the students wrote on the six African American culture-referenced topics. Each form (A-E) of the University Writing Examination included at least one culture-referenced topic. Form A included two prompts identified as culture referenced. Form B topics were selected by 34% of the sample. Form D topics were selected by 16% of the students. The culture-referenced topics elicited the highest number of passing scores. The six culture-referenced topics (1A, 2A, 3B, 3C, 3D and 2E) accounted for nearly 70% of the topics selected and 80% of the total passing essays. (For examples of student essays, see Appendix C.)

Table 3: Comparison of Pass Rates by Choice of Essay Topics

Topic	Number	% of Total	% of Topic	Number % of Pass
<u>Form A</u>				
1A	29	4.1	12.2	5 (2.6)
2A	59	8.4	30.5	18 (9.5)
3A	30	4.2	16.7	5 (2.6)
<u>Form B</u>				
1B	33	4.4	18.2	6 (3.2)
2B	46	6.5	23.9	11 (5.8)
3B	161	22.8	36.0	58 (30.7)
<u>Form C</u>				
1C	23	3.3	13.0	3 (1.6)
2C	19	2.6	15.8	3 (1.6)
3C	83	11.7	18.1	15 (8.1)
<u>Form D</u>				
1D	27	3.8	22.2	6 (3.2)
2D	23	3.3	8.7	2 (1.0)
3D	46	6.5	37.0	17 (9.0)
<u>Form E</u>				
1E	28	4.0	25.0	7 (3.7)
2E	89	12.4	36.8	31 (16.4)
3E	15	2.0	13.3	2 (1.0)
TOTAL	711	100%		189 (100.0%)

Table 4: Results of Writing and Reading Placement Exams for High School Students who Tested in their Junior (Spring 1990) and Senior Years (Fall 1991)

Test/Measure	Junior Year		Senior Year		No. of Students	t-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
COOP Test						
Effectiveness	12.87	4.21	10.20	3.10	30	-2.89**
Mechanics	19.43	5.88	15.00	5.32	30	-4.24**
Writing	32.30	8.67	25.20	6.45	30	-4.81**
Reading	15.50	5.70	11.47	4.91	30	-4.05**
Essay	6.15	0.54	6.69	0.97	26	3.03**
Percent Pass						
Writing	7.69		34.62		25	3.03**
Reading	20.00		10.00		30	-1.36
** p < .01						

** p < .01

Table 4 presents the means and standard deviations of the placement scores of twenty-five high school students who tested in both their junior and senior years. The essays and examinations of these students were selected from the total sample.

For each of the sections of the Cooperative Test, students' scores were higher in the junior year.⁹ The Essay Placement scores were higher in the senior year. Essay Forms A, C and E (1990) were used in the junior year. Forms A, B and E (1991) were used to test the students in the senior year. As Table 4 shows, there were significant differences between each of the sections of the COOP Test. The mean for effectiveness in the junior year is 12.87 compared to 10.20 for the senior year; for mechanics 19.43 compared to 15.00; for writing 32.30 compared to 25.20; for reading 15.50 compared to 11.47; and for the placement essay 6.15 compared to 6.69. In the junior and senior years the scores on each of the three sections (effectiveness, mechanics and reading) of the Cooperative Test were significantly different at $p < .01$.

Table 5 presents the results of the sample of 25 high school students (14 females and 11 males) who wrote essays in the 11th and 12th grades. The essays for the 25 students were analyzed to determine the number of words, sentences, and paragraphs and average words per sentence and paragraph and number of sentences per paragraph.

Significant differences were obtained for five of the aspects ana-

lyzed of the essays of the eleventh and twelfth grades. Generally, the statistical results indicate that twelfth graders did better for words [$T = 5.01, p < .05$]; for sentences [$T = +3.64, p < .001$]; for paragraphs [$T = 1.87, p < .05$]; and for words per sentence [$T = -1.81, p < .05$]. The writing quality of students who wrote essays in response to culture-referenced topics differed markedly from those students who wrote on the other topics. The culture-referenced essays generated more ideas about the topic. They were longer (number of words and sentences). They contained more information and specific details relevant to the topic. Specific references were made and developed about the content. The culture-referenced essays were more focused, more organized and rated as better than essays produced in response to the non culture-referenced topics.

Table 5: Selected Aspects of Essay Performance for High School Students who Tested in their Junior (Spring 1990) and Senior Years (Fall 1991)

	Mean	Standard Deviation	T value
<u>Words</u>			
Grade 11	201.01	57.92	+ 5.01**
Grade 12	275.54	86.23	
<u>Sentences</u>			
Grade 11	12.46	3.47	+ 3.64**
Grade 12	16.32	5.63	
<u>Paragraphs</u>			
Grade 11	3.34	1.51	+ 1.87*
Grade 12	3.64	.95	
<u>Words/Sentences</u>			
Grade 11	16.14	4.02	+ 1.81*
Grade 12	17.12	3.04	
<u>Words/Paragraphs</u>			
Grade 11	75.64	45.41	-.23
Grade 12	74.10	21.60	
<u>Sentences/Paragraph</u>			
Grade 11	4.81	2.91	-1.12
Grade 12	4.29	1.24	

* $p \leq .05$

** $p \leq .01$

Table 6 presents the results of the analytical scoring of the stu-

dents who wrote essays in the 11th and 12th grades. The essays for the 25 students were analyzed to determine the quality of writing, e.g. organization, syntax, vocabulary and grammar/usage. This table shows the frequency of results of the essays which were analyzed using the modified Diederich scale.

Table 6 Composite Analytical Scores of Writing Quality for High School Students Who Tested in Their Junior (Spring 1990) and Senior Years (Fall 1991)

Quality	Low		Middle		High
Ideas and Details	2	4	6	8	10
Grade 11	(0)	(3)	(18)	(3)	(1)
Grade 12	(0)	(2)	(17)	(4)	(2)
Organization	2	4	6	8	10
Grade 11	(0)	(3)	(17)	(4)	(1)
Grade 12	(0)	(2)	(15)	(6)	(2)
Syntax	2	4	6	8	10
Grade 11	(0)	(6)	(11)	(7)	(1)
Grade 12	(0)	(3)	(14)	(7)	(1)
Vocabulary	2	4	6	8	10
Grade 11	(0)	(5)	(16)	(3)	(1)
Grade 12	(0)	(7)	(14)	(4)	(0)
Style/ tone	2	4	6	8	10
Grade 11	(0)	(4)	(16)	(4)	(1)
Grade 12	(0)	(7)	(15)	(1)	(2)
Grammar/ usage	2	4	6	8	10
Grade 11	(0)	(6)	(14)	(4)	(1)
Grade 12	(0)	(6)	(15)	(3)	(1)
Spelling/ mechanics	2	4	6	8	10
Grade 11	(0)	(3)	(18)	(3)	(1)
Grade 12	(0)	(6)	(16)	(3)	(0)

Discussion

The current study revealed that more than two-thirds of the participating students chose to write on culture-referenced topics. The African American students who selected these topics wrote a greater number of sentences and words than those who selected other more standard topics. Generally, the culture-referenced topics seemed to facilitate increased fluency and topic development. Greater conceptual elaboration (development and fluency) occurred with culture-referenced topics. Compared to the standard topics, these topics elicited

an increased number of ideas, ideas that appeared to come from the culture-based knowledge of the students. Therefore, the present results support the use of specific culture-referenced topics for African American students rather than the standard prompts and topics that are generally used in large-scale assessment and locally developed tests. Essay topics that are specific to a particular culture presumably do facilitate greater fluency, coherence, and clarity. It appears that culture-referenced prompts are effective in encouraging African American writers to include more culture-based knowledge of self and community.

However, the author recognizes that the topics used in the present study represent only a small number of African American culture-referenced topics/prompts. Future research might investigate the development of culture-referenced topics that examine the influence of experiential demand, a feature of topics described by Greenberg (1981) that signifies the kind of knowledge a writing task demands and ranges from personal experiences to facts and generalizations (outside knowledge, direct experience, and imagined experience). Research should also be conducted to determine the effects of culture-referenced topics that incorporate cognitive demands required by different writing tasks and different modes of discourse (e.g., narration, exposition, definition, and argumentation). Additionally, research needs to be conducted to determine whether African American culture-referenced prompts would also facilitate the writing of non African American students.

It must be recognized that the present research does have some limitations. First, questions remain concerning the use of culture-referenced topics to enhance African American writers' self-esteem and confidence in writing. In addition, the culture-referenced topics were derived from statements, quotations, or proverbs of African American culture. Further research might investigate students' attitudes toward different kinds of culture-referenced topics (content/demand) and students' preference, if any, for a particular topic type. We also need to determine which kind of topics are most effective in revealing African American writers' differing reading and writing ability levels.

Implications

The results of this study have led the researcher to make several suggestions relevant to teaching and assessment of the writing of African American students. It seems appropriate to recommend that teachers develop knowledge of African American students' (language) linguistic competency and linguistic environments so that they may plan activities to improve African American students' written language skills. Millward suggested that

by working with the teachers, by providing students with specific feedback to their essays, by meeting with students to discuss their performance, and by providing the opportunity for revision, we not only send a clearer message about purpose and audience, but we enable students and teachers alike to participate in a pedagogical enterprise. (111)

Activities and strategies aimed at identifying cultural language influences need to be developed.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects (if any) of culture-referenced essay topics on the writing quality of African American students. The results of the study may provide several implications for the training of raters, writing pedagogy, assessment and curriculum:

Writing Pedagogy

Culture-referenced prompts (reading and writing) should be used for developing ideas for writing in all situations and in each mode of discourse. The use of topics and texts by African Americans would connect students with a realistic and relevant writing prompt. Fox suggested that

writing teachers who recognize the urgent need to reconceive writing pedagogy can look to [African] American literacy theory for strategies of reading and interpreting African American student writing that are free from a narrow understanding of dialect interference, strategies free from the residue of deficit theories of language that still govern the reading of African American student writing, strategies that instead see African American literacy in social, economic, and historical contexts. (292)

Ladson-Billings suggested that "culturally relevant teaching requires the recognition of African American culture as an important strength upon which to construct the education of African American children" (314). She views this culturally-referenced teaching as "a pedagogy of opposition that recognizes and celebrates African and African American culture" (314)..

Curriculum

The incorporation of African American cultural materials in the writing/ English curricula would provide African American students a content knowledge that could facilitate critical thinking skills and

enhance analytical thinking and writing among high school students. Through these cultural materials and through reading texts by African American writers, students would become more aware of the socio-political relationships among race, culture, and history, what Fox refers to as "positions." Fox advocates teaching "positions . . . [that] present intersections between race and history and history, race and institutions, race and gender . . . that would help writing teachers and their students map cultural and historical positions . . . as a means of exploring the relationship between self, race, language and education" (292-296).

Assessment

It is widely recognized that the choice of topics and prompts is critical to the effective assessment and placement of students. We need to keep in mind the goal of large-scale assessments, and this goal should help determine the nature of the prompt or topics used in the testing. Knowing the consequentiality of pre-college testing, we need to provide prompts and topics that will elicit a fair and accurate assessment of students' abilities. When assessing African American students, we should keep in mind stylistic devices, syntactic, knowledge and organizational structures that may be linguistically and culturally specific for African American students. This research suggests that one way to improve the testing and placement of African American students is to incorporate culture-referenced prompts (reading and writing). Oliver tells us that "we need to investigate the ways in which African American students view various 'positions' when they are asked to produce writing samples for placement. Researchers need to examine the particular discourse features of African American students' written language to relate these features (if relevant) to cultural positions" (443). To do this, we need to examine whether discourse features as evidenced by African American student writers "have cultural implications [and implications for designing topics, prompts, teaching and assessment] . . . [and whether African American] students have different ways of meaning, and if so, . . . [whether] these variations become evident in a linguistic analysis of their written compositions" (Eller 344). This study is intended as a springboard for future research into the implications of culture-referenced topics in large-scale testing and in curriculum development.

Notes

This study owes so much to the dedication and the research of Karen Greenberg; to the conversations (arguments) we shared even when she wasn't present; and to Lois Cronholm, the former Dean of

the College of Arts and Sciences, who initiated collaborative projects between Temple University and the Philadelphia Public Schools.

1. Taylor and Lee described several possible sources of culturally based communication and language bias in standardized tests: (a) situational bias, (b) linguistic bias, (c) communicative style bias, (d) cognitive style bias, and (e) interpretation bias (68).

2. The study of language within the social context (i.e., the communicative (cultural) environment) led to the identification of variances in the manner in which information is imparted among and within cultural groups. The manner of imparting information is often referred to as communicative style. The communicative style used by an individual results from a combination of socially and culturally determined factors such as values, interactional rules and perceptions of events. Such differences of communicative style may interfere with the standardized testing process (Taylor and Lee, 71-72).

3. The Whorf hypothesis suggested that languages not only report information but shape our perceptions of reality (linguistic relativity). Linguistic communities differ in their perceptual experiences of their environment. Language functions like a filter, thus molding our perception of reality. Whorf also suggested that language determines thought (linguistic determination).

4. Culturally determined differences within a language can occur at the levels of phonology, syntax, vocabulary, or referential context. The variables that account consistently and predictably for these differences include social status, age, sex, and ethnicity (cultural) and their possible interaction (Wolfram and Fasold).

5. Cooper suggested that cultural and dialect differences affect the writing styles of African American writers in several different ways. Some stylistic features involve confused word choice, grammatical deviation, or incorrect word order. Others, culturally based stylistic aspects of writing, include extensive use of imagery in expository and argumentative writing.

6. It is important to note that none of the syntactic problems which have been suggested to appear in AAE appeared in the writing samples of these students' writings: (1) the redundancy or doubling of forms (2) incorrect adverb placement and (3) incorrect relative pronouns.

7. Most linguists acknowledge the "legitimacy" of African American English (AAE), Black English (BE), Black English Vernacular (BEV), Black English or Dialect (BED), as a correct, grammatical, normal model of communicating African American culture. For further discussion of the AAE or BEV influence on students' writing performance, see Fasold and Wolfram; Hartwell; Lipscomb; Morrow; Scott; Smitherman and Wright; Wilson; and Wolfram and Whiteman.

8. I gratefully acknowledge the support and assistance of Jim

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9. This result was not expected. We expected that writing quality and scores would improve between the eleventh and twelfth grades. Zeni and Thomas reported similar results. In their study, "the 12th graders' performance was slightly weaker in both years. This may reflect the special nature of the senior year – the omission of students who have completed their English requirements, and the inclusion of those whom must take one last course after repeated failures. The performance of 11th graders seems more representative of high school completion" (37).

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APPENDIX A: PHILADELPHIA HIGH SCHOOL PLACEMENT TOPICS

HS-91-A-1

Directions: Below are three topics. Be sure to choose only one to write about. Read the topic carefully so that you understand exactly what it is asking you to do. Don't forget to write on every other line of the bluebook and to underline any word whose spelling you're not sure is correct. You should write about 350-400 words.

FORM A

- 1A Discuss whatever meaning the following quotation has for you: "No person is your friend who demands your silence, or denies your right to row."

Alice Walker
- 2A Discuss whatever meaning the following quotation has for you: "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

James Baldwin
- 3A In the "Declaration of Independence," Thomas Jefferson says that all individuals are entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Write an essay in which you argue that these rights are not absolute or guaranteed.

FORM B

- 1B Some individuals believe that a college education should be a

right like elementary school and high school. They argue that the government should pay college expenses for all citizens regardless of their ability to pay or their ability to do college-level work. Write an essay in which you present your position on this topic.

- 2B Discuss whatever meaning the following quotation has for you:
"Only the educated are free."

Epictetus

- 3B Discuss whatever meaning the following quotation has for you:
"Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today."

Malcolm X

FORM C

- 1C To some people the Declaration of Independence still accurately reflects America's political philosophy and way of life; to others it does not. What is your position? Write an essay in which you discuss your analysis of the Declaration of Independence's contemporary relevance.

- 2C Discuss whatever meaning the following quotation has for you:
"Act in such a way that your principle of action might safely be made a law for the entire world."

Immanuel Kant

- 3C Write an argumentative essay on the following topic:
"Chance has never yet satisfied the hope of a suffering people. Action, self-reliance, the vision of self and the future have been the only means by which the oppressed have seen and realized the light of their own freedom."

Marcus Garvey

FORM D

- 1D Write an argumentative essay on the following topic:
Should all high school students be required to take a course that discusses racial and cultural issues?

- 2D The following subject is the basis of sharp differences of opinions: Write an essay in which you argue the position you favor. You must make clear your point of view. You must provide sufficient support and details for your argument.

"The current campaigns to eliminate drug problems are admirable, but greater social problems are now being ignored. The government should stop over-reacting to the drug problem and spend more money on child-care and education."

- 3D Discuss whatever meaning the following quotation has for you:
"When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions."

Carter G. Woodson

FORM E

- 1E Write an argumentative essay on the following topic:
"Should writers, painters, musicians, poets, and rappers have their works censored for obscenities of nudity, profanity and defamation of the U.S. flag by local and state agencies?"
- 2E Discuss whatever meaning the following quotation has for you:
"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
Martin Luther King, Jr.
- 3E The following subject is the basis of sharp differences of opinions. Write an essay in which you argue the position you favor. You must make clear your point of view. You must provide sufficient support and details for your argument.
"Some states require that students pass a competency exam before they can graduate from high school. If students can't read and write at a certain minimum level, as measured by the test, they aren't allowed to graduate."

APPENDIX B: TEMPLE UNIVERSITY'S PLACEMENT ESSAY SCORING CRITERIA

A Score of One

These writers clearly lack the linguistic resources needed to translate speech into formal written language. They do not grasp the topic or the task. Essays are extremely short and read like an internal monologue; it is as if the writers were writing to themselves. They respond to the topic almost entirely in terms of extremely personal experience but do not formulate general ideas based on that experience. Consequently, no position or only the most vaguely defined position appears. Other than chronology, there is no discernible patterns of organization. Problems with grammar, punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary are so severe that readers find it impossible, at times, to arrive at the

writers' intended meaning. Sentence structure is rudimentary.

A Score of Two

These writers still have difficulty translating speech into formal written language. At best, they address one aspect of the topic as it relates to the writers' personal experience. They are still unable to demonstrate that they can take a position on an issue. Organization remains rooted in chronology; general ideas, if present, are not clearly stated or supported. Grammar and usage problems, though generally less severe than in a one essay, are still wide-ranging and distracting, obscuring the writers' intentions. On the other hand, the extremely limited range of sentence patterns employed by some writers may conceal further difficulties with grammar, punctuation, and sentence construction.

A Score of Three

These writers demonstrate some awareness of what is needed to take and hold a position on a public issue, but lack the skill to perform the task adequately. Many fail to maintain a consistent position. Though they can, generally, achieve a public voice, some remain inappropriately personal: the language may be inappropriately conversational, with lapses in internal organization, or confusing jumps in time, space, and logic that obscure relationships between ideas and illustrations, reason and support. Supporting ideas remain implicit and vague when they should be stated explicitly; OR the obvious is stated unnecessarily. These writers' limited vocabulary is not adequate to the requirements of a position paper. Common words are used incorrectly; necessary words or letters sometimes omitted. Punctuation errors obscure sentence boundaries. These essays generally reveal recurrent sentence-structure problems; if there are only occasional problems, this fact may be due to the limited range of sentence patterns employed.

A Score of Four

These writers demonstrate minimal competence in addressing an issue and holding a position. Positions are taken and supported plausibly, writers using a clear, if formulaic, structure that allows readers to follow the paper's reasoning. Development of ideas remains superficial, their connections tenuous. Writers generally avoid taking controversial stands or exploring the implications of their ideas. Though these writers do demonstrate a "public" voice, they often fail to address the specified audience realistically, a failure that results in the superficiality described above. With respect to the conventions of grammar, spelling, and mechanics, fours are relatively fluent. Readers are not frequently distracted by major errors. Those that do appear are errors common to usage handbooks rather than idiosyncratic to

the writers. Vocabulary is usually appropriate, though writers occasionally run into difficulty by selecting words, which are inappropriately or ineffectively used. Some essays lapse into slang or colloquialisms, though writers usually indicate the switch.

A Score of Five

In addressing an issue and taking a position, these writers demonstrate a degree of fluency over and above minimal competence. These writers are more clearly in command, both with respect to their material and to the strategies employed for communicating it. Organization develops from the topic and from the writers' intentions, not from an artificially imposed formula. These writers are willing to undertake complex development or adopt controversial stands, to explore implications and to recognize other points of view. They respond more realistically to their readers' needs for information and to their possible objections. These essays reflect a reliable knowledge of conventions in writing. Errors that do occur seem to result from the haste of writers attempting a more complex – and often longer – essays with a limited time.

A Score of Six

Unlike essays scored five, these writers' performances are marked by a fluency which suggests mastery in writing. These writers are, without a doubt, in command and demonstrate assurance in their choice of rhetorical strategies. These essays show a well-developed sense of perspective. Positions taken are carefully qualified, and reasons given, as well as the support for those reasons, are thoughtful, resulting in complex, crafted development. The reader has a clear sense of being addressed realistically, and that readers' reactions are, to a degree, anticipated by the writer. Few errors in spelling, grammar, or mechanics appear. The reader is almost never distracted by them.

APPENDIX C: EXAMPLES OF STUDENTS' COMPOSITIONS

H.S. 01: Female: Holistic Score 6: Coop Score 42

Discuss whatever meaning the following quotation has for you:
"Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced."
James Baldwin

This quote means a variety of things to me, it brings out the more

personal aspects of my life. I know about facing things and trying to change them. Topics of my life which I've tried to cope with, from School to Family to coping with deaths.

If a person is born in my neighborhood, this person is taught to be educated and street wise from day one. This is because of the problems he will undoubtedly face when he grows into a young adult. There is the problem of drug selling and drug abuse. There is always a want and need for this problem to be erased from the face of the Earth. What you have to realize is that if no one recognizes the problem and if everyone just turns their back on it, it will never be solved. People of today have to face their problems, this is the first step to overcoming them. It is true that you may not get rid of it, but you'll feel an inner warmth knowing that you have at least contributed to the destruction of it.

We may also look at this quote in a more positive view. Picture this, a young woman striving to be on top. She wants to enroll in college, Temple maybe. There may be a fear inside of her, a fear of entering the real world and getting started on her own. She will no longer be under mama's protective wings. If this girl looks at all the opportunities she will have, then maybe she can overcome her fears. If she analyzes her feelings and thinks of her future then maybe she'll feel more secure. Sure she'll have that unbearable longing to go home and to be nurtured, she may not be able to change that. If she faces her problems then she has a great chance of solving them. She couldn't have solved her problem if she didn't realize it first.

Also this quote can be related to family problems and other teen related problems. A Death in the family, an unwanted pregnancy, or even drug abuse. This may bring sorrow and depression to victims of these sorrowful burdens. I feel that a person has to look at these things as exactly what they are, problems. They need to be solved or coped with. Every problem can't be changed automatically, but it can be worked out if it is brought to attention and if it isn't ran away from. A Death can be coped with if a family sticks together and mourns together. Teen pregnancies can be coped with in three different ways, adoption, abortion, or raising it yourself. Drug abuse can be coped with by going to a rehabilitation center. All these things can be worked out if you face them (which is the first step) and if you make the effort to change them.

H.S. 04: Male: Holistic Score 6 : Coop Score 39

Discuss whatever meaning the following quotation has for you:
"Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today."
Malcolm X

The passage by Malcolm X, "Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today," is a verbal expression for his beliefs and my beliefs also. Malcolm X is a man of great deeds. He tries to get his point across to the youth and elders. Malcolm X never discriminated. No matter what your race or color was, he believed that we would all unite. Malcolm X believe we should all move as one. To do this we must abide by the rules set by our society such as: great morals and knowledge of who you are.

Malcolm X preached great morals to our young, black youth. He believed that a man with a good heart would endeavor and achieve good things in life. To do so he taught, not to kill one another and also to respect each other. When Malcolm X was alive there were many racial tension in the community. People did not respect one another. The worst kind of crime that was done, and still done today, was black on black crime. This meant that the black race was killing the black race. We will never succeed this way. The black race would soon be demolished. "We should come together and unite first as a race then as one." Malcolm X believed and taught just that. To unite as one, we must be given an opportunity. We can give ourselves this opportunity through knowledge.

Knowledge is the key to life. Without knowledge and awareness of who you are you will not overcome the difficulties in life. Malcolm X has taught the African-Americans to be proud of who they are, for there is nothing to be ashamed of. If everyone (would become) proud of their own race and color, and also respect others, we will have prepared for the future. A good education can educate you with any human being upon this earth. Various subjects such as math, English, and history are very important for math is some what similar to life: We must know how to analyze certain problem in life. English is need to communicate with the world: History is need to learn about the past and succeed in the future.

People who believe these thing will not have problems. Malcolm X spreaded this message to everyone. He has lived an died for the liberation of our land.

H.S. 04: Female: Holistic Score 6: Coop Score 38

Write an argumentative essay on the following topic:
"Chance has never yet satisfied the hope of a suffering people. Action, self-reliance the vision of self and the future have been the only means by which the oppressed have seen and realized the light of their own freedom."
Marcus Garvey

Marcus Garvey, believed that, blacks are oppressed, and have long suffered. But have a chance, if we as people and a whole, would

come together, and builded, so we can become reconcizable, to this country and to others "To get back Respect." Something blacks have yet to received, He believed going, but to Africa, and building our own again.

Change is only the beginning, of liberty and justice. A change, and a chance to build, self help, self respect. We as a people have to realized, that even though we had been deprogram, on every ability, and every self culture, such as our hair, our clothes, our songs. And even though we have been treated, and cheated out of every self thought one could learn about, themselves, their family members (descended). Marcus Garvey gave the black people a self vision about ourselves and some would say. That's beening selfish because there are whites that want to learn about us. But whites fail to realized that this ours. Our, culture and heritage are the only thing we as black people have left. And me and my people are going to hold on and believe that if we reprogram ourselves and give ourselves back the our original names, our clothing, songs, and dance even our worshipped.

Yes Marcus Garvey tried to put us on our shippes and send us back but even then they were not satisfied with. If we left then who would buy your products and builded your _____ only the oppressed so you stopped that, and cont_____ look at as an say. Their okay. And not asked, but told to take care of your children, your home, and plantation. And after that, just cut loose, and not no than you or even, a welcome. Would have been greatly appreciated, respect. When the other one does, not recognized, another one reality.

And the reality, is that we just want our own. And not just taking about. Those things that material listic, America is offering. But that "glow," of understanding, when it was okay to put your "woman" up on the peddle stool and show her off to world. And not to be ashamed to be "Black" or your children to be black. Because some one does not, understand, that, this how are born. And we should love each other, and help each other to grow. With the understanding, that, my culture is your. And respect that. This is the realzitation of one's freedom. Marcus Garvey write in one of his, brillant speeches "Rise Up You Mighty Race"