

## **Examining the Effects of Gender and Second Language Proficiency on Hispanic Writers' Persuasive Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

The present study was designed to examine the degree to which persuasive responses are present in Hispanic second language writers and to categorize these responses by level of language proficiency and gender. Thirty seven elementary school students were asked to write an essay in response to a standard prompt designed to elicit persuasive writing. Using an adaptation of Weiss & Sachs' (1991) classification system of persuasive responses, originally developed for oral tasks, students written discourse was examined. The findings seem to indicate that students exit ESL classes without having achieved a higher level of expertise in the use of persuasive discourse. In addition, essays written by Hispanic females show a greater degree of elaboration and a clearer attempt to express the writers point of view than those written by male Hispanic students, regardless of proficiency level. Teachers must incorporate writing beyond the linguistic level of a text to include students' discourse-level competence.

### **Introduction**

Students' poor performance in writing persuasive discourse has been extensively documented (Applebee, Langer & Mullis, 1986 a,b; Pringle & Freedman, 1985). Data based on a 1988 survey conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that approximately two-thirds of the fourth grade students performed at minimal levels or below in a persuasive task involving convincing others. Elaborations were also infrequent (Applebee, Langer, Jenkins, Mullis & Foertsch, 1990).

Research indicates that one of the reasons for this failure is that elementary school curricula avoid persuasive writing tasks (McCann, 1989; White, 1989). As a matter of fact Edelsky (1987) labeled writing as a: "rare event in bilingual classrooms" (p. 12). This lack of instructional experience in writing, and particularly in persuasion, is compounded by the absence of schema for writing persuasion in younger writers (Scardamalia, 1982). Additionally, Clark and Delia (1976) reported a relationship between children's

social-cognitive status and the production of persuasive arguments; notwithstanding the impact that age and grade levels have on the number and variety of requests (Pellegrini, Galda & Rubin, 1984; Rubin & Piche, 1979).

Considering the developmental nature of persuasion (Moffett, 1983), it is easy to understand why elementary school children have a great deal of difficulty with persuasive writing tasks (McCann, 1989; Rybscynski, 1992). Generally, younger writers' persuasive essays are unsophisticated and short (Rybscynski, 1992). Some of the most common problems exhibited by young writers attempting persuasive written discourse include: (a) poor organization (Freedman & Pringle, 1984); (b) failure to elaborate reasons for their arguments (Crowhurst, 1983); (c) low overall quality (Applebee, Langer & Mullins, 1986a, 1986b); (d) use of ineffective and/or abrupt endings (Langer, 1986; Crowhurst, 1983); (e) disregard for audience concerns and needs (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986); (f) absence of effective introduction of self to audience (Kroll, 1984); and (g) limited degree of persuasiveness (Crowhurst, 1988; Applebee et al 1986b).

However momentous a task, oral persuasive skills are already present as early as infancy (Wagner, 1987). In addition, rudimentary knowledge of persuasive written discourse was found in fourth graders (Kroll, 1984; Erftmier & Dyson, 1986). Knudson (in press) observed that there is a growing sophistication of arguments by grade level (e.g., third graders frequent use of "Simple Statements" as contrasted with twelfth graders using "Compromise"). Messages also become longer, more varied and more complex with age (Pellegrini, Galda & Rubin, 1984). Nevertheless, it is still not clear to what extent learning to use persuasion effectively is related to the student's cognitive maturation level (i.e., development of logical thinking and abstract reasoning) (Knudson, 1992).

Clearly, thinking about others' thoughts is a highly demanding cognitive skill, particularly for second-language writers whose transcultural communication experience may also be limited. Socialization tends to influence the content as well as the style of the message (Raign & Sims, 1993). This cognitive role-taking ability is said to influence children's social interactions (Shantz, 1975) as well as the writer's competence in generating effective persuasive messages (Clark & Della, 1976; Rubin & Piche, 1979). Limited opportunities to socialize or interact may impair the writer's ability to

gauge the effectiveness of persuasive strategies, at both the linguistic and discourse levels.

In addition, the speech behavior of individuals reflect the value systems of their own speech community and as a result can pose difficult challenges for communicating across cultures. For example, Connor and Lauer (1985) have reported cultural differences in choice of register between United States' writers and British and New Zealander writers. United States' writers elect to use colloquial and interactive language more frequently; whereas, British and New Zealand writers favor more formal structures. It follows that using persuasion effectively across cultures would include an additional awareness of, and sensitivity to, these preferences.

To make matters more complicated not all speakers belonging in the same speech community reflect the same rules of speaking (Wolfson, 1988). A community as diverse of the United States is evidently a case in point. However, for purposes of research Wolfson admonishes that "...the notion of speech community must be used at a level of abstraction which ignores many subtle distinctions" (p. 23). It follows that in contrasting the speech behaviors of Spanish dominant bilinguals and native American English speakers more divergence would be found. Borkin and Reinhart (1978), for example, discuss the frequency with which English as a second language (ESL) speakers confuse "excuse me" with "I'm sorry". Along with the verbal components of speech, cultural practices and other speech rules vary from community to community and need to be negotiated for persuasion to make its full impact on the audience. Wolfson (1988) concludes:

The fact that urban middle-class Americans live in a complex and open society means that individuals are members not of a single network in which their own place is well defined, but rather belong to a number of networks, both overlapping and non overlapping, in which they must continually negotiate their roles and relationships with one another. (p. 36)

The present study was designed to examine the degree to which persuasive responses are present in Hispanic second language writers and to categorize these responses by level of proficiency and gender. Various theoretical premises served as the basis for this investigation: (a) There are two types of language proficiency that are fundamentally different: "context-embedded" proficiency (i.e., occurs in the presence of concrete, situational clues that make the

meaning of the utterance clear) and “context-reduced” language (i.e., requires the application of abstract thought and greater experience with the subject or task) (Cummins, 1979; 1981; 1983). Persuasion is more complex than other forms of writing because it requires performance within a “context-reduced” situation; and (b) Speech behavior is reflective of the individual’s own speech community and is therefore subject to rule negotiation (Wolfson, 1988)

Four research questions guided this study:

(1) Are there significant group [students acquiring English (SAE) versus students proficient in English (SPE) differences in overall quality of persuasive essays, number of appeals, and number of categories of appeals used?

(2) Are there significant gender differences in overall quality of persuasive essays, number of appeals, and number of categories of appeals used?

(3) Are there significant interactions (group x gender) in overall quality of persuasive essays, number of appeals, and number of categories of appeals used? and

(4) Do SAE and SPE differ significantly in strategy selection?

## **Methods**

**Data Sources.** Thirty-seven Hispanic fourth-graders enrolled in two inner-city schools in a large metropolitan area in southwestern United States participated in the study. Students’ age ranged from nine to eleven years. Eighteen were identified as acquiring English proficiency (SAE) and were attending English as a second language classes. The remaining nineteen were already mainstreamed into the regular English classroom (SPE). Of the SAE, eight were male and 10 female. All SAE students spoke Spanish at home; 10 were US born, seven were born in Mexico and one in El Salvador. The SPE student profile showed 11 were male and eight female. Most SPE students spoke Spanish at home, except one. In addition, 15 were US born, three were born in Mexico, and one in El Salvador.

**Procedure/Instrumentation.** The 37 subjects were asked to write an essay in response to a standard prompt designed to elicit persuasive writing. Using an adaptation of Weiss & Sachs’ (1991) classification system of persuasive responses, originally developed for oral tasks, students written discourse was examined. The instrument, adapted by Knudson (1992) to analyze written

production, contains 22 responses and their descriptions (refer to Exhibit A). In addition a holistic score was calculated using Knudson's rubric (refer to Exhibit B).

**Prompt.** Students were asked to write an essay in response to the following prompt:

You are interested in becoming mayor of the city. Convince voters that you are the right person for the job.

**Scoring.** Two readers were trained in the use the Knudson instrument. Each essay was coded for: (1) number of appeals used and (2) category of appeals used. In addition, a holistic score for overall quality was assigned by trained readers. In the event of a scoring discrepancy, a third rater, also trained in the instrumentation, was used to break the tie.

**Analysis/Results.** Three separate 2 (group) x 2 (gender) ANOVAs were used to compare performance on the three dependent measures: (a) number of appeals (b) types of appeals; and (c) quality of the essays. No significant main effect for group (SAE versus SPE [ $F(1,33) = .48, p > .05$ ] or interaction effect [ $F(1,33) = .83, p > .05$ ] was found when the essays were scored for quality; however, a significant main effect [ $F(1,33) = 10.99, p < .01$ ] for gender was found. (See Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**ANOVA for type of appeal**

	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F-Value	P-Value
Gender	1	6.006	6.006	4.059	.0522
Proficiency	1	.315	.315	.213	.6475
Gender * Proficiency	1	2.632	2.632	1.779	.1914
Residual	33	48.832	1.480		

No significant main effect for group (SAE versus SPE) [ $F(1,33) = .29, p \geq .05$ ] or interaction effect [ $F(1,33) = .97, p > .05$ ] was found when the essays were scored for number of appeals produced; however, a trend is indicated in the gender effect [ $F(1,33) = 2.99, p < .09$ ]. (See Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**ANOVA for number of appeals**

**ANOVA Table for Number of Appeals**

	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F-Value	P-Value
Gender	1	39.922	39.922	2.985	.933
LEP	1	3.860	3.860	.289	.5946
Gender* LEP	1	13.014	13.014	.974	.3310
Residual	33	441.127	13.367		

No significant main effect for group (SAE versus SPE) [ $F(1,33) = .21, p > .05$ ] or interaction effect [ $F(1,33) = 1.78, p > .05$ ] was found when the essays were scored for number of categories of appeals produced; however, a significant difference was found again for gender [ $F(1,33) = 4.06, p < .05$ ]. (See Table 3).

**Table 3**  
**ANOVA for holistic scores**

**ANOVA Table for Holistic Scores**

	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F-Value	P-Value
Gender	1	9.701	9.701	10.988	.002
LEP	1	.423	.423	.479	.493
Gender * LEP	1	.732	.732	.829	.369
Residual	33	29.136	.883		

These findings seem to indicate that students exit ESL classes without having achieved a higher level of expertise in the use of persuasive discourse. In addition, essays written by Hispanic females show a greater degree of elaboration and a clearer attempt to express the writer's point of view than those written by male Hispanic students, regardless of proficiency level. (Refer to Exhibits C and D). Consistent with Lakoff (1977), who argued that gender-specific discourse techniques are shaped from childhood, these findings seem to further corroborate the effects of differentiated socialization practices on the type and quality of written persuasive discourse exhibited by males and females.

The fourth hypothesis was tested using a series of chi squares with continuity correction to compare the types of appeals favored. Both SAE (N=16 or 89%) and SPE (N=19 or 100%) favored *Guarantees* ("Offering assurances not in one's power") as a persuasion technique. In examining the use of *Simple Statements* ("A matter of fact statement without supporting evidence or facts") group differences approached significance (corrected chi square=3.26,  $p<.07$ ), with 67% of SAE students using the strategy while only 32% SPE used it.

Additionally, the groups differed significantly (corrected chi square=7.85,  $p<.005$ ) in their use of *Bargain* ("Explicit statement about reciprocating favors and making other two-way exchanges") with 74% of the SPE students as opposed to 22% of the SAE demonstrating its use. The difference in the selection of persuasion strategies favored by one group over the other can be indicative of a higher degree of students' cognitive role-taking ability resulting from a greater opportunity to socialize with native speakers in the regular classroom. In addition the use of bargaining suggests greater awareness of the needs of their audience. It is important to note that the 19 remaining categories of persuasion adapted by Knudson (1992) are not present in the essays of either SAB and SPE students. This absence underscores a limited level of performance of these students in the use of persuasive discourse.

### **Educational Implications**

Since lack of experience with persuasive discourse has been identified as a possible reason for the low writing performance of students in this important genre (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982), it is imperative that attention be focused on providing opportunities for Hispanic SAE and SPE writers to develop a more sophisticated

schema that will incorporate a greater variety as well as more complex forms of persuasion. Crowhurst (1987) found that students' ability to elaborate reasons and to organize their thoughts was helped by direct instruction. In addition, research has shown that when second language students are directly taught how to express a specific purpose in writing, they are able to effectively vary their styles to fit the various purposes (Clair, 1982). Campagna (1987) argues that teachers need to concern themselves with setting up experiences that will allow children to develop the ability to write for different purposes.

Teaching persuasive writing to second language students should not be delayed because it is cognitively more demanding than other genres. Allowing students to become exposed to persuasion at an early stage sensitizes them to important aspects of transcultural communication, such as language choice and persuasion schemata (e.g., what the writer wants the audience to do or think, rationale for the request, supporting evidence, and evaluation). As mentioned earlier, at the text-linguistic level, writers' choice of words, or of register, may have a direct impact on the success or failure of persuading an audience. Additionally, Crowhurst (1987) found that students showed significant gains in their persuasive writing as a result of schema instruction. She argues that: "Large gains in composition quality scores were made both by students who practiced writing, following the schema, and by students who read persuasive pieces which exemplified the schema" (p. 22).

Besides classroom practices, external factors to the writing event must also be examined as they also influence the quality of students' essays (Edelsky, 1986). Two of these factors deserve mention: (a) idiosyncrasies of the print environment in the classroom, and (b) the teacher's attitudes towards writing and in particular second language writers.

The quality and extent of the classroom print environment needs to be a foremost consideration. As discussed earlier, exposure to a variety of genres has been found to be an effective tool in developing a sense of audience and purpose for second language learners (see e.g., Clair, 1982). In addition, the interrelationship between reading and writing, as well as the transference of writing skills between first and second languages, has been clearly documented (see e.g. Edelsky, 1986; Canale, Frenette & Bélanger, 1988; Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 1992; therefore, exposure to a well equipped bilingual library with persuasive writing models is an

essential component in creating a supportive writing climate for SAE students. As Edelsky (1986) concludes: "Extensive interaction with conventionally written, functional print is needed for input and feedback when becoming literate in a language" (p. 76).

Teachers' attitudes and beliefs about second language learners and learning, along with knowledge of writing instruction, can be pivotal in considering persuasion as part of the writing curriculum. If teachers consider grammar, spelling and punctuation as the center of ESL instruction and, additionally consider the students as deprived of the cognitive strategies necessary to master persuasive writing, the genre will be delayed to a future time that might never come. Edelsky (1986) stated that: "Instead of deficiencies, our subjects'[young bilingual students] writing shows use of a varied vocabulary, complex syntax, and a move toward stylistic sophistication"(p. 54). These strengths should serve as an encouragement to teachers in going beyond the linguistic level of a text to also pursue students' discourse-level competence (Connors, 1990).

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**APPENDIX A****Categories and Descriptions (Knudson, 1992)\***

<b>CATEGORIES</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
Acknowledgement	Student admits or recognizes another point, which may be followed by counterargument.
Appeal to Authority	Higher Student refers to person perceived as having higher authority in order to influence the audience.
Assertion	Verbally asserting ones way.
Bargain	Explicit statement about reciprocating favors and making other two-way exchanges.
Compromise	The student gives up part of his/her desired goals in order to attain part of them and assumes/argues audience will do/does the same.
Deceit	Attempting to deceive the audience by lying or concealing information or advocating that the audience use deception.
Defiance	Belligerent reply or strong negation of the audiences previous statements without supporting evidence.
Emotion-Agent	The student cries, screams, laughs, or uses other nonverbal means to reach goal.
Emotion-Target	The student attempts to alter the audience's emotions by distracting or playing up to him or her, or inducing feelings of guilt.
Fait Accompli	Openly doing what one wants without avoiding audience.

Force	Student expresses violence to influence audience or advocates that the audience use violence.
Guarantee	Offering assurances not in one's power.
Hint	Not openly stating what one wants; indirect attempts at influencing others.
Mitigation	Softening a previous statement by use of "please" in isolation.
Mitigated Simple Request or Mitigated Simple Statement	Use of "please" along with any simple statement or simple request.
Plead	Making a request in a begging manner.
Reason	Any statement using reason or rational argument to influence others.
Simple Request	A simple, polite request of one's desire.
Simple Statement	A matter of fact statement without supporting evidence or threats.
Thought Manipulation	Student turns the audience's anger around and directs it toward the audience or defuses anger by denying the audience's charges.
Threat	Stating or implying that negative consequences will occur if the student's plan is not accepted.
Why Challenge	Use of "why" in isolation or combined with another statement to challenge the audience's statement

\*Adapted from Weiss & Sachs (1991)

**APPENDIX B****Guide for Holistic Scoring for Persuasive Writing (Knudson, 1992)****Score Point 1**

Papers that attempt to address the topic but are general and vague. In general, they are not fluent, do not list or discuss reasons for an argument, and contain many errors in form. They are characterized by some of the following:

**Score Point 2**

Papers that respond to the task with some argument(s). Such paper are more fluent than the Score Point 1 paper and exhibit some development of logical reasoning.

**Score Point 3**

Papers that represent good attempts at developing a persuasive argument. The reader has no difficulty understanding the student's viewpoint.

**Score Point 4**

Papers that represent good attempts at developing a persuasive argument. The reader has no difficulty understanding the student's viewpoint. These papers are better organized than Score Point 3 papers.

**Score Point 5**

Papers that respond to the task with developed and substantiated reasons/appeals. These papers are well organized, fluent, and function as a unified piece of persuasion.

**Score Point 6**

Papers that address the topic, state and elaborate arguments, and exhibit logical thought. These papers are outstanding.