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How Much is Enough to Learn? Exploring the Effects of an Abbreviated Implementation of the National Writing Project's College, Career and Community Writers Program (C3WP) on English Learners' Argumentative Writing Growth

SAMANTHA J. MANZO, KELSEY DECAMILLIS AND SARAH LORENZ

When teachers are asked to incorporate new curricula into their classrooms, a common concern typically follows: "This is great, but how can I possibly make this happen in my classroom? I already have so much to get through!" It is true that there is already so much on teachers' plates, such as a school's rigorous curriculum, professional development initiatives, and district/statewide tests. It is hard to incorporate new teaching techniques or lessons, even if it is clear the benefit that it would have on student learning. Many teachers involved in the WritEL Grant (a National Professional Development grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition in 2016) at Eastern Michigan University experienced these same barriers as they began to implement C3WP as part of WritEL's research study with English Learners. In this study, the teachers' first experience with C3WP was through Eastern Michigan University's Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages program. At the time of their enrollment in the program, Eastern Michigan University (EMU) was conducting a research study under the WritEL grant examining the extent to which C3WP benefits English learners (ELs). The teachers were extremely excited to learn about effective implementation of this rigorous argument writing program and for their own opportunity to engage in researching the program's

effectiveness. The MA students participating in the grant at EMU seemed to be in a similar situation: although they were excited to begin, they all had concerns, such as timing, flexibility, how to fit this into their regular curriculum, and the rigorous goals of C3WP. Further, how would they help support their English Learners, many of whom were still developing fairly basic English language skills?

Despite these hesitations, from the first introduction to C3WP, the benefits to implementing this program were clear. Not only does it take specific writing skills and break them into the focus of short cycles, it also leads students to question the text and analyze the various perspectives—an important skill beyond the ELA classroom. Each writing cycle provides the teacher with instructional sequences, texts, handouts, and suggested EL modifications. The cycles all typically follow this structure: reading, annotating, analyzing the texts, discussing, and taking a stance before drafting an argument. Students are asked to critically think about their own perspectives as well as form opinions on issues new to them. It also generates valuable conversations in the classroom where students' voices are heard.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, most teachers participating in the WritEL grant study were not able to finish all four cycles of writing with their students for the 2019-2020 school year. For that reason, this study explores the effects of an abbreviated implementation of C3WP with two cycles

compared to four. We believe that using only two cycles of instruction may be a common use of C3WP as teachers “try it out” or run out of time for the four recommended cycles. This study aims to examine whether two cycles of writing is as efficient as four and determine the importance of making time for the recommended four cycles of C3WP.

Context: Argumentative Writing and the National Writing Project’s College Career and Community Writers Program (C3WP) at Eastern Michigan University

Argument writing is a dominant genre at the secondary level, and increasingly incorporated at the elementary level. There is a heightened emphasis on students’ ability to “write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics of texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” (CCSS, 2020). There is also an increased emphasis on teaching argumentation across subject areas which has resulted in expanded research (e.g. Monte-Sano et al., 2015; Sampson et al., 2013). These findings point to the benefits of learning through analysis and questioning, as well as an increase in content specific language and discourse. C3WP is a sophisticated evolution of the teaching of argument writing, providing a rich, adaptable menu of resources, text sets, and lessons.

C3WP began as CRWP, the College-Ready Writers Program, with funding in 2012–2017 from an Investing in Innovation (i3) Validation grant from the U.S. Department of Education, undertaking a two-year, random-assignment evaluation with the assistance of the Education Division of SRI International (SRI), in 10 states with 44 rural high-need districts, involving approximately 25,000 students (Park et al., 2021). The findings were encouraging: CRWP had “a positive, statistically significant effect on the four attributes of student argument writing—content, structure, stance, and conventions” (Gallagher et al., 2017) and in “the quality of reasoning and use of evidence” (Gallagher et al., 2017). In 2016–17, NWP conducted a second study, a short-cycle, 6-month implementation with urban high-need students in 30 grade 7–8 classrooms, and again found positive impacts (Arshan et al., 2018).

At the same time in 2016, CRWP became C3WP (the College, Career, and Community Writers Program) to better reflect its wide applicability, and NWP was awarded a five-year i3 Scale Up grant to conduct a third randomized controlled trial. It engaged 17 Writing Project sites in 16 states, with 47 rural high needs districts, involving over 40,000 students. 6.2% of these students were English Learners (Park et al., 2021). The outcomes were again positive: “Adjusting for baseline performance, students in C3WP districts outscored students in business-as-usual comparison districts by about 0.21 on a 1- to 6-point scale on each of the 4 measured attributes” (Arshan et al., 2021, p. 2). This study is the third randomized trial SRI has conducted of C3WP, and each of these studies found “positive and statistically significant effects on student writing achievement” (Arshan et al., 2021, p. 2). Each of these studies were “designed to meet the Department of Education’s highest standards for research: What Works Clearinghouse standards without reservations and ESSA Tier 1 (Strong Evidence)” (Arshan et al., 2021, p. 2).

C3WP integrates regular use of a formative assessment called the “Using Sources Tool” (UST). The UST consists of eight questions to evaluate the presence and effectiveness of specific writing skills taught throughout the program and is designed to guide teachers toward effective, targeted assessment of student writing that prompts learners toward strategic next steps in argumentation practices (Appendix A). All provided resources help teachers teach students to write nuanced claims and skillfully integrate evidence to support those claims with commentary and reasoning (National Writing Project, 2019). The UST, along with the approach of multiple, low-stakes writing opportunities, have been embraced by secondary ELA teachers. In one particular instance, Smith (2019), drawing on her own classroom research, noted that following the implementation of C3WP resources and in her use of the UST, her students began to question the credibility of sources when presented with evidence. She also stated that the UST showed evidence that her students learned to go beyond using evidence to illustrate a point, but rather, they began to “authorize, extend and counter” in order to write more nuanced claims, which is a skill that helps

students utilize higher order thinking. Additionally, the students also showed an increase in using signal phrases and more effectively used commentary to connect their ideas to claims, which are all specific targets of certain cycles in C3WP. Furthermore, Smith (2019) noticed that the students found the sources to be engaging and relevant to their lives, evidenced by their desire to continue writing on the video game and social media topics. Students are able to develop more nuanced argumentative writing with the specific skills that C3WP targets with each cycle, and they are more likely to adapt this knowledge in other areas of learning as well.

Similar to Smith (2019), Kurtze (2019) reported positive outcomes of C3WP for students as well. Kurtze (2019) and her colleagues implemented four cycles and the UST to track selected student growth through the program and were able to see significant results from the full implementation of the program. Through the results they noted a clear increase in achievement based on the UST results between cycle one and cycle four, but the increase between cycle one and cycle two was not steady and sometimes not seen at all (Kurtze, 2019). The significant increases came at the ends of cycle three and four, more than likely because students have the opportunity to practice the previously taught skills as well as build new ones. Although implementing more cycles is time consuming, the results show the importance of committing to C3WP and completing at least four cycles per academic year. Kurtze (2019) praises the unique way that C3WP implements argument writing, explaining that this different approach allows students to critically evaluate sources and to critically think about each move in the argumentative writing process, which is exactly what teachers want for their students so they can apply these skills outside of the classroom.

While these findings are encouraging, less is known about the extent to which argument-focused instruction works for ELs who are developing their linguistic and cultural capacities along with academic work. Indeed, scholars in the field of second language (L2) writing have acknowledged this gap, urging research to expand to include ELs (e.g., Hirvela, 2017; Pessó et al., 2017). The research and teacher accounts

of using C3WP with first language (L1) writers is informative, but we do not have conclusive evidence about the extent to which ELs benefit from C3WP specifically. The work at EMU, under the auspices of the WritEL Grant and using NWP's C3WP, looks to address this gap.

At EMU as a part of the WritEL grant, C3WP is being implemented in classrooms with EL learners in southeastern Michigan. According to the design of C3WP, 45 hours of professional development (PD) and at least four cycles of argument writing are to be implemented in a classroom over the course of a year. The WritEL study also requires a pre and post written test to examine growth. After each cycle, the writing is assessed by teachers using the UST. The larger research project conducted under the WritEL grant will examine C3WP implementation by 20+ teachers over two school years, specifically assessing ELs. Again, due to COVID-19, teachers were not able to complete all of the required PD or the four recommended C3WP writing cycles within their contexts in the 2019-2020 school year. As a result, this much smaller study examines ELs' response to C3WP from cycles one and two and analyzes the growth of their English argumentative writing over only two cycles. The goal for this research was to explore the effects of an abbreviated implementation of C3WP on ELs and examine if any argumentative writing growth is shown with just two cycles of instruction.

Participants

Data for this study comes from three classrooms at three different schools in Southeast Michigan that each implemented two cycles of C3WP resources. Classroom A was a high school that had a population of around 1,400 students with a predominantly white student population of 73%. Classroom A consisted of 11 ELs in grades 10-12. Most students were foreign exchange students whose first languages included Mandarin, Spanish, Polish and German. The class was an ESL pull-out classroom for students that generally had a WIDA level of 4 or below, and this group's WIDA levels ranged from 4.5-1.5 with an average of 2.5. Classroom A functions both as a support class that gives students three days a week of homework

and language help in their other classes, as well as two days per week that uses a Communicative Learning Teaching approach (CLT) with activities that help students practice the English language (Prasad, 2013).

Classroom B was at a middle school with a diverse population of about 825 students, with 54% from Asian descent. The school has a range of supports for EL students with varying English classes depending on WIDA level. This classroom consisted of students ranging from grades 6-8 whose first languages included Arabic, Marathi, Korean, Urdu, Chinese and Russian. All students in this classroom had a WIDA level of 3. Typically, the class is an English language focused classroom for ELs with a WIDA of 3 or 4. It is a two-hour class with one hour focusing on reading and one hour focusing on writing.

Classroom C was at a school with 872 students and a population of 95% native Spanish speakers. The teacher worked with six seventh grade students with WIDA levels ranging from 3-4. This teacher pulled students out of their mainstream language arts classes to complete the work and only taught C3WP resources.

C3WP Implementation

For both Classroom A and Classroom B, it was the teachers' first time implementing C3WP resources. Classroom C's teacher taught C3WP the previous year

and was able to complete the whole program of four cycles as well as 40 hours of PD. During the school year studied in this paper, all three of the teachers had approximately 20 hours of PD training via the EMU WritEL program before implementing these cycles, and they were also trained with the UST to formatively assess student writing to evaluate growth after each cycle. Table 1 outlines the implementation of each cycle for each teacher, including which cycle was taught, what adaptations were made, and the combined number of teaching hours for the implementation of both cycles.

Each cycle is designed to focus on one skill, as indicated by the title of the cycle, and provides a text set that follows a topic of discussion for argumentation.

Collection and Rating of Writing Samples

Student writing samples from two cycle assessments were collected. In total, 58 student papers were collected and analyzed. Classroom A had one student who did not complete cycle two, and Classroom B had seven students who did not complete cycle two. All of Classroom C's students completed both cycles. On all occasions, the assessments came at the end of a cycle designed to teach a particular skill or subskill in the area of argument writing. The student writing ranged from 32 words to 456 words.

Table 1
Classroom A, B and C's Text Set Topics, Adaptations, and Hours of Instruction

Classroom	Cycle 1 & Topic	Cycle 2 & Topic	Adaptations	Hours of Instruction (Both Cycle 1 and 2)
A	Writing and Revising Claims	Connecting Evidence to Claims (Text Set: Social Media)	Taught a mini-lesson on paraphrasing before cycle 1	9 hours: 9 sixty minute class periods
B	Joining the Conversation (Text Set: Drones)	Practicing Writing Recursive Claims (Text Set: Eating Insects)	NewsELA articles taken to a lower lexile level based on student need Some students were provided extended time to finish the writing prompt	5 hours: 10 thirty minute periods
C	Joining the Conversation (Text Set: Drones)	Practicing Writing Recursive Claims (Text Set: Eating Insects)	Slight EL modifications based on EMU PD	About 12 hours: 8 fifty minute class periods

In classroom A, 21 papers were collected with a whole class average of 183.6 words per paper. In classroom B, 25 papers were collected and there was an average of 115.56 words per paper, and in classroom C, 12 papers were collected with an average of 98.5 words per paper. With all of the classrooms combined there was a mean of 136.74 words and a median of 127.5 words. The samples were then typed and coded with students' classroom (A, B, or C) and then the cycle number and student assigned number. For example, the code "A-101" was provided to indicate the following: Classroom A, cycle 1, student 01.

These typed papers were scored by two independent, unaffiliated National Writing Project evaluators with the Analytic Writing Continuum for Source-Based Argument (AWC-SBA). The AWC-SBA was adapted by NWP from the original Analytic Writing Continuum (Bang, 2013) for internal use in large-scale research projects. With this instrument, there are four scoring categories: Content, Structure, Stance, and Conventions. Each category consists of a 0-6 scale for scoring: 0 being an unscorable paper,

6 indicating a very advanced source-based argument paper. For each score criteria, frequency distributions and means were calculated using the scale. All fifty-eight papers were scored at least once and 50% (29) of the papers were scored twice with a reliability rate of 90%. If the two evaluators were not in agreement, an additional evaluator administered a third adjudication score.

Results

The results from the NWP evaluators were analyzed in different ways to see how effective this shortened implementation of C3WP could be; after all fifty-eight papers were scored using the AWC-SBA, the papers were placed in frequency distribution tables where the analytic score means, standard deviation and the range of each of the AWC-SBA scores were gathered (see Table 2).

As seen in Table 2, there is no significant difference between scores and all papers had similar scoring. The "Stance" category had the highest mean

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Content Score	58	1.0	5.0	2.629	.8354
Structure Score	58	1.0	5.0	2.629	.8913
Stance Score	58	1.0	5.0	2.698	.8783
Conventions Score	58	1.0	4.0	2.595	.6912
Valid N (listwise)	58				

Table 3
Sample Statistics based on the AWC-SBA

		Mean	N	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean
Content	cycle 1	2.60	25	.866	.173
	cycle 2	2.60	25	1.041	.208
Structure Score	cycle 1	2.52	25	.872	.174
	cycle 2	2.48	25	1.229	.246
Stance Score	cycle 1	2.68	25	.900	.180
	cycle 2	2.76	25	.970	.194
Conventions Score	cycle 1	2.48	25	.872	.174
	cycle 2	2.32	25	1.030	.206

with a 2.698 and “Conventions” had the lowest mean with 2.595, as well as the lowest maximum score of a 4. This data shows that there is no significant statistical difference between the 58 papers, so there is no shown change between the cycles.

The papers were also analyzed to compare cycles one and two with the mean and standard deviation between the scoring criteria analyzed. For the data set in Table 3, the eight papers that did not have a cycle two completed were left out of the data, which left 25 student papers that were analyzed for a total of 50 papers: 25 papers for cycle one, and 25 papers for cycle two.

Again, there is no significant statistical difference after cycle two, indicating that two cycles of writing are likely not enough for recognizable gains.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that two cycles of C3WP is not enough to see change in EL student writing. C3WP recommends implementing at least four cycles, and the findings of this study support that recommendation: teachers should commit to at least four cycles per year in order to see gains in student argument writing proficiency. Based on the lack of statistically significant change between the student writing samples, it is clear that these students needed additional writing instruction and practice in argumentative writing skills to have a larger impact on their overall argument writing. In order to see results from this program, teachers need to be able to implement at least four cycles of C3WP into their curriculum. In addition, the implementing teachers fell significantly short of the recommended 45 hours of PD and coaching for the year, which would include support for the formative assessment work for each cycle of writing. The combined benefit of implementing four cycles while supported by the correct number of PD and coaching hours is important to consider as well.

Teaching Implications

Our findings support C3WP’s program design for the number of writing cycles, formative assessments,

and professional development hours over the course of an academic year in order to produce student gains, but this can be a challenging commitment for districts and for teachers pulled in many directions. However, it is clear from these results and prior C3WP research that only committing to one or two cycles is not enough to have an impact with EL students. Four comparatively short C3WP cycles of writing can equal the time teachers traditionally spend on a single, large argument writing unit, with superior results. There are ways to effectively integrate the cycles. Beginning early in the year can be crucial for making time to complete all four cycles. C3WP’s focus on discussion and collaboration is wonderful for building classroom community, and it creates a routine of critical thinking from the start. C3WP also addresses many standards for nonfiction/informational reading and writing, creating the possibility of combining previously separate units of study.

Limitations of the Study

This study evaluated only two writing pieces separated by a brief interval, which makes it more difficult to assess the impact of the program. It is also limited by the small data pool of students. There were only 33 students in total and 8 of those students provided only one writing assessment for the first cycle. The rest of the 25 students provided writing assessments for both cycle one and two.

Conclusion

It is important to set high expectations for our students. Some teachers may look at this rigorous program and think that it may be too difficult to implement with their ELs. However, with adequate professional development support, the EL adaptations that the program provides, and the individualized adaptations that teachers can create for their own classrooms, this program is not only possible to implement, but has the potential to increase students’ critical thinking and academic writing skills. It sets high expectations for our EL students and allows them to be successful by using

the tools provided to understand argumentative writing. Quite often we see our EL students struggle with writing, specifically academic writing, since it differs based on background and culture. C3WP helps scaffold students into understanding the U.S. academic standard of argumentative writing, along with helping students critically analyze sources and create nuanced claims. This will not only help our students in future classrooms, but on standardized testing and other aspects of learning as well. As Ladson-Billings (2009) states, "When students are treated as competent, they are likely to demonstrate competence." It is imperative that we share high expectations with our EL students and not shy away from the rigor expected of all students. We need our EL students to work on their critical thinking skills to better prepare them for future schooling and expectations. C3WP's rigor will help our ELs with argumentative writing and critical thinking skills, but only if teachers commit to the full program in order to see changes and growth.

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Note on Funding

The U.S. Department of Education has awarded Eastern Michigan University a grant to increase the number of ESL-credentialed teachers in Michigan and study effective professional development for teachers of English learners. The WritEL grant recruits teachers and paraprofessionals who currently work with English learners who wish to pursue an undergraduate minor, endorsement, or Master of Arts in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Teachers are eligible for a scholarship of approximately 40% of their academic program in these areas. They are involved in a research study of professional development that will examine the effectiveness of strategies for improving opinion writing with English learners, as well as pursuing their program of study. The initiative intends to enroll 300 teachers over the program period. The partnering agency is the Washtenaw Intermediate School District, which recruits teachers from Washtenaw and Livingston counties and other counties as needed. All teachers in the region have been invited to apply. The grant is renewable for up to five years, with total funding of over 2.6 million dollars.

WritEL is a collaboration between the Department of World Languages and the Eastern Michigan Writing Project. Dr. Zuzana Tomas is the Principal Investigator and Dr. William Tucker the Assistant Principal Investigator. Sarah Lorenz, Director of Professional Development at EMWP, is the Project Director. Kim Pavlock, EMWP Family Literacy Programming Director, oversees family writing series at ten partnering schools each year. A community outreach coordinator and two instructional coaches was hired to assist with program implementation. EMU preservice teachers have been involved with service learning/tutoring in after-school and community programs in Ypsilanti, funded

by the grant. EMU's Dr. Shawn Quilter conducts the program evaluation, which is a quasi-experimental design. The National Writing Project's national office at the University of California, Berkeley, has been commissioned to conduct the assessment of student writing.

K-12 teachers and paraprofessionals of all subjects who are/will be working with two or more English learners who apply are involved for 2-3 years, sometimes longer depending on their chosen pace of program completion. Cohorts began in January 2017, August 2017, August 2018, August 2019, and August 2020 (final year will be a condensed program). For more information, contact Sarah Lorenz, Project Director, at slorenz@emich.edu.

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Sarah Lorenz is an educational researcher, former teacher, principal, and instructional coach. She is the Project Director for the WritEL grant at Eastern Michigan University and a Co-Director of the Eastern Michigan Writing Project in Ypsilanti, Michigan.