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ESL MiniConference

Blueprints Aloud Students Speaking Their Essays

I am teaching an advanced ESL course in written communication this semester, and for the third time I am using **Blueprints 2**, by Folse et al (Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

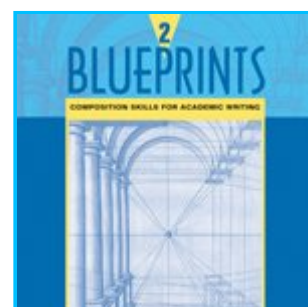
I like this book and I hope that I am improving my understanding of how to use it each time. The Blueprints textbook presents traditional essay formats--classification, process, comparison, cause-effect, etc...--as well as including a considerable number of grammatical points, each in the context of an essay type which lends itself to their use.

The first unit reviews paragraph form and then transitions to essay form, so that it is natural for the teacher to draw connections between topic sentence and thesis statement, supporting sentences and body paragraphs, and concluding sentence and concluding paragraph. This unit also includes a nice section on different ways to construct a "hook" to draw the reader's attention.

My students had already completed their first essay project before we started preparing the first major essay activity that concludes Folse's unit one. In our first project we had done first drafts, second drafts, collected the second drafts into a pdf classbook, and each student had read his or her paper aloud in front of the class. I did up a one-sheet agenda the day of their performances, with the titles of their essays and their names, and each student got a copy of this.

The students also wrote an in-class essay for an assessment, which was scored using a modified version of the checklist found at the end of Blueprints unit 1, with points awarded based on the presence of a "hook," a thesis statement, the relationship between each body paragraph and that thesis statement, etc...

The assessment informed me that students were not yet incorporating hooks, thesis statements, etc..., in their essays, so I was especially interested in having them go through Folse's preliminary exercises enroute to writing their first Blueprint essay, on a person they admired, because these



important rhetorical aspects are addressed directly, step by step.

Everyone came up with an idea of who they were going to write about. That was the assignment one day, just to think about who they admired. The next day in class, each student (except a few who were still thinking it over) told me the person they wanted to describe. Their next assignment was to prepare a paragraph explaining why they had chosen that person, and these paragraphs went through a rewrite. Meanwhile, we moved into the outlining portion of the Blueprint assignment, in which the textbook has an outline with blank spaces for the student to fill with information and draft thesis statement and topic sentences.

These outlines were turned in on paper for me to read and respond to, and students got their outlines and second drafts of their paragraphs back just before the weekend, so their homework was to write the first drafts of their essays by Monday.

Most of the essays came in by Monday, and several more came in on Tuesday, so I had a pretty complete set to go over and give them feedback on for Wednesday.

Several students had asked earlier in the week whether they would be reading these essays aloud, and it seemed that some wanted to, but others didn't, so I suggested that those who wanted to read theirs to the class would certainly get that opportunity.

When they got their papers on Wednesday, this class--mostly students from China, along with one from each of Mexico, Korea, and Russia--responded in an interesting way to my question as to when they would like to turn in their second drafts. They wanted to write them overnight, for the next day, Thursday. O.K., I said, and that was their homework. I told them that if anyone wanted to read theirs the next day in class, they could do so.

Thursday I took their rewrites with me and scanned them into a pdf "classbook" before adding my scribbles and feedback. I put this onto the Web and sent the link to my students via e-mail.

Friday morning, I thought perhaps three or four students would want to read their papers aloud to the class, but they all indicated they wanted to do this, so it became the activity that day. Luckily, on Fridays the class that normally is waiting for our room on Mondays and Wednesdays does not meet, so we were able to stay an extra 10 minutes, allowing every one of our students to speak (13 out of 14--one was not present and had not completed the second draft).

Listening to them from a seat in the very back of the classroom, I detected improved pronunciation and increased fluency, which helped to make their content and the coherence and unity (key Folse concepts) ring through clearly.

It is a nice feeling when the students push the agenda forward like this. Of course, the fact they were writing about topics of such heartfelt importance made a difference, too. As my friend and mentor Dave Hopkins says, "They made a personal investment in their learning."

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