Problem:

Tenth grade students demonstrate inadequate writing skills and a lack of interest in acquiring written communication skills.

Hypothesis:

After teaching the “Five Features of Effective Writing” that North Carolina Department of Instruction has identified as essential to any writing program, high school students will demonstrate improved writing skills. (Originally, I had wanted to measure the effects in implementing a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program and teaching the “Five Features”; however, I have revised my study to include just the measurement of the “Five Features of Effective Writing” on improving a student’s writing skills.)

Variables:

In conducting this research, there are a number of variables to consider through quantitative and qualitative research. The independent or treatment variables are identified as the “Five Features of Effective Writing” and have also been recognized by the researcher and are being measured in this study: focus, organization, support and elaboration, style, and conventions. (If IEP dictates that a student may use technology during writing – a student will then be encouraged to develop computer skills as a means of compensating for learning difference). Students with varying writing skills and learning differences will be variables noted prior to the research. A future study will be to determine the moderator variables and if teaching the five features affects particular categories or classifications of students, such as the student’s class size, English teacher, ethnicity, gender, and/or GPA. These issues can be clarified through assessing the data and then creating activities and assessments targeting manipulated variables – class size, English teacher, ethnicity, gender, and/or GPA.)

The criterion variables that test the outcomes of the study will be conducted in three phases: standardized testing, vertical teaming, and classroom assessment. Each phase will measure writing skills but differently.

The standardized testing phase will collect data on an individual student’s growth on the PSAT and on the writing assessment tests. Since all tenth grade students will take the PSAT and then again in eleventh grade, these PSAT scores will reflect a student’s writing skills and will assist teachers/schools in modifying writing instruction. Another test that will provide valuable feedback is the North Carolina Writing Assessment Tests that are administered in 4th, 7th, and 10th
grades. As of this year, students will take writing tests that evaluate written responses using the same grading rubric, since the revised writing rubric incorporates the “Five Effective Features of Writing.” Schools will eventually be able to chart an individual’s growth through the final writing assessment test that is administered in 10th grade. Test scores will then be sent to each county for dispersal to individual schools. Upon the return of the scores, each county will then assess an individual’s improvement in the five features of writing. However, current 10th grade students have not taken the modified writing assessment tests in fourth or seventh grades, so these students will not have a base line score. These students’ scores will be used to compare growth among classes. Eventually, students reaching the 10th grade will have taken all three tests and an individual’s writing skills will be evaluated.

The second phase of assessment is vertical teaming. I plan on completing a qualitative approach through vertical teaming - a group of teachers that interacts with the same grade level of students that meet to plan interdisciplinary activities and to assess student work. Each team – 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th - will consist of academic and elective teachers that relate with specific grade levels. Elective teachers may be involved in more than one team. The teaming approach to assessment will require the support from the school’s administrative team to work effectively. Notes from these team meetings will be kept and given to the appropriate administrator.

A team will then meet to discuss vertical curriculum alignment and assessment strategies. Cross-curricular planning will also facilitate teachers and students recognizing the importance of writing as a tool to master individual course goals and objectives. The “Manteo High School’s Products List” – a list of writing samples that NCDPI and Manteo High School expects high school students to produce - will be distributed and discussed with teachers and, eventually, students. Using this list, team members will discuss and select writing products to complete in their respective class. To ensure that all types of writing from the list are being taught, team members will discuss and decide on the categories of writing that a student will produce in a class. A teacher will be responsible for at least these categories and will produce copies of these writing samples as evidence for his/her Professional Growth Plan. By providing instruction of the five writing features in a team meeting, the team will serve to control the writing information and provide teachers with the same materials to present to his/her classes. Therefore, the variable of the teacher giving instruction is reduced.

Periodically, all teams – 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th - will meet to also discuss horizontal curriculum alignment. Again, notes from these meetings will be kept and given to the appropriate administrator.
To implement the teaching of “Five Effective Features of Writing,” the administration will also need to implement writing as a school goal and to offer training to teachers. To measure this goal, administration could have each teacher produce two different writing samples with rubrics as part of his/her individual Professional Development Plan for Teachers. Writing workshops will also need to be held to help teachers view writing-across-the-curriculum as a tool and not as an add-on, or as something else that they have to do. The workshops will also provide teachers with writing rubrics that incorporate the “Five Effective Features of Writing.”

The third phase of measuring student improvement is through classroom assessment using rubrics that emphasize the five writing features. Even though an individual teacher could alter the point value on a rubric, the language on the rubric will need to remain the same to consistently reinforce a writing vocabulary in each classroom to every student. These rubrics will serve as another variable in controlling the instruction given to students. Various rubrics will be given to teachers to help them assess a student’s growth in the writing process. These rubrics will also help a student understand and monitor his/her own learning. After having students complete a career interest inventory in the computer lab and deciding possible career choices, the teacher and student will discuss this data and create an effective and individualized writing program for the student targeting this career. Using the Manteo High School Products List, teachers and students will then be able to discuss writing assignments that appeal to a student’s career or interest as well as fulfill state and local requirements. Thus, the student will have ownership and see relevancy in the writing activities.

Additional study:

After the three different phases to measure improvement in students’ writing skills, future research may be needed to discern the impact of teaching the features on different categories or classifications of students, such learning style, class size, English teacher, ethnicity, gender, GPA, and/or socio-economic background.