ED439532 1999-12-00 Teaching Expressive Writing to Students with Learning Disabilities. ERIC/OSEP Digest E590.

ERIC Development Team

www.eric.ed.gov

Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

ERIC Identifier: ED439532
Publication Date: 1999-12-00
Author: Gersten, Russell - Baker, Scott - Edwards, Lana
Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education Reston VA.

Teaching Expressive Writing to Students with

Learning Disabilities. ERIC/OSEP Digest E590.

A recent meta-analysis (Gersten & Baker, 1999) highlights research-based instructional approaches for teaching written expression to students with learning disabilities, including ways to teach students how to analyze material learned in the classroom and how to write personal narratives, persuasive essays, and other genres. All of the instructional interventions studied improved the quality of students' written products, and there was evidence of positive impact on students' self-efficacy, i.e., their senses of being able to write.

Expressive writing was defined as writing for the purpose of displaying knowledge or supporting self- expression (Graham & Harris, 1989a). This analysis asked, "Given a group of studies designed explicitly for the purpose of improving the writing of students with learning disabilities, which interventions and components were found to be most effective, and what is the strength of their effects?" This definition and research question led the analysis to include studies of a various interventions.

Virtually all of the interventions studied were multifaceted. Three components stood out as ones that reliably and consistently led to improved outcomes in teaching expressive writing to students with learning disabilities:

* Adhering to a basic framework of planning, writing, and revision;

* Explicitly teaching critical steps in the writing process and

* Providing feedback guided by the information explicitly taught.

ADHERING TO A BASIC FRAMEWORK OF PLANNING, WRITING, AND REVISION

Teaching students to write requires showing them how to develop and organize what they want to say and guiding them in the process of getting it down on paper. Most of the interventions used a basic framework based on planning, writing, and revising. These steps are part of a recursive, rather than linear, process, i.e., each step may be revisited during the writing process, and the steps do not always proceed in the same order. In these studies, each step was taught explicitly, with several examples and often supported by a "think sheet," a prompt card, or a mnemonic.

Planning. Well-developed plans for writing result in better first drafts. Teachers or peers who write well can verbalize the process they go through to help students develop their own "plans of action." One type of plan of action, called a "Planning Think Sheet," uses

a series of sequential, structured prompts. It specifies a topic and asks the questions, "Who (am I writing for)?," "Why am I writing?," "What do I know?," "How can I group my ideas?" and "How will I organize my ideas?" (Englert, Raphael & Anderson, 1992). Another technique is to use semantic mapping to help students plan their writing.

Creating a first draft. Using a plan of action helps students create first drafts. The plan serves as a concrete map for engaging in the writing process and provides students with suggestions for what to do when they feel "stuck." The plan of action provides a permanent reminder of the content and structure of the writing task.

A well-developed plan of action also gives the student and teacher a common language to use in discussing the writing. The dialogue between teacher and student represents a major advance in writing instruction over traditional methods that required students to work in relative isolation.

Revising and editing. Revising and editing skills are critical to the writing process. Developing methods to help students refine and edit their work has been difficult, but a few researchers have begun to develop specific strategies that appear promising. For example, Wong, Butler, Ficzere, and Kuperis (1996), in teaching students to write opinion essays, used peer editing as an instructional strategy for the students. Pairs of students alternated their roles as student-writer and student-critic. The student-critic identified ambiguities in the essay and asked the writer for clarification. With help from the teacher, the students made revisions. The teacher also provided the student-writer with feedback on clarity and on the cogency of the supportive arguments. Once the clarity and cogency of the essay met the teacher's standard, the pair moved on to correct capitalization, spelling, and punctuation. Through this process, the student-writer had to explain his or her communicative intent to the peer and revise the essay to faithfully reflect it. These clarifying interactive dialogues led the student-critic and student-writer to understand each other's perspective. In this way the trainees developed a sense of audience for their writing.

EXPLICITLY TEACHING CRITICAL STEPS IN THE WRITING PROCESS

Explicitly teaching text structures provides a guide for the writing task, whether it is a persuasive essay, a personal narrative, or an essay comparing and contrasting two phenomena. Different types of writing are based on different structures. For example, a persuasive essay contains a thesis and supporting arguments, while narrative writing may contain character development and a story climax. Instruction in text structures typically includes numerous explicit models and prompts. Although different writers may proceed with the structures in a different order, good writing involves what Englert & Mariage (1991) called "overlapping and recursive processes." These processes do not proceed in a particular order, and one process may inform another in such a way that

the author returns to previous steps to update or revise on a regular basis. Again, a plan of action is helpful. The plan makes text structures more visible to students and helps to demystify the writing process.

PROVIDING FEEDBACK GUIDED BY THE INFORMATION EXPLICITLY TAUGHT

A third component common to these successful interventions was frequent feedback to students on the overall quality of writing, missing elements, and strengths. When feedback is combined with instruction in the writing process, the dialogue between student and teacher is strengthened. Giving and receiving feedback also helps students to develop "reader sensitivity" and their own writing style.

Wong et al. (1997) hypothesized that interactive dialogues, which led students through multiple cycles of reflection, realization, and redress of problems, helped students "see" their thoughts and write from another's perspective. Across the studies of successful writing instruction, teachers and students had an organizational framework and language to use in providing feedback on such aspects of writing as organization, originality, and interpretation. Wong and her colleagues modeled procedures, for students and teachers, providing feedback so that they would attend to the surface features of writing (e.g., spelling and punctuation) as well as to the presentation of ideas.

SPECIFIC METHODS

Numerous methods for teaching written expression incorporate these three common principles. Two examples are Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) (Graham & Harris, 1989b) and Cognitive Strategy Instruction in Writing (Englert et al., 1995; Englert & Mariage, 1991).

The SRSD technique involves self-directed prompts that require the students to (a) consider their audience and reasons for writing, (b) develop a plan for what they intend to say using frames to generate or organize writing notes; (c) evaluate possible content by considering its impact on the reader; and (d) continue the process of content generation and planning during the act of writing.

Cognitive Strategy Instruction in Writing includes brainstorming strategies for preparing to write, organizing strategies to relate and categorize the ideas, comprehension strategies as students read and gather information for their writing, and monitoring strategies as they clarify their thoughts and the relationships among their items of information. All of these strategies are applied prior to the actual writing.

EMERGING ISSUES IN WRITING INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS

WITH LEARNING DISABILITIESGersten and Baker (1999) identify some issues in which research is expected to blossom in coming years. The first group of issues concerns the mechanics versus the content of writing. Early evidence suggested that writing instruction that focused more on content would better capitalize on the strengths of students with learning disabilities. When asked to write about complex ideas, students with learning disabilities often showed conceptual performance beyond that which would be expected on the basis of their performance on lower-level skills such as capitalization, punctuation and spelling (Goldman, Hasselbring, & The Cognition Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1977).

More recent research indicates that dictating to a scribe can eliminate mechanical difficulties and result in a longer, higher-quality composition (e.g., De La Paz & Graham, 1997). While students must eventually learn to do their own writing, these findings suggest a possible bridge to higher performance.

Gersten and Baker point out that daily writing instruction should include time devoted to both the mechanics and the process of writing. Problems with the mechanics of writing must be addressed in expressive writing instruction; there is a reciprocal relationship between mastery of transcription skills and growth in the quality of writing. When students have mastered the mechanics, their cognitive resources can be devoted to planning, composing, and revising their work.

According to Gersten and Baker, another issue that is likely to be the focus of expressive writing research is the transfer of writing skills and the spontaneous use of the strategies involved in writing to other subject matter areas to raise the student's overall level of academic achievement. In the meta-analysis reported here, few investigated the transfer of writing skills. Those that did found mixed results. Wong called for instruction to promote transfer of skill. When students are provided such opportunities, she says, transfer will be greatly enhanced.

Based on Teaching Expressive Writing To Students With Learning Disabilities: A Meta-Analysis by Russell Gersten and Scott Baker, 1999.

REFERENCES

DeLaPaz, S. & Graham, S. (1997). Strategy instruction in planning: Effects on the writing performance and behavior of students with learning difficulties. Exceptional Children, 63(2), 167-181.
Englert, C.S., Garmon, A. Mariage, T. Rozendal, M. Tarrant, K. & Urba, J. (1995). The early literacy project: Connecting across the literacy curriculum. Learning Disability Quarterly, 18,253-275.

Englert, C. S., & Mariage, T. V. (1991). Shared understandings: Structuring the writing experience through dialogue. Journal of Learning Disabilities, 24(6), 330-342.

Englert, C. S., Raphael, T. E., & Anderson, L. M. (1992). Socially mediated instruction: Improving students' knowledge and talk about writing. Elementary School Journal, 92, 411-449.

Gersten, R. & Baker, S. (1999). Teaching expressive writing to students with learning disabilities: a meta-analysis. Eugene, OR: University of Oregon.

Goldman, S. R., Hasselbring, T. S., and The Cognition Technology Group at Vanderbilt (1977). Achieving meaningful mathematics literacy for students with learning disabilities. Journal of Learning Disabilities, 30(2), 198-208.

Graham, S. and Harris, K. R. (1989a). Components analysis of cognitive strategy instruction: Effects on learning disabled students' compositions and self- efficacy. Journal of Educational Psychology, 81, 353-361.

Graham, S. and Harris, K. R. (1989b). Improving learning disabled students' skills at composing essays: Self-instructional strategy training. Exceptional Children, 56 (201-214).

Wong, B. Y. L., Butler, D. L., Ficzere, S. A., & Kuperis, S. (1997). Teaching adolescents with learning disabilities and low achievers to plan, write and revise compare-contrast essays. Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 9(2), 78-90.

Wong, B. Y. L., Butler, D. L. Ficzere, S. A., & Kuperis, S. (1996). Teaching low achievers and students with learning disabilities to plan, write, and revise opinion essays. Journal of Learning Disabilities, 20, 197-212.

 This digest was prepared with funding from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), U.S. Department of Education, under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0026. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OSEP or the Department of Education.

Title: Teaching Expressive Writing to Students with Learning Disabilities. ERIC/OSEP Digest E590.
Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);
Target Audience: Practitioners, Teachers
Available From: ERIC/OSEP Special Project, ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Dr., Reston, VA 20191-1589. Tel: 800-328-0272 (Toll Free); e-mail: ericec@ced.sped.org. Web site: http://www.ericec.org.
Descriptors: Cognitive Development, Elementary Secondary Education, Expressive

Language, Instructional Effectiveness, Intervention, Learning Disabilities, Learning Strategies, Metacognition, Teaching Methods, Writing Instruction
Identifiers: ERIC Digests
###

—

[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page]