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Strategy-focused writing instruction: Just observing and reflecting on a model benefits 6th grade students

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ABSTRACT

Three groups of typically-developing 6th grade students (total N = 62) each completed strategy-focused writing training. Using a combined lagged-group and cross-panel design we assessed the effectiveness of a sequence of four different instructional components: observation and group reflection on a mastery model, direct (declarative) instruction, peer feedback and solo practice. Cumulative effects on written product and writing process were assessed at baseline and after each component. Findings supported the effectiveness of strategy-focused intervention: All three groups showed gains, relative to controls, in the quality of their written products assessed by both holistic and text-analytic measures, and a more structured and goal-focused planning processes. These effects were associated almost exclusively with the modelling and reflection component. Improved performance was sustained through other instructional components but there was no strong evidence that they provided additional benefit. This finding was replicated in all three groups, and across two different text-types.

1. Introduction

Developing the ability to communicate clearly in writing is both an important educational focus in its own right, and necessary for demonstrating competence across the curriculum. From a psychological perspective, writing competence involves implementing, coordinating and monitoring processes for planning content, translating this content into sentences, and for reviewing what has been written (Hayes & Flower, 1980). While doing this, writers need to maintain, and have rapid access to, representations of what they want to communicate, of the structure of the emerging text, and of the characteristics of their audience (Kellogg, 2008). Effective writing requires that the student brings to the task knowledge and skills that are writing-specific. Communicating with an absent audience requires particular linguistic skills for maintaining coherence across the text and for guiding readers' focus and understanding. Writing also requires procedural skills for managing the demands of various writing sub-processes without overloading limited cognitive resources.

Mastery of word-level skills (spelling and handwriting) does not appear to be sufficient to ensure writing competence. Students must also develop text-specific linguistic and rhetorical knowledge, and processes that allow this knowledge to be brought to bear on specific writing tasks. Arguably, to be successful writers, students require appropriate strategies. "Strategies" in this context are understood as procedures that students deliberately and effortfully employ with a view to meeting specific goals (Alexander, Graham, & Harris, 1998). Strategy-focused writing instruction therefore teaches students a combination of explicit knowledge about the characteristics of good writing, and strategies for goal-setting and for organizing the writing process that allow this knowledge to be applied to the emerging text. The aim is that students emerge from instruction with the ability and motivation to regulate their own writing processes in a way that ensures that they set and work towards rhetorical goals, rather than just expressing whatever content comes to mind.

Strategy-focused writing instruction has been a major focus of recent research effort. Meta-analytic reviews suggest that it outperforms other approaches in both struggling and typically-developing students, and at both primary and secondary levels (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhara, & Harris, 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007; Rogers & Graham, 2008). Strategy-focused instruction can take a variety of forms. The most widely researched of these is an intervention called Self-Regulation Strategy Development (SRSD; Harris

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& Graham, 1996). This has proved successful in a North American school context (e.g., De La Paz & Graham, 2002) and has been adapted, and again has proved successful, for typically-developing students in schools in Germany (Brunstein & Glaser, 2011; Glaser & Brunstein, 2007), Portugal (Limpo & Alves, 2013), and Spain (Fidalgo, Torrance, & Garcia, 2008; Fidalgo, Torrance, & Robledo, 2011; Torrance, Fidalgo, & Garcia, 2007).

The theoretical basis for strategy-focused writing instruction lies in an understanding of writing as a thinking-and-reasoning (problem-solving) process (Bereiter, Burtis, & Scardamalia, 1988; Hayes, 1996; Hayes & Flower, 1980) and theories of learning that emphasize the importance of self-regulation (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000). Problem-solving accounts of writing see text composition, when performed successfully, as being goal-driven: Writers start by setting initial goals for what they want to communicate, and identify rhetorical constraints associated with intended audience and genre. These form the basis for mental or written plans for the content of the text to be produced. Writing, in the sense of producing linked sentences on the page, is then the act of translating these plans into full prose. Text production is possible without following this strict goal–plan–translate sequence, and this may prove successful for expert writers performing familiar tasks. Arguably, though, for developing writers the probability of success is maximized if composition involves deliberate, explicit, and appropriately sequenced decisions about what to say and how to say it. For this to happen students need to know both how to set goals for a particular composition and to have the knowledge to fulfil these.

Crucially, however, students must also choose to apply this knowledge to their writing processes, independently of teacher prompting. Schunk and Zimmerman (1997) presented a social cognitive model of how students develop sequential skills, such as those associated with specific procedures for planning text. Students initially observe the target skill being modelled by others, then deliberately and strategically emulate the behaviours that they have observed. This intermediate stage requires initial scaffolding, which is gradually decreased until students regulate their behaviour without needing regular external or internal monitoring. Social learning is central to this account. This occurs when students first see skills being modelled, and then process-focused comment and encouragement from their peers and teachers.

Strategy-focused writing instruction therefore aims to teach effective goal setting and planning skills using methods based in this social–cognitive model. It typically involves a combination of some or all of following instructional components: direct (declarative) teaching of writing strategies supported by mnemonics and graphic organizers, students observing mastery modelling of these strategies, practice of these strategies in pair or group writing tasks, and solo practice. As we have noted, taken together these components prove particularly effective in developing the writing skills of typically-developing students taught within full-range classes. However, little is known about the relative value of the different instructional components. Understanding this is important for both theoretical and applied reasons. From a theoretical perspective, understanding the effects of individual components gives insight into the psychological mechanisms by which the positive effects of strategy-focused instruction are achieved. For classroom practice, knowing the relative merits of different components allows teachers to incorporate strategy-focused instruction within existing timetables and curricula.

Graham, Harris and co-workers (Danoff, Harris, & Graham, 1993; Graham & Harris, 1989; Sawyer, Graham, & Harris, 1992) explored the relative effects of various decompositions of SRSD instruction. Instruction was individualized rather than whole-class, and with struggling writers. Graham and Harris (1989) contrasted strategy instruction with and without components explicitly aimed at developing self-regulation (goal setting, self-monitoring), finding similar benefits in both conditions. Sawyer et al. (1992) reproduced these conditions and added a third "direct instruction" condition that stripped away the social learning components—teacher modelling and collaborative practice—that have been specifically associated with developing self-regulation. Again, students in all three conditions showed benefit relative to practice-only controls, with no evidence of difference among conditions. Danoff et al. (1993) made similar comparisons by exposing students to a sequence of components starting with direct instruction, then teacher modelling of strategies followed by strategy memorization, (supported by mnemonics), and then collaborative and individual practice. Multiple single-case studies of 4th and 5th grade writers with writing-task probes after each component, suggested limited gains from declarative instruction—in contrast to Sawyer, Graham, and Harris—but gains from both modelling-plus-memorization and, particularly, after collaborative and solo practice. This is consistent with the findings of Zimmerman and Kitsantas (2002) who, in the context of a writing-related but much more constrained task, also demonstrated the benefits of observing models following direct strategy instruction.

The research that we report here also examined the role of modelling and collaborative practice in strategy-focused instruction. However, our aim was rather different. These previous studies aimed to manipulate the self-regulatory content of instruction by adding or removing these social learning components. As Sawyer et al. (1992) observe, however, self-regulation can be taught in many ways: Any learning of strategy, whether by observation of a model or by direct instruction can, in principle, result in an increased tendency for students to self-instruct and self-monitor. For present purposes we do not want to assume direct association between social learning and learning to self-regulate.

The main aims of the present study were as follows: (1) to determine whether observing and then group reflection on modelling that includes self-instruction and self-monitoring, in the absence of declarative instruction, results in improvement in student performance, and (2) to determine the extent to which direct instruction that explicitly formalizes and labels planning and drafting strategies provides additional benefits to student performance over and above those afforded by observation and group reflection (if any). We see the central difference between the modelling-and-shared-reflection and declarative components as whether or not strategies were made explicit, through labels and mnemonics, or inferred from observation and then discussion of a model which used these strategies but did not explicitly label them. For students to learn and apply effective writing strategies, both observation and direct instruction might be necessary: Modelling might be necessary to illustrate strategies taught through direct instruction and/or direct instruction might be necessary to provide a framework for understanding and retaining what has been observed. Alternatively declarative instruction may be essential, and modelling less important (as found by Sawyer et al., 1992, but contrary to Danoff et al., 1993). A third possibility, and the hypothesis that we test in the present study, is that, in certain populations at least, modelling and group discussion that does not explicitly label or directly teach strategies is alone capable of delivering substantial gains in students' writing performance. Thus, in contrast to the studies discussed above which all took direct teaching of strategies as a starting point, we tested the hypothesis that writing performance may improve just through observation and group discussion of effective writing processes in which specific strategies are not made explicit.

There is some reason to believe that this might be the case. Rijlaarsdam and co-workers have conducted a number of studies exploring the effects of observing peers performing composition tasks (reviewed in Rijlaarsdam et al., 2008). Observing peers has shown