



The long-term effects of strategy-focussed writing instruction for grade six students[☆]

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Available online 11 January 2008

Abstract

We compared 56 eighth-grade students who 28 months previously had received instruction in strategies for planning and revising their writing, with 21 students of similar academic ability from the same school who had not experienced the intervention. Both groups wrote an expository essay whilst logging their writing activities and completed writing metaknowledge and self-efficacy questionnaires. Students who had received the intervention showed a greater tendency to pre-plan (but not to revise) their texts, produced better quality and more reader-focused writing, and were more likely to show an awareness of the importance of text structure. These findings suggest persistent benefits for strategy-focused writing instruction.

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Keywords: Self-regulation; Cognitive strategies; Text production; Writing development

1. Introduction

Traditionally instruction for young writers has focused on features of the finished product. Writing tasks are introduced and writing performance is assessed with reference to

[☆] This research was made possible by funds from DIGICYT MEC [General Research Board of the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science, SEJ2007-66898/EDUC] for 2008-2010, awarded to the third author. The authors thank the following school for their assistance: Colegio Nuestra Madre del Buen Consejo, Padres Agustinos de León. We are also grateful to Carmen Díez for help with coding.

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depth and breadth of content, conformity to genre conventions, and accuracy of spelling and grammar. However, there is increasing recognition that in addition to knowing about desirable features of completed texts, students also need to know how to manage the processes by which these texts are produced (e.g., DFES, 2001). More specifically, it appears that developing writers benefit from training in the kinds of planning and revising skills that are often observed in mature writers. These skills are needed so that rather than relying on unregulated transfer of content from mind to paper, students shape their text to accommodate reader needs and achieve rhetorical goals. Scardamalia and Bereiter (1991) characterize this development as movement from “knowledge telling” to “knowledge transforming”, and observe that the latter requires both greater sophistication in the cognitive strategies employed and substantially more writer effort.

Findings from a number of studies suggest that teaching strategies for managing text production is an effective way of improving the writing of students with learning disabilities or poor writing skills (De la Paz, 1999; García & Arias-Gundin, 2004; García & Caso, 2004; García-Sánchez & Fidalgo-Redondo, 2006; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005; Graham, Harris, & Troia, 2000; Graham, MacArthur, Schwartz, & Pagevoth, 1992; Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006). A smaller number of studies have found that this kind of intervention is also effective in typically-able students (Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam, van den Bergh, & van Hout-Wolters, 2004; De La Paz & Graham, 2002). Graham (2006) recently conducted a meta-analysis of 20 group-comparison studies, with both learning disabled and typically-developing students, and concluded that strategy instruction showed large positive effects on writing quality. Seven of these studies also explored maintenance over time and evidence from these suggested that effects on text quality remain 4–10 weeks after the intervention. In a broader meta-analytic comparison of studies evaluating a range of both traditional and innovative forms of writing instruction Graham and Perin (2007) found that strategy-focused instruction tended to provide the greatest text quality gains. As might be expected the benefits of strategy instruction are contingent on the use of appropriate teaching methods. Successful interventions typically involve students observing and then emulating a teacher modelling competent writing processes (Braaksma, van den Bergh, Rijlaarsdam, & Couzijn, 2001; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2002). Peer support also appears to be important (Harris et al., 2006). Without these students may acquire declarative metaknowledge about mature writing strategies but this is unlikely to transfer to practice.

There is therefore good evidence that strategy-focused instruction substantially benefits the quality of young writers' text. What is not known is whether these benefits persist beyond, for example, the academic year in which the intervention occurred. It is possible that over time students lose the procedural or motivational gains that were present shortly after training. It is also possible that training simply brings forward the development of skills that the students would in time have acquired anyway if they had remained within a traditional, product-focused curriculum. To our knowledge, long-term effects have not been explored in previous research. In the absence of evidence of enduring effects it is difficult to make firm recommendations about the value of strategy-focused instruction.

This paper aims to fill this gap by presenting findings from a long-term follow-up study of the effects of a strategy-focused intervention for normally-developing sixth-grade students. We called this intervention Cognitive Self-Regulation Instruction (CSRI). CSRI was designed as a prototypical example of a strategy-focused intervention, and as such

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