



## Empirical study

# Professional development of teachers in the implementation of a strategy-focused writing intervention program for elementary students <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

In this study we examined the effectiveness of *Tekster* [Texter], a comprehensive program for writing for the upper elementary grades, combining strategy instruction, text structure instruction, and the teaching of self-regulation skills with observational learning, explicit instruction, and (guided) practice to address both the focus of instruction (what is taught) and the mode of instruction (how it is taught). Further, we investigated the added value of a professional development program for teachers on the effectiveness and implementation of the intervention in the classroom, by adopting a teachers-training-teachers approach. One group of teachers ( $N = 31$ ) was trained by experts, and subsequently trained their colleagues ( $N = 37$ ). Quasi-experimental results showed that students' writing performance improved after the intervention ( $ES = 0.55$ ), while generalizing over tasks, students, and teachers. Further, teachers became more positive and felt more efficacious about teaching writing after the intervention. There were no differences between trainers and trainees, which provides evidence for the spillover effect of professional development. To get more insight in how teachers implemented the intervention in their classroom and in the social validity of the intervention and the teachers-training-teachers approach, we triangulated post-intervention questionnaires with classroom observations and interviews. This mixed methods approach revealed that both trainers and trainees were highly satisfied with the program and easily adapted their focus of instruction. However, for adjusting the mode of instruction more teacher support seems to be needed.

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## 1. Introduction

In many countries concerns are raised about the level of writing proficiency of elementary students (cf. Department for Education, 2012; Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008). In the Netherlands has also been established that students' writing performance at the end of elementary school does not meet the standards set by the Ministry of Education (Henkens, 2010). As a target goal for the end of elementary school the Ministry proposes that "students are able to write coherent texts, with a simple linear structure on various familiar topics; the text includes an introduction, body, and ending" (Expert Group Learning Trajectories, 2009, p. 15). However, at the end of elementary school the majority of Dutch

students is not capable of composing a text that successfully conveys a message to a reader (Kuhlemeier, Til, Hemker, de Klijn, & Feenstra, 2013). Why is writing so hard for elementary students? The major problem developing writers face during writing is cognitive overload. Writing is a complex cognitive process, during which several resource-demanding cognitive activities have to be performed simultaneously, such as activating prior knowledge, generating content, planning, formulating, and revising, whilst taking into account the communicative goal of the text and the intended audience (Fayol, 1999). Additionally, the amount of attention required for foundational skills (e.g., handwriting, spelling, and sentence construction) needs to be considered. This is particularly relevant with developing writers, as they often lack automaticity in these areas (McCutchen, 2011). Due to this limited automaticity, the learner has less attentional capacity for the higher level processes in writing, such as planning, formulating, and revising, which has detrimental effects on text quality (Berninger et al., 1992; McCutchen, 1996). An additional source of cognitive overload is the fact that, in the way writing education

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is often organized, learning-to-write and task execution are inextricably linked. For novice writers text production is already so cognitively demanding, that there is hardly any attentional capacity left for learning (Rijlaarsdam & Couzijn, 2000). Thus, writing instruction should aim to improve students' writing performance by teaching them skills and knowledge to manage the cognitive activities during writing. To achieve this, writing instruction needs to address the focus of instruction (what is taught) as well as the mode of instruction (how it is taught).

### 1.1. Writing instruction: the present situation

The Dutch Inspectorate for the Education reported that in the average classroom attention and time devoted to writing are limited, and that the majority of teachers do not succeed in effectively teaching writing (Henkens, 2010). There are two reasons for these shortcomings in writing education: (1) a lack of suitable teaching materials, and (2) teachers lack the necessary skills and knowledge for effectively teaching writing (Pullens, 2012; Van der Leeuw, 2006). Teachers often do not explain how students can approach a writing task, discuss texts, provide feedback, nor do they promote rereading and revising activities (Henkens, 2010). Although the language teaching materials pay attention to process-directed writing education, they do not offer teachers enough support to adequately assist their students during the writing process. Support for teachers is essential, as during their preservice and in-service professional development they are not sufficiently prepared to teach writing (Pullens, 2012; Van der Leeuw, 2006). Time devoted to the didactics of writing is limited, and student-teachers are expected to acquire the required skills and knowledge independently through learning-by-doing. As part of their training prospective teachers have to write a lot, but due to limited time and resources, they hardly receive any feedback on their writing (Van der Leeuw, Pauw, Smits, & Van de Ven, 2010). Thus, not only teaching materials need to be improved, but also the skills and knowledge of teachers need to be extended to optimize the focus and mode of writing instruction in elementary school. Already a lot of research has been done on both these aspects, identifying several effective instructional practices. These will be discussed below.

### 1.2. Optimizing the focus of instruction

Concerning the focus of instruction, several meta-analyses have identified various effective instructional practices to enhance students' writing performance, such as strategy instruction, teaching students self-regulation skills for writing, and text structure instruction, (Graham, 2006; Graham, McKeown, Kiuahara, & Harris, 2012; Koster, Tribushinina, De Jong, & Van den Bergh, 2015). Teaching students to adopt strategies before, during and after writing is an effective way to reduce cognitive overload during writing as this limits the number of cognitive processes that are active at the same time (Kellogg, 1988, 2008). For example, when students are taught to plan during the prewriting phase, they can focus on non-planning processes during writing. Studies involving explicit strategy instruction invariably yield large effect sizes, ranging from 0.82 to 1.15 (Graham, 2006; Graham et al., 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007; Hillocks, 1984; Koster et al., 2015).

The combination of strategy instruction with teaching self-regulatory skills yields an even higher effect size,  $ES = 1.17$  (Graham et al., 2012). Essential self-regulatory skills in writing are setting goals for writing, and subsequently monitoring the progress towards these goals (Flower & Hayes, 1981). The most prominent and well-researched approach combining strategy instruction and the teaching of self-regulation skills is the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) (Harris, Graham, Mason, & Sandler,

2002). In SRSD students are taught strategies for planning, writing, revising and editing, and they are supported in the development of the self-regulation procedures needed to monitor and manage their writing. This instructional approach has been implemented in small groups and whole classrooms with students of different age groups and abilities, and has invariably proven to be very effective in improving students' writing performance (Harris et al., 2002).

To be able to set effective goals for writing, students need to know what communicative goals should be set for which type of text and how you write a text meeting these goals. For this, students need to have knowledge about text structures and criteria for a good text. The effect of explicit text structure instruction, in which the elements and organization of text types are specifically taught, has been extensively examined in the elementary grades, in different genres: narrative (Fitzgerald & Teasley, 1986; Gordon & Braun, 1986), persuasive (Crowhurst, 1990, 1991; Scardamalia & Paris, 1985), and informative (Bean & Steenwyk, 1984; Raphael & Kirschner, 1985). Meta-analyses (Graham et al., 2012; Koster et al., 2015) show that the overall effect of text structure instruction was positive ( $ESs$  0.59 and 0.76 respectively).

### 1.3. Optimizing the mode of instruction

Writing instruction must be optimized to address the double challenge problem of learning-to-write and task execution. An effective approach to separate these two components and provide students with the opportunity to fully direct their attention to learning-to-write is observational learning (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). By observing a model performing (part of) a writing task while explaining, demonstrating, and verbalizing his thoughts, students gain insight into the writing process. This prepares them for the writing task and supports them during their writing process (Rijlaarsdam & Couzijn, 2000). Various studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of teacher modeling as an instructional mode to teaching writing strategies (cf. Fidalgo, Torrance, Rijlaarsdam, Van den Bergh, & Lourdes Álvarez, 2015; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005). Peers can also be used as models (cf. Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam, Van den Bergh, & Van Hout-Wolters, 2010). Besides positive effects on students' writing performances and writing processes (Braaksma, 2002; Braaksma et al., 2010), peer modeling also has positive effects on self-efficacy and motivation, especially in weaker students (Schunk, 1987).

Observational learning can also be applied by confronting students with reader reactions to provide them feedback on the communicative effectiveness of the written product (cf. Couzijn & Rijlaarsdam, 2004; Holliway & McCutchen, 2004). Beginning writers often are unaware of the communicative deficiencies in their writing. Observing genuine readers and discussing readers' experiences provide students with valuable information on the readers' needs and whether they succeeded in fulfilling these needs (Couzijn & Rijlaarsdam, 2004; Schriver, 1992). Several researchers (Couzijn, 1995; Couzijn & Rijlaarsdam, 2004; Holliway & McCutchen, 2004; Rijlaarsdam, Couzijn, Janssen, Braaksma, & Kieft, 2006) have shown that students' writing improved when they experience the effect their text has on a reader.

Although observational learning is effective in improving students' writing, there is still a gap to be bridged: from observing to independent practice. The teacher can facilitate student's progress through scaffolding with a gradual release of responsibility. In scaffolding the teacher controls the elements of the task that are initially beyond the student's capacity, thus permitting the student to concentrate upon the elements that are within his range of competence (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). The amount of teacher assistance can gradually be decreased as the learner progresses, and through guided practice and, finally, independent performance

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