

# **Effect of Direct Grammar Instruction on Student Writing Skills**

Lisa Robinson

Jay Feng

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## Abstract

Grammar Instruction has an important role to play in helping students to speak and write more effectively. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of direct grammar instruction on the quality of student's writing skills. The participants in this study included 18 fifth grade students and two fifth grade teachers. Based on the results of the students' pre-assessment writing scores through Write Score, direct grammar instruction was administered to address common errors found in their writing. The students receive direct grammar instruction each week for about four months. At the end of the four months the students were given a writing post-assessment. The results indicate that after 4 months of direct grammar instruction half of the students who participated in the study showed significant increases in their overall writing scores. These results show that students can make adequate progress to improve their writing when research based strategies such as grammar instruction is implemented during writing instruction. Educators need to receive more training to increase their knowledge of effective research-based writing strategies in order to improve the overall writing quality of their students.

**Key Words:** Strategy Instruction, Grammar Instruction, Self-Regulation, Guided Writing, Quick Write

## Introduction

Over the past ten plus years, standardized testing has taken center stage and has affected instruction. Written expression is becoming recognized as the most neglected of the basic skills and there is no consensus on the best method for either teaching composition or evaluating it (Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, & Lovelace, (2009). Unfortunately, writing is a difficult task for most students. According to the article *Common Problems in Elementary School Writing*, learning to write is uniquely challenging because it requires the mastery and concurrent use of a complex array of language skills from vocabulary and spelling, to the ability to organize and convey ideas (Time4Writing, 2014). Many of the students are encountering the elements of writing for the very first time therefore; this entire process can be overwhelming for them.

Writing is such a valuable tool for communication, learning, and self-expression, therefore students who do not have adequate writing skills will be at a great disadvantage and will face restricted opportunities for education and even for employment. Data for the National

Center for Education Statistics (2012) reveal that less than a third of students in the United States have mastered the skills necessary for proficient, or grade-level appropriate writing on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Most of our students in the United States have scored at the basic level or below, which denotes only partial mastery of the writing skills needed at each grade (Harris, Graham, Friedlander, & Laud, 2013). Undoubtedly, the quality of instruction a student receives has been found to play a major role in their writing achievement.

Struggling writers often lack or have ineffective strategies for accessing the knowledge they possess, therefore effective research-based strategies must be implemented in the classroom to help struggling writers to become successful writers. Researchers have argued that writing strategies, knowledge, skills, and motivation all play an important role in student's growth as writers. Because of the ways in which affective and cognitive processes interact with writing, it is important that interventions for developing writing ability focus on strategies for developing both motivation and cognitive processes (Garcia & DeCaso, 2004). One promising approach to enhancing the writing skills of students is to directly teach them strategies for carrying out basic writing processes such as planning, drafting, and revising (Tracy, Reid, & Graham, 2009).

### **Statement of Research Problem**

For the past 5 years, the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students at the elementary school have scored below the state average of 80% meeting or exceeding on the State Writing Assessment. The scores have averaged in the 70% range. During the 2010 school year, the scores dropped drastically to 46% meeting or exceeding which was below the state as well as the county average. In 2011, the scores rose to 84% meeting or exceeding. The dramatic increase was contributed to the teacher's attitude towards writing as well as the students receiving a full one hour writing block each day.

When examining the data presented, there is a lot of inconsistencies when it comes to student performance each year. The plan is to get all 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers excited about teaching writing as well as provide them with strategies that have been proven successful in improving student writing. The objectives of this project were: 1) to provide teachers with effective, research-based strategies that they can implement within their classrooms to help students improve their quality of writing; 2) to provide students with opportunities to practice writing on a daily basis; and 3) to increase student scores on the Write Score Writing Assessment.

### **Review of Literature**

Writing is a very essential skill that will benefit students for their entire lives by helping them to connect to the world around them. Students struggling with the writing process develop a negative view of writing as well as a negative image of their own abilities to conduct written communication (Diliberto, 2004). When teachers introduce and allow students to practice writing with engaging activities in elementary school, they will be able to foster confidence and hopefully a lifelong love of writing. Several research-based instructional strategies have been found to be effective in engaging students in the writing process thereby improving their overall writing performance. Some of these strategies include grammar instruction, Strategy Instruction, adding Self-Regulation to Strategy Instruction, and guided writing/quick-write program. In this paper, the effectiveness of strategies to improve student writing is investigated.

### **Grammar Instruction**

Grammar instruction is very important. Its primary goal is to enable students to carry out their communication purposes whether verbally or in writing. According to Chin (2000), effective grammar instruction begins with what students already know about grammar, and it

helps them use this knowledge as they write. Therefore, as teachers, we must determine what the students already know about grammar and build upon that knowledge. Grammar instruction needs to be couched in meaning contexts, which includes appropriate student support as well as involve them in learning experiences that encompass whole class instruction, small group instruction, collaboration in pairs, and independent work (Stathis & Gotsch, 2013). Grammar instruction should also be integrated into the revising and editing process because this will help the students to make immediate applications, which in turn will allow them to see the relevance of grammar to their own writing.

The need for grammar instruction and the method of teaching it in elementary language arts curriculum have long been controversial issues (Feng, & Powers, 2005). In a research study conducted by Feng and Powers, (2005), on the effects of explicit grammar instruction, two specific questions were addressed for guiding their study. First, does error-based grammar instruction have positive short-term effects on student writing? Second, does error-based grammar instruction have positive long-term effects on student writing? For this study, a decrease of 20% would be considered positively effective. The data for this study consisted of student writing samples that were collected at three different points in the school year. Mini-lessons were designed and taught based on errors identified in previous writings. The participants in this study were a group of fifth grade students in a public elementary school in a southern state. Based on results from each of the three writing samples, students improved in their writing in the following three areas: mechanics, sentence structure, and usage. Positive results were found on both the short-term and long-term measures. Grammar instruction is most effective when mini-lessons are taught that target specific errors in student writing. It has been

strongly suggested by some researchers that this is the most beneficial way of helping students to improve their command for grammar in writing.

### **Strategy Instruction**

Strategy Instruction (a student-centered approach to teaching) is an effective method in improving student writing. In a research study by Graham, et al. (2012), in an effort to identify effective instructional strategies for teaching writing to elementary grade students, a meta-analysis of writing intervention literature was conducted. The focus was on true and quasi-experiments. An average weighted effect size (ES) was calculated for 13 different writing interventions. The primary question guiding their review was: What writing treatments improve the writing quality of writing produced by students in the elementary grades? Twenty studies examined the effectiveness of strategy instruction. The focus of most of the studies were on teaching planning or drafting strategies, followed by planning, drafting, or revising, and just revising. The research showed that strategy instruction enhanced the quality of the students' writing. All of the studies in this meta-analysis included students in grades 1 through 5. According to Hough, et al. (2012), the primary effects that have been shown from strategy instruction have been an increase in the number of story elements (e.g., who, what, when, where, and how) included in student stories, higher rated stories in terms of quality, and longer stories.

### **Adding Self-Regulation to Strategy Instruction**

Self-Regulation Strategy Development (SRSD) involves explicitly teaching students' strategies for accomplishing specific writing tasks (Lienemann, Graham, Leader-Janssen, & Reid, 2006). With SRSD, the teacher models how to use the target strategy and then provide students with as much support as they need as they progress toward independent use of the

strategy (Troia & Graham, 2003). Research has shown that when self-regulation is combined with Strategy Instruction, it will have positive effects on student writing. This method of writing instruction is designed to help students learn, use, and eventually embrace the strategies of skilled writers. In SRSD, students are taught to generate ideas, organize them, and write more about them (Hough, Hixson, Decker, Bradley-Johnson, 2012). In a review of research conducted by Troia and Graham (2003), the research revealed that when strategy instruction incorporates self-regulation (SRSD) both struggling and good writers showed improvements in the quality of their writing. Research has also shown that the SRSD model of instruction has been proven to be effective in teaching students a variety of planning and revision strategies. Instruction in these strategies has led to improvement in four characteristics of student's performance: quality of writing, knowledge of writing, approach to writing, and attitudes about writing.

### **Guided Writing/Quick-write Program**

Guided writing is defined as instruction presented to small, flexible group of students that share similar instructional need (Gibson, 2008). Guided writing provides opportunities for direct intervention instruction, assessment, and feedback of students writing. Teachers are able to reinforce an instructional objective and provide scaffolding were needed. Thus, this targeted approach to writing is able to meet the needs of a specific group of students.

The Quick-write strategic writing program teaches many of the same story elements as Self-Regulated Strategy Development, but in a more abridged format with time limits (Hough, Hixson, Decker, & Bradley-Johnson, 2012). These time limits and abridged format allow students to have a rough draft of a story in about 10 minutes. Quick-write allows students to go through the writing process during each teaching session. The biggest difference between Self-Regulated Strategy Development and Quick-write is the time component. The strength of Quick-

write is that more frequent and repeated practice with each step of the writing process may aid students in understanding and utilizing the writing skills that they have learned. However, the biggest obstacle to Quick-write is that the program does not include a description of teaching techniques. Hough, Hixson, Decker, & Bradley-Johnson (2012) did observe positive effects of the Quick-write program.

A variety of instructional strategies has been examined in an effort to improve the writing of 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. Experts agree that most struggling writers differ from those who are successful writers in that the struggling writers have not developed a strategic approach for creating and organizing ideas (Weisendanger, Perry, & Braun, 2011). As teachers begin to implement a variety of strategies, they can begin to improve writing instruction, thereby; enhancing student writing. According to Graham (2008), the road from novice to competent writer is paved by changes in students' writing knowledge, motivation for writing, strategic writing behaviors, and basic writing skills.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Participants**

Participants in this study included two 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers and 18 students selected from 5<sup>th</sup> grade students at a public elementary school. The school is a Title 1 school with approximately 650 students. Of the students chosen for this study, eight were female and ten was male. Ten of the students were African American, two were white, and four were Hispanic. Eight out of the 18 students received special education services. None of the students received Gifted or ESOL services. This class of students was selected to participate in this research study because they were enrolled in the inclusion class that I was serving as co-teacher.

Both teachers participating in this study were white females with an average of three to five years of teaching experience. Both teachers taught writing, but indicated during the first professional development session that neither of them had received any formal training on how to teach writing.

## **Procedure**

This research started with a series of professional development sessions for the teachers. During the first session, a pre-assessment was given to the teachers in the form of a T-Chart. The teachers completed a word wall using the T-Chart to express both positive and negative feelings towards writing. The teachers expressed that they did not feel very confident with teaching writing. They also expressed that it is hard teaching students who already have a negative view towards writing. On the positive side, the teachers expressed that they loved coming up with different ideas for the students to write about and they also enjoyed reading the students' writing because they got an opportunity to see how the students express themselves.

The focus of this professional development was on finding effective writing strategies that we felt would improve the students' overall writing quality. During our second session, we reviewed the results of the students' pre-writing assessments. After looking at the most common errors found in their writing and reviewing/discussing the different strategies presented in the PowerPoint presentation, we decided that we would implement the direct grammar instruction strategy based upon common errors found in the students' writings and immediately began implementation. The students received the intervention for approximately 1 hour per day, 3 days per week for a total of 11 weeks (from Mid-October until the beginning of February). At the end of the professional development, the teachers completed a post-assessment using the

same T-Chart from session one to see how their attitudes toward writing had changed. The teachers expressed that they felt more confident teaching writing. They realized that when they showed enthusiasm and excitement about writing, the students showed the same attitudes. Providing strategies for the teachers gave them a starting point for teaching writing.

### **Data Collection**

Within the first two months of school, the students were given a Write Score baseline assessment. This assessment was used to establish the student's initial writing levels. Write Score is a company that provides hand scored open-response questions and essays with human scorers. The scorers are educators with a strong background in writing instruction.

Data was collected over a four month period from November through February using the writing worksheets, *Improving a Paragraph*. Each week, the students received instruction on different grammar skills based on the common errors from their writing pre-assessment. Each day after instruction, the students were given a paragraph that they had to rewrite and make changes as necessary to improve the wording and/or the flow of the paragraph. At the end of the week, the students were given three different writing prompts. They had to choose one of the prompts and write their own paragraphs incorporating what they had learned from the lessons that week. The students were able to conference with the teacher to discuss their errors and receive individualized grammar instruction to help them to make corrections to their papers. In February, the students received a post writing assessment through Write Score.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

To test the effects of explicit grammar instruction on the writing skills of 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, the pre and post writing assessments from Write Score were collected for comparison.

The scores were evaluated for each student participating in this research study. They received scores in three categories: Organization and Purpose, Development/Evidence/Elaboration, and Conventions. For organization and purpose, the students could receive up to four points, development/evidence/elaboration up to four points, and conventions up to two points. The students could receive up to 10 points for their essays based on the sum of the three scoring categories. The students were grouped based on the pre-assessment results from the Write Score Assessment. They were placed in two groups: group one consisted of students who scored in the average range with scores from six to ten points and group two consisted of students who scored in the below average range with scores from zero to five points. From the two groups, students were placed in subgroups based on common errors found in their writing. It was hypothesized that the number of students receiving a higher score would increase, while the number of students receiving a lower score would decrease.

The Write Score Pre- and Post- Assessment scores showed significant gains in some student scores. Of the 18 students who participated in the study, four students scored lower on the post-assessment than they did on the pre-assessment. Five of the students' scores remained the same and nine of the students' scores increased.

Table 1: Pre-test and post-test scores

<b>Pre-Assessment Scores</b>	<b>Post-Assessment Scores</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>

<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>

The results from the pre- and post- writing assessments were analyzed using the Paired *t*-test. The two-tailed P value was equal to 0.1471. By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be not statistically significant. The mean of the pre-assessment was 3.11 and the mean for the post-assessment was 4.28. The mean of the pre-assessment minus the post-assessment equals negative 1.17. The standard deviation of the pre-assessment was 2.37 and the post-assessment was 2.14. According to these results, the research hypothesis is not supported. Although the overall scores increased, those students who received higher overall scores received more points for organization and purpose. Most of the students received the same number of points on both the pre- and post- assessments for grammar and conventions.

Table 2: t-test results

<b>Group</b>	<b>Pre-Assessment</b>	<b>Post-Assessment</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>3.11</b>	<b>4.28</b>
<b>SD</b>	<b>2.37</b>	<b>2.14</b>
<b>SEM</b>	<b>0.56</b>	<b>0.50</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>18</b>

### **Discussions**

Writing is such an important skill that all students must be able to master. There are many strategies and resources that teachers can use in order to help students produce quality writing. The focus of this research study was to test the effects of direct grammar instruction in improving the overall quality of students' writing.

The findings from this research study show that when teachers read the students' writing, identify common errors, and design mini-lessons to target those particular errors, the overall quality of the students' writing improved. The students were able to see their errors and receive targeted instruction as well as receive additional feedback from the teachers. In the past when grammar skills were taught in isolation, it had no effect on the students' writing. This is primarily because most of the students in the class were unable to make the connections between grammar and writing. They were not able to take what they had learned when grammar skills were taught in isolation and apply it to their writing.

With more emphasis being placed on writing through the implementation of the Georgia Milestones Assessment, in the future, I would like to allow students more time in the classroom to practice writing as well as spend time in small groups using an error-based instructional

approach to teaching grammar highlighting the importance of applying these skills especially during the revising and editing stages of writing.

Teachers must be willing to commit to providing quality writing instruction and they must afford the students multiple opportunities during the week to write as well as provide them with constructive feedback to ensure that they understand their writing errors and are able to make corrections using the strategies they learn during writing instruction. Implementing this strategy at the beginning of the year would be beneficial to helping improve the writing of the students in addition to ensuring overall academic success. According to Garcia & DeCaso (2014), writing ability contributes substantially to general academic success.

### **Limitations of the Research**

There were some limitations that might have affected the outcome of the research. The sample consisted of a total of 18 students. This was a convenient and relatively small sample of participants. The length of time that the students received direct grammar instruction might have also affected the results. The strategy was implemented for a total of 4 months, which included holiday breaks. This short amount of time might not have allowed the students to get maximum benefits from the implementation of the strategy.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

From the literature review, studies have found that grammar instruction has impacted student's writing abilities in a positive manner. Further research needs to be conducted on the effects of grammar instruction across the curriculum on students' writing. Research should focus on the overall improvement in the quality of students' writing when this type of program is implemented.

More studies should be completed like this one for a longer period of time with random samples of students rather than a convenient sample. Conducting this research for a longer period of time with a different group of students on a larger scale could be beneficial to educators when choosing a strategy or strategies to teach students how to write. Teachers of all grade levels would benefit from this research as well as those students who are struggling writers. Writing is a skill that is important not only to the success in school but also in work, as well as in our personal lives.

### **Conclusion**

Writing is a difficult task for most students and therefore, quality instruction is needed on a daily basis. A high-quality writing program will provide a balance between opportunities for students to engage in writing that is meaningful to them. It will also allow them to receive explicit instruction in the skills and strategies they need to become proficient writers. The process of teaching effective writing instruction at the beginning of a student's formal educational experience is one way of preventing difficulties and negative reactions to writing (Diliberto, 2004).

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