

**IMPROVING EXPOSITORY WRITING SKILLS WITH EXPLICIT AND STRATEGY INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS IN INCLUSIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOMS****David F. Cihak****Kristin Castle***University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

*Forty eighth grade students with and without learning disabilities in an inclusive classroom participated in an adapted Step-Up to Writing (Auman, 2002) intervention program. The intervention targeted expository essays and composing topic, detail, transitional, and concluding sentences. A repeated-measures ANOVA indicated that both students with and without disabilities made significant improvements in expository writing skills as measured on the state's criterion reference test for written expression.*

Written expression can be frustrating and difficult for many middle school aged students. Students may experience difficulties describing information, writing sentences, paragraphs, and essays. Compositions may be inadequately organized and include excessive spelling and grammatical errors. Many researchers and teachers consider writing instruction a means to assist students to express their ideas, as well as unique perspectives and knowledge of social, political, and historical issues (Gerstein & Baker, 2001).

Graham and Harris (1989) suggested three factors that account for problems for students who struggle with written expression. First, text production was especially cumbersome that it hinders the generation of ideas. Second, students lack the knowledge of the writing process. Third, students were unaware of specific cognitive writing strategies to apply and assist with writing expression. Brown and Campione (1990) suggested that students with learning disabilities in written expression have difficulties acquiring a variety of cognitive and metacognitive strategies and writing skills when taught informal and incidental writing methods unless explicit instruction also was provided.

Explicit and strategy instructional methods are two approaches for teaching written expression skills to students with deficits in writing. Explicit instruction assists with student's cognitive processes. Explicit instruction does not change student ideas rather it serves to assist with the development of ideas. Explicit instruction has the potential to act as a change inducing agent that promotes the development of the cognitive system of writing (Graham, 1990). Explicit instruction was used successfully in improving written expression for students with writing deficits (Englert et al., 1991; Graham & Harris, 1993; 1997; Harris & Graham, 1996; 1999; Troia & Graham, 2002; Walker, Shippen, Alberto, Houchins, & Cihak, 2005; Wong, 1994; 1997; Wong, Butler, Ficzero, & Kupersis, 1996; 1997). Best practices in expressive writing instruction included explicit teaching of (a) critical steps in the writing process, (b) conventions of a writing genre, and (c) guided feedback.

The use of strategy instruction is another approach to assist students with the cognitive process of writing. Strategy instruction assists students to internalize, execute, appropriately modify, and to maintain the use of specific learning strategies (Wong, 1998). Common strategies included the use of self-directed cues or prompt cards, *think sheets*, or mnemonics. Strategy instruction prompts students to self-regulate the writing process. These *text structures* provided a guide for undertaking the writing task at hand, whether it was a persuasive essay, a personal narrative, or an essay comparing and contrasting two phenomena. Strategies were used successfully to improve written expression skills for students with writing deficits (Graham & Harris, 1996; 2000; Graham, Harris, & Troia, 1998; Graham, Harris, MacArthur, & Schwartz, 1991; Sawyer, Graham, & Harris, 1992). Strategy instructions were often taught to students using explicit instructional procedures. The teacher invariably modeled how to use

these steps by writing several samples. With this in mind, explicit and strategy instructions work in conjunction to improve students' written expression skills (McCutchen, 1987; Wong).

Due to the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2001) more and more students with disabilities are being included in assessments that are used as a measuring stick for schools and students today. Thus, students with disabilities in the general education classrooms are a primary target of intervention strategies for teachers. Baker, Gerstein, and Graham (2003) noted that future research was needed in effective writing instruction. Specifically, large-scale classroom practice that included both students with disabilities and students without disabilities required investigation.

*Step Up to Writing* (Auman, 2002) is a commercially produced expository writing program based on the principles of explicit and strategy instructional techniques. The goal of the program is to improve students' response to a writing intervention. It was designed for middle school aged students to facilitate their abilities to construct expository essays. Using explicit and strategy instructional methods, step-by-step guidelines, modeling, guided practice, extended interactive practice, and frequent feedback, *Step Up to Writing* (Auman) provided students structured experiences to develop writing skills successfully (Simon, 2003; Sopris West Educational Services, 2003).

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of an adapted commercially produced writing program for classroom practice. Specifically, how will *Step Up to Writing* (Auman, 2002) assist written expression skill for students with learning disabilities and students without disabilities in eighth-grade inclusion classrooms?

## **Methods**

### *Participants and Setting*

Forty-five eighth grade students and one classroom teacher from a rural Southeastern middle school participated in the study. Twenty-one males and 24 females were enrolled in the two Language Arts inclusion classrooms. Forty-two percent (n=19) of the students qualified and received special education services under the specific learning disability category for written expression. One class consisted of 23 students with 10 students with disabilities. The second class consisted of 22 students with nine students with disabilities. All students with disabilities met state and local criteria for special educational services (i.e., 20 point discrepancy between IQ and achievement for written expression). Table 1 lists specific characteristics for students with and without disabilities. Students with disabilities specifically demonstrated difficulties including (a) organizing ideas, (b) creating topic sentences, (c) expressing ideas to the reader (d) using details, and (e) creating conclusion sentences.

### *Materials*

The lessons used with this writing intervention were created with adaptations from the *Step Up To Writing* program (Auman, 2002). The program offered many different ideas to improve student's skills to organize ideas, create topic sentences, use transitions, develop supporting details, and create a concluding sentence. Specific materials used in this writing intervention included: (a) examples of expository essays, (b) newspaper, (c) color markers to highlight different types of sentences, and (d) paper and pencil.

### *Variables and Measure*

The independent variable was five lessons from the *Step Up To Writing* (Auman, 2002) expository writing intervention. The five lessons targeted specific structural elements of expository writing including topic, detail, conclusion, and transitional sentences. The dependent variable was expository writing skills. Students composed a five paragraph expository composition. A state's expository writing skills assessment (Tennessee Department of Education, 2005) was used to score all compositions. The expository writing skills assessment is a seven point rubric, which rates students writing skills from zero or inability to score to six or outstanding composition. A score of four or higher was considered a competent composition. Table 2 lists the possible writing scores and corresponding description.

**Table 1. Student Characteristics**

Variables	Students with Disabilities		Students without Disabilities	
Age ( <i>M / SD</i> )	14.30	.46	14.10	.43
Gender ( <i>n</i> )				
Boys	15		6	
Girls	4		20	
Ethnicity ( <i>n</i> )				
European American	17		24	
African American	2		1	
Hispanic	0		1	
Free/reduced price lunch ( <i>n</i> )	16		23	
Additional disability ( <i>n</i> )				
LD Reading	10			
LD Math	2			
ADHD	3			
Emotional Disorders	2			
IQ <sup>a</sup> ( <i>M / SD</i> )				
Verbal scale	101.40	10.17		
Performance scale	105.60	15.60		
Writing composite score <sup>b</sup> ( <i>M / SD</i> )	76.00	8.12		
Number of years in special education ( <i>M / SD</i> )	4.7	.90		

Note. LD = learning disability and ADHD = attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. <sup>a</sup>IQ tests used were the *Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Third Edition* (WISC III) and the *Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale-Fourth Edition* (SBIS-4). <sup>b</sup>Achievement test used was the *Test of Written Language-Third Edition* (TOWL-3).

**Table 2. Expository Writing Skills Assessment Scoring Rubric**

Score	Description
6	A 6 paper is outstanding. It demonstrates a high degree of proficiency in response to the assignment but may have a few minor errors. An essay in this category is well organized and coherently developed, clearly explains or illustrates key ideas, demonstrates syntactic variety, clearly displays facility in the use of language, is generally free from errors in mechanics, usage, and sentence structure
5	A 5 paper is strong. It demonstrates clear proficiency in response to the assignment and may have minor errors. An essay in this category is generally well organized and coherently developed, explains or illustrates key ideas, demonstrates some syntactic variety, displays facility in the use of language, is generally free from errors in mechanics, usage, and sentence structure
4	A 4 paper is competent. It demonstrates proficiency in response to the assignment. An essay in this category is adequately organized and developed, explains or illustrates some of the key ideas, demonstrates adequate facility in the use of language, may display some errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure
3	A 3 paper is limited. It demonstrates some degree of proficiency in response to the assignment, but it is clearly flawed. An essay in this category reveals one or more of the following weaknesses including inadequate organization or development, inadequate explanation or illustration of key ideas, limited or inappropriate word choice, a pattern or accumulation of errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure

**Table 2 Continued. Expository Writing Skills Assessment Scoring Rubric**

Score	Description
2	A 2 paper is flawed. It demonstrates limited proficiency in response to the assignment. An essay in this category reveals one or more of the following weaknesses including weak organization or very little development little or no relevant detail, serious errors in mechanics, usage, sentence structure, or word choice
1	A 1 paper is deficient. It demonstrates fundamental deficiencies in writing skills. An essay in this category contains serious and persistent writing errors or is incoherent or is undeveloped.
0	A 0 paper is reported because a paper could not be scored for one of the following reasons including blank or refusal, insufficient to score or illegible, off topic, or written predominantly in another language

*Note.* Tennessee Department of Education (2005).

#### *Writing Probes*

Students individually completed three expository composition writing probes administered at pretest (prior to writing intervention), midtest (after lesson three), and posttest (after the writing intervention). Lined paper and a pencil were provided. At the beginning of each writing probe session, the teacher instructed the students to write a composition for the selected prompt. The writing prompts were: (a) the best day I ever spent with my family, (b) the world would be a better place if, and (c) the best gift I ever received. The writing prompts were counterbalanced across probes to ensure that 15 students, including at least six students with disabilities, addressed each topic during pre-, mid- and posttests. All students had 35 minutes to respond to the prompt. No feedback was provided about the content or quality of the student's compositions during probe administration.

#### *Writing Intervention Procedures*

Five adapted *Step Up to Writing* (Auman, 2002) lessons were used to provide explicit instructional methods to improve students writing skills. Lessons were adapted to target the conventions of an expository writing and sentence structure. Each lesson occurred for 90 minutes. The first lesson instructed students in the organization of ideas and how to create an informal and formal outline. The classroom teacher explained explicitly the purpose of an outline and then modeled the use of both outline types. While modeling the outline, the teacher emphasized generating as many ideas as possible while identifying key similarities and differences of specific details pertaining to specific subtopics. Students then were given a practice writing prompt and instructed to either create a formal or informal outline. Feedback was provided to students as a group and individually regarding the quality of the outline.

During the second lesson, students were asked to recall the purpose of organizing ideas using an outline. Then, students were instructed on the use of different types of topic sentences of expository compositions. Similar to lesson one, the teacher explained the purpose of a topic sentence and then modeled writing different types of topic sentences from a section of newspaper. The teacher also emphasized and modeled the use of sentence structure, syntactic variety and language usage. Students then were given a copy of different sections of the newspaper and instructed to write a topic sentences regarding one of the stories. Feedback was provided to students as a group and individually regarding the quality of the topic sentence.

The third lesson combined both sentence transitions and supporting details. The teacher explained the purpose of transitions and then modeled how various transitions were used in expository compositions. Then, students were provided with a worksheet with transitional words listed on the sheet. Students were asked to circle the transitional words. Next, the teacher explained the purpose of supporting detail sentences and modeled how details support a topic sentence using three different writing prompts. The teacher also accentuated and modeled syntactic variety and the writing mechanics of detailed sentences, which supported the central theme. Students were then asked to write five supporting detail sentences for the topic sentence; *Instead of attending sixth period on Monday, students were allowed to attend a pep-*

rally to celebrate the football championship. Similar to previous lessons, feedback was provided to students as a group and individually regarding the quality of transitions and supporting detail sentences.

During lesson four, the teacher reviewed lessons one through three. The purpose of this lesson was to review expository writing, the role of organization in writing, the different types of topic sentences, transitions, and supporting detail sentences. Students were given a worksheet with topic, transition, and supporting detail sentences in random order and asked to reconstruct the sentences which corresponded to a specific topic in an organized manner.

During the fifth lesson, students were asked to recall the purpose and provide examples of a topic sentence, transition sentence, and supporting detail sentences. Students then were instructed on the use of concluding sentences. Similar to previous lesson, the teacher explained explicitly the purpose of a concluding sentence and then modeled writing different types of concluding sentences, which included appropriate language use, sentence structure, and syntactic variety. Next, the teacher displayed an expository composition and divided the students into two groups to identify correctly the topic, transition, supporting details, and conclusion sentences in three different examples. Lastly, students used the worksheet from lesson three and asked to individually create a concluding sentence. Feedback was provided to students as a group and individually regarding the quality of concluding sentences.

#### *Reliability*

A naïve classroom teacher (a second eighth-grade teacher) independently scored 20 students pre-, mid- and posttest compositions. The naïve teacher was trained in scoring the writing assessment rubric, yet unaware of the experiment. Using the expository writing skills assessment rubric, the second scorer read and rated 35 compositions written by student without disabilities and 25 by student with disabilities. Interobserver agreement was calculated by dividing the number of agreements of scores by the number of agreements plus disagreements of scores and multiplying by 100. Interobserver reliability ranged from 95% to 100%, with a mean of 97% agreement.

#### **Results**

A repeated-measures ANOVA was used to examine whether there was a relations between the *Step Up to Writing* (Auman, 2002) adapted program and pre-, mid-, and posttests scores of written expression for 40 eighth grade students with and without disabilities. Five students without disabilities were dropped from the data analysis because of absenteeism during the posttest probe. The level of significance was established at  $p < .05$ . Table 3 displays students' mean and standard deviation scores across probes. Significant interaction effects of students (students without disabilities and students with disabilities) by time (pre-, mid-, and posttest) occurred  $F(2, 76) = 20.15, p < .00$ . When examining pairwise comparisons between group differences across time, students without disabilities ( $M=3.83, SD=1.02$ ) scored significantly higher on the pretest than students with disabilities ( $M=1.79, SD=.63$ ),  $p < .00$ . Also, students without disabilities ( $M=4.35, SD=.60$ ) scored significantly higher on the midtest than students with disabilities ( $M=3.34, SD=.73$ ),  $p < .00$ . However, there was no significant differences on posttest scores between students without disabilities ( $M=4.33, SD=.80$ ) than students with disabilities ( $M=4.10, SD=.57$ ),  $p = .21$ .

When examining pairwise comparisons of specific student groups across time, students without disabilities scored significantly better from pretest ( $M=3.83, SD=1.02$ ) to midtest ( $M=4.35, SD=.60$ ),  $p < .05$ . However, there was no significant differences for students without disabilities from midtest ( $M=4.35, SD=.60$ ) to posttest ( $M=4.33, SD=.80$ ). Overall growth for students without disabilities from pretest to posttest was a mean of .50 ( $SD=1.14$ ).

For student with disabilities, pairwise comparisons across time indicated that they scored significantly higher from pretest ( $M=1.79, SD=.63$ ) to midtest ( $M=3.34, SD=.73$ ),  $p < .00$ . Students with disabilities also scored significantly higher from midtest ( $M=3.34, SD=.73$ ) to posttest ( $M=4.10, SD=.57$ ),  $p < .00$ . Overall growth for students with disabilities from pretest to posttest was a mean of 2.26 ( $SD=.70$ ).

Individual student scores were examined further for students with disabilities and students without disabilities. Pretest scores indicated that no students with disabilities demonstrated a competent expository writing score (i.e., score of 4 or higher). After participating in the writing intervention, 84% of the students with disabilities ( $n=16$ ) demonstrated competent scores on posttests. Only 3 of 19 students with disabilities did not perform competently although their writing scores did improve to a score of 3.5.

Moreover, the percentage of students without disabilities performing competent scores increased from 67% on pretest to 100% on posttests.

**Table 3. Means and standard deviations for groups across pre-, mid-, and posttest.**

Groups	Pretest	Midtest	Posttest	Growth	F	p
All student	2.86 (1.35)	3.87* (.83)	4.20* (.71)	1.34 (1.30)	20.15	.00
Students without Disabilities	3.83 (1.02)	4.35* (.60)	4.33 (.80)	.50 (1.14)		.02
Students with Disabilities	1.79 (.63)	3.34* (.73)	4.10* (.57)	2.26 (.70)		.00

Note. \* = significant difference.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of an adapted *Step Up to Writing* (Auman, 2002) program for classroom practice for students with and without learning disabilities. Improvements in the quality of writing emerged after students had received the writing intervention. In pretest analysis, students with disabilities lacked the writing skills of how to create a topic sentence, how to use supporting details, how to use transitions, and how to conclude a composition. In posttest analysis, students with disabilities made significant writing improvements. Students demonstrated the skills of writing a topic sentence, supporting the topic with details, using transitions, and effectively concluding the composition. Moreover, students without disabilities made significant writing improvements from pretest to posttest. For both students with disabilities and students without disabilities, the greatest developments between pretest and posttest compositions were paragraph structure. Essays were organized and themes well developed. Compositions including the presence of an introductory sentence and central ideas were expanded coherently using detailed sentences. Transition and concluding sentences also were exhibited. Moreover, sentence structure and syntactic variety improved. Overall, students wrote expository essays that were qualitatively better, which were generally free from mechanical errors and language misuse.

This study confirmed previous studies that explicit and strategy instructional methods successfully improved students with disabilities written expression (Englert et al., 1991; Graham & Harris, 1993; 1996; 1997; 2000; Graham et al., 1998; Harris & Graham, 1996; 1999; Sawyer et al., 1992; Troia & Graham, 2002; Walker et al., 2005; Wong, 1994; 1997; Wong et al., 1996; 1997). Moreover, this study extends previous research by investigating large-scale classroom practices that included both students with and without disabilities in a inclusive general education classroom.

At the onset of the study, no students with disabilities performed competent writing skills according to the writing assessment scoring rubric. Moreover, 67% of students without disabilities demonstrated competency on the writing assessment. This would have indicated a failure to meet adequate yearly progress under No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001). After the writing intervention, 84% of students with disabilities and 100% of students without disabilities demonstrated expository writing competency. Additionally, students were observed applying the expository writing skills and strategies to other assignments and in other classes. Although skill transference was not the focus of this study, teachers in other classes noted that both students with disabilities and students without disabilities writing compositions improved.

However, 3 of the 19 students with disabilities did not improve enough to achieve a competent or passing score according to the evaluative rubric. Although each student increased scores from a 1.0 (deficient) to a 3.5 (progressing to competency) from pre- to posttests, supplemental instruction would be necessary. With that in mind, additional writing practice or a multifaceted writing intervention possibly including self-regulation (Sawyer et al., 1992), guided feedback (Englert et al., 1991, Wong et al., 1996; 1997), handwriting (Graham, Harris, & Fink, 2000), or spelling (Graham, Harris, & Fink, 2002) would be required. Additionally, extended time to write the essay might be an appropriate accommodation.

Many of the students and the teacher reported the writing intervention was beneficial. The teacher noted that the intervention was easy to implement, it was acceptable for improving expository writing, and it

was appropriate for a variety of students. Students reported that the targeted lesson, *really help my writing, I noticed a difference right away, and I wish other Language Arts teachers taught this way.*

Many middle school students experience frustration with written expression. The abbreviated *Step Up to Writing* (Auman, 2002) program successfully facilitated improved writing skills among all students. Students with learning disabilities demonstrated the greatest improvements and students without disabilities writing skills were enhanced. Through the use of explicit and strategy instructional methods, the writing intervention assisted students' skills of idea organization, construction of topic, supporting details, transitions, and conclusion sentences. By assisting students written expression skills, students with and without disabilities successfully composed an expository essay in order to pass the state's criterion assessment.

Several limitations of this study may have affected the overall results and interpretations. First, students with disabilities pretest compositions were classified as flawed to deficient; therefore other research-based writing interventions may have successfully produced a positive change. Second, the lack of a control group may suggest alternative explanations to improved expository compositions. Although the brevity of the study attempted to control for extraneous variables, without a true control group practice effects could not be parceled-out. Third, the students were relatively homogenous most of the students who participated were European American males. With this mind, broad conclusions must be cautioned.

Future research is needed to verify the result of this study's writing intervention. Future research should attempt to replicate these results across different writing compositions (e.g., persuasive, narrative, opinion). Additionally, future research is needed to investigate the long-term effects of writing interventions and possible novelty influences. The generalization of writing interventions across settings and different writing compositions also warrant future investigations. Furthermore, future research is needed to investigate student perceptions of various writing interventions.

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