

Literature Review: Strategies for Effective Writing Instruction

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Writing is a critical skill that spans across numerous academic disciplines and career paths. Students in primary, secondary, and post-secondary education need quality writing instruction for college and career readiness. However, teachers are not receiving adequate training to provide effective writing instruction. In 2009, a national survey was conducted among high school teachers to gather data regarding their writing instruction. “Seventy-one percent of them indicated that they received either no or minimal formal preparation to teach writing in their college teacher education program” (Kiuahara et al., 2009, p. 153). This alarming statistic is further reinforced by another national study that was conducted in 2016. This study focused on college level instructors that work in teacher preparation programs. Only 28% of respondents reported that they taught a class specifically dedicated to writing instruction and 72% of respondents reported that writing instruction was embedded in reading courses (Myers et al., 2016).

Purpose of the Literature Review

There is substantial evidence that more training in writing instruction must be provided for teachers of all grade levels. The purpose of this literature review is to inform writing teachers at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels of the scholarly research that has been conducted on writing instruction. Through this literature review, writing teachers can gather strategies and ideas that can be implemented in the classroom to enhance their writing instruction. This analysis contains research studies that were conducted at the middle school, high school, and college levels. However, the strategies that are presented in these research studies can be reasonably adapted to other grade levels. While a single literature review cannot bridge the statistical gaps that have been reported in research studies on writing instruction, this

publication provides a practical starting point for writing instructors to expand their knowledge of teaching writing skills.

National Studies

The two national studies that were introduced at the beginning of the literature review provide an overview of trends in writing instruction. Kiuvara et al. (2009) mailed a survey to 711 high school teachers across the United States in the content areas of language arts, social science, and science. 361 teachers completed the survey resulting in a 51% response rate. The survey included 76 questions such as Likert-type items, checklists, and open-ended questions. The survey results indicated that teachers from all three content areas were mainly assigning surface level writing activities such as short answers, journal entries, worksheets, and lists. The researchers commented that students need to be writing for longer periods of time and students need to perform deeper analysis and interpretation in their writing activities (Kiuvara et al, 2009).

The national study conducted by Myers et al. (2016) focused on instructors in teacher preparation programs. A survey link was emailed to 132 teacher educators from 50 public and private universities in 29 states. Sixty-three educators completed the 27-item survey resulting in a 48% response rate. Fifty-four participants responded that their training in writing instruction was primarily conducted through self-study and personal research. Twenty five percent of the respondents reported that they feel very successful in teaching writing, 37% of respondents feel moderately successful in teaching writing, and 37% of respondents feel somewhat successful in teaching writing.

Over half of the instructors in the teacher preparation programs revealed that they did not receive training in writing instruction and most of their training was self-taught. Not only does

the issue affect teachers, but the issue extends to their mentors in teacher preparation programs. Negligence of training in writing instruction has trickled down through several generations of teachers. Kiuahara et al. (2009) concluded that writing instruction needs to be reformed. Both national studies show that a call to action is needed.

Strategies for Writing Instruction

Despite the challenges presented in the national studies, many of the upcoming studies in this literature review show that the application of evidence-based practices can improve students' writing performance. Evidence-based practices in writing instruction particularly benefit struggling writers and neurodiverse students. Concepts covered in the literature include essay planning and organization, group interaction, teacher to student feedback, the think aloud strategy, and peer editing and revising. Teachers can use the results from these studies to replicate the same evidence-based practices in their own classrooms.

Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD)

A recurring theme in the research on writing instruction is the use of Self-Regulated Strategy Development, commonly abbreviated as SRSD. The SRSD model is designed to help students with setting goals in academic tasks and to self-monitor their progress (Jacobson & Reid, 2010; Kiuahara et al., 2012; Ray et al., 2019). SRSD is broken down into six stages. The first stage is to activate background knowledge about the essay writing process. The second stage invites students to discuss the strategy with the teacher. The third stage is for the teacher to model the strategy. In the fourth stage, the students memorize the steps discussed in the first three stages. In the fifth stage, the student writes the essay and employs the self-regulation strategies, but the teacher is available to support the student. In the sixth and final stage, the student writes their essay independently with the SRSD strategy with no teacher intervention.

SRSD emphasizes the planning component of the essay writing process. An example of SRSD is the use of mnemonic devices to help students remember the steps of writing an essay. For example, Jacobson and Reid (2010) used the mnemonic called DARE which stood for develop a topic sentence, add supporting ideas (at least three), reject at least one argument for the other side, and end with a conclusion. Ray et al. (2019) used HIT SONGS³. HIT stood for hook, introduce the topic, and thesis. SONGS³ stood for state the perspective, outlook on the perspective, need examples, and give your opinion. The number three reminded the students that they need to do this set of steps 3 times, once for each body paragraph. Finally, the S³ doubled as a reminder to complete the steps in the conclusion paragraph which are to support your thesis, state the relationships between your thesis and the perspectives given in the prompt, and end with a summary.

The researchers in each study found that the SRSD model improved the writing performance of their participants. Jacobson and Reid (2010) implemented the SRSD model during the fall semester at a high school with an enrollment of 1800 students. The researchers' goal was to replicate other studies on SRSD writing instruction but with a different population of students, specifically students with ADHD. Three Caucasian male students were identified to participate in the study because they met the criteria of being diagnosed with ADHD and a minimum IQ of 80. The six stages of SRSD writing instruction were administered by one of the authors. The researchers found that the students' planning time increased from 0 minutes of planning time at baseline to 26 to 37 minutes of planning after instruction was administered. They also found that all three students were including at least five of the six essay components from the DARE mnemonic device. Even though the students had room for improvement, they showed significant improvement in their essay writing after receiving SRSD instruction.

Ray et al. (2019) also gathered similar results. In this study, the researchers focused on using SRSD for ACT writing scores. Four 10th grade students from a suburban private high school in the southwestern United States were selected as participants. Unlike Jacobson and Reid's 2010 study, these four students were not diagnosed with ADHD but were identified as having writing difficulties by their English Language Arts teachers. These students also scored at or below the 25th percentile on the essay portion of the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT-III). The six stages of SRSD instruction were administered to the four students. The students were assessed at four points during the study. The first point was baseline (before SRSD instruction), the second point was during SRSD instruction, the third point was post instruction, and the fourth point was the maintenance phase which lasted for 4 weeks. All four of the students' ACT writing scores increased between 185% to 260% from the baseline assessment. The students spent more time planning, wrote more words per essay, wrote more transition words per essay, and used more argumentative essay writing elements such as a hook, topic sentence, thesis statement, etc. The students revealed in interviews that the HIT SONGS³ mnemonic helped them to remember the essay elements. The students also commented that it was beneficial to see examples of weak essays and strong essays during the SRSD instruction.

Kiuhara et al. (2012) also found success with the SRSD model. This study was conducted at a suburban high school in the western United States with an enrollment of 2000 students in grades 10 through 12. Seven students were identified as participants because they scored at or below the 25th percentile on the Test of Written Language (TOWL-3), they were identified as struggling writers by their special education teachers, and they were only producing zero to three persuasive writing elements in their essays. One of the seven students did not participate in the study because the study would interfere with their study hall time. The remaining six students

were taught the DARE mnemonic that Jacobson and Reid (2010) implemented in their study, but Kiuahara et al. (2012) also used mnemonics called STOP and AIMS. Twenty-five writing prompts were randomly assigned during the study. The researchers found that at the baseline phase, the students spent very little time planning and would only spend 9-10 minutes composing each session. Due to the lack of planning, the essays would be missing essential persuasive elements. Once SRSD instruction was administered, writing increased by 244% on average, and planning time increased from 4% to 25%. A key observation from the study was that the modeling stage was critical for improving writing performance. The students' essays did not improve until the teacher had modeled the strategy.

All three of the studies on SRSD demonstrated measurable evidence that the strategy helped their participants to write persuasive essays that were longer in length. The participants used the various mnemonics to ensure their essays contained all the essential components that are needed in a persuasive essay so that their argument was convincing and well supported. If students are not performing writing activities that are long enough, as discovered in the survey conducted by Kiuahara et al. (2009), then SRSD instruction is one strategy that can be used to help students transition from surface level writing activities to deeper analytical writing.

The Five Paragraph Essay

A case study by Johnson et al. (2003) argued that the five-paragraph essay is flawed and limited. However, the five-paragraph essay is commonly used for writing instruction, especially at the secondary level. The purpose of the study was to analyze why one middle school teacher named Leigh Thompson, was using the five-paragraph essay format despite the criticism that the format has received. The criticisms were outlined in the literature review of the study. Data were collected in various settings such as observing Thompson's classroom, interviewing her

colleagues and mentors, and retrieving artifacts from her workplace and teacher education program. The researchers found that Thompson used the five-paragraph essay as a student, so she was very comfortable with it. She explained that the format helped her students stay organized when writing. She recognized the limitations of the format, so her solution was to use student centered writing prompts to boost engagement in the classroom. Thompson felt pressure to teach the five-paragraph essay because that format was used for the state writing test. This pressure was increased by her workplace culture because her school site emphasized the importance of test scores.

This study is severely limited because it only focused on the experience of one teacher which cannot be generalized across larger populations. However, the study raises several ideas that are worth investigating. Thompson explained that the five-paragraph essay format helped her students to stay organized which is in alignment with the SRSD model. The SRSD model emphasizes self-regulation skills such as planning and organization. The instruction that was administered in all three of the SRSD studies directed the participants to write an essay that was approximately five paragraphs (Jacobson & Reid, 2010; Kiuahara et al., 2012; Ray et al., 2019). Even though Thompson felt pressured to use the format, perhaps the format has remained in the writing curriculum because it is in alignment with evidenced based practices.

There is also a disconnect between the argument that was presented by Johnson et al. (2003) and the evidence that was presented by Kiuahara et al. (2009). If students are primarily spending time on surface level writing activities such as journal entries and short answers (Kiuahara et al, 2009), then the five-paragraph essay still holds value because the national survey data shows that students are not writing enough. Writing teachers should not be discouraged to use the five-paragraph essay format for it will guide their students to practice their long-form

argumentative essay writing. However, the criticisms of the five-paragraph essay that are presented by Johnson et al. (2003) should not be disregarded. The rigid structure of the five-paragraph essay could reduce engagement and inhibit students from developing their writing voices.

Teacher and Student Interaction in the Writing Process

Writing instruction can be delivered in a variety of group configurations such as whole class instruction, small group instruction, or one on one instruction. Lin et al. (2020) investigated the impact of instructional grouping on argumentative writing instruction. The researchers observed 187 English Language Arts class sessions taught by 31 teachers over the course of 3 years. The researchers gathered data with audio recording, video recording, and field notes. Each researcher was assigned a teacher to observe for 5-10 class sessions. They found that teachers would spend 72.6% of the class time using whole class grouping. Instruction would be primarily teacher centered with students only responding to questions prompted by the teacher. However, there were opportunities when students would engage in group discussion about argumentative writing and there was time for one-on-one conferences between the teacher and the student. In the conclusion, the authors explained that research shows that group work is helpful for argumentative writing. Therefore, there is a disconnect between the research and what is happening in practice. However, the authors also noted that students are given time to write in class and the teacher can provide real time feedback during the composing process.

Another study by Beck et al. (2015) explored real time feedback with the application of the Think Aloud strategy to the writing process. The authors created the Think-Aloud-Protocol (TAP) as an alternative way to assess students' writing abilities beyond using a rubric. The researchers conducted the study with five 9th and 10th grade English Language Arts or English as

a Second Language teachers. Each teacher selected three of their own students to participate, for a total of 15 student participants. Each teacher would administer the 30-minute TAP assessment to one student at a time. The student thinks aloud while writing a response to an argumentative essay prompt for 30 minutes. During the process, the teacher is taking notes on a TAP assessment sheet with yes or no questions and open-ended prompts. The researchers found that the teachers would provide precise feedback about the students' writing instead of commenting on a student's personality, intelligence, or attitude. One of the students created a checklist at the beginning of the assessment and she asked herself, "What are the things I tend to not do?" The think aloud strategy helps the students to build self-awareness about their writing strengths and weaknesses. The teachers also developed deeper insights into their students' abilities as writers.

The relationship between these two studies is the importance of the teacher giving feedback during the writing process. A rubric is necessary at the end of the writing process to give students a clear expectation as to what is expected, but if the teacher does not give feedback before the final draft, there will be missed opportunities to strengthen writing skills in real time. The second stage of the SRSD model (Jacobson & Reid, 2010; Kiuahara et al., 2012; Ray et al., 2019) is to discuss the writing process. These studies show that providing opportunities for conversation during writing helps to solidify the writing instruction.

Another connection to consider is the 72% teacher centered instructional pattern from Lin et al. (2020) and the use of modeling in the SRSD model (Jacobson & Reid, 2010; Kiuahara et al., 2012; Ray et al., 2019). A possible explanation for the high percentage of teacher centered instruction is because good writing needs to be modeled for the students. Kiuahara et al. (2012) "found that modeling had to occur before students' performance improved" (p. 352). Modeling is a key component to teaching a new skill. However, writing instructors should be cognizant to

incorporate group discussions and think aloud strategies into their teaching since the evidence from Lin et al. (2020) and Beck et al. (2015) displays the value of those two activities in writing instruction. Writing teachers should also look for opportunities to provide in the moment feedback to their students during the composition process.

Peer Editing and Revising

Teacher to student feedback is vital in writing instruction but research shows that peer editing and revising is a rewarding process for students. Abbas and Herdi (2018) hypothesized that a collaborative writing strategy would help students to improve their argumentative writing. The authors conducted the study at the University of Lancang Kuning Pekanbaru, Indonesia. Twenty-three students were selected due to their low ability in writing argumentative essays. Data were collected with a writing test, field notes, an observation checklist, and interviews. In this study, collaborative writing refers to two different events during the study. In the first event, students were grouped into pairs. One student assumed the role of the writer and the other student assumed the role of the helper. The students submitted their drafts for feedback from the instructors. In the second event, the students applied the feedback and showed their work to the class. Classmates provided feedback for each other. After both collaborative writing events, a final test was administered. The researchers found that the collaborative writing activities improved the students' scores. On the midterm test, 12 students earned a score of fair, and 11 students earned a score of poor. However, on the final test called the cycle test, five students scored very good, 12 students scored good, and six students scored fair. The class demonstrated significant improvement in argumentative writing.

Baker (2016) also conducted a study at the college level except the setting of this study was located at a small private college in the United States. In this study, Baker investigated the

types of feedback that students give each other in peer revision and how students would apply that feedback to their final drafts. This study was conducted from Fall 2009 to Fall 2012 using 91 students from junior level sociology courses. The participants were required to submit a draft of their essay 4 weeks before the final paper was due. The instructor provided a 20-minute demo on how to give formative feedback. Written instructions on helpful peer feedback were also provided for the participants. The student reviewers used a rubric to record their comments. Data were collected by using the compare documents feature in Microsoft Word. Revisions were coded as surface level revisions or meaning level revisions. The researchers discovered some encouraging findings; only 16 out of 91 students submitted an incomplete draft, which meant that students were motivated to start writing earlier rather than procrastinating to write their paper until the end of the semester. The participants provided formative feedback. There were only five occasions where student reviewers provided unsubstantial feedback. 78.9% of changes were meaning level changes and only 21.1% of changes were surface level revisions.

Both studies are highly encouraging because not only did Abbas and Herdi (2018) show significant improvement in essay scores, but Baker (2016) confirmed that students are capable of providing rich feedback. In both studies, the students were committed to the peer review process. The depth of feedback shows that the students wanted to help each other to succeed in completing their papers. These studies show that peer editing and revising is a transformative tool in the writing process. Even though these studies were conducted in college level settings, the strategies that were presented in the studies can be reasonably adapted to primary and secondary grade levels. Writing teachers should prioritize instruction time for peer editing and revising.

Limitations and Validity Threats

To ensure a balanced review of the literature, it is important to outline the limitations and validity threats of each study. The national study conducted by Kiuahara et al. (2009) only used a survey as the instrument. Therefore, all the information was self-reported. The authors stated that the study needs to be supported by future research where writing practices are observed in the classroom and not just reported. Extensive descriptions of the survey items were not provided for the participants, so the participants may have misinterpreted survey items. Even though 1200 participants were identified through a stratified random sample, 489 participants were no longer working at their district and could not be reached. Only 361 out of 711 participants responded, resulting in a selection threat. The survey was sent out to the teachers in January and the teachers had 4 weeks to respond. Historical events happening in the teachers' lives may have prevented them from responding or could have influenced how the teachers responded to the survey items.

Myers et al. (2016) also showed a selection threat. Although 132 participants were identified, only 48% of the participants completed the survey. The convenience sample was obtained from a special interest group, which may not accurately replicate the larger population of instructors and professors in teacher preparation programs in the United States. The authors acknowledged this limitation and that the sample could have been increased by using listservs from other literacy organizations. The authors also disclosed that the survey was not piloted, which is an instrumentation threat.

All three of the research studies related to SRSD instruction share the limitation of having a small sample of participants. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize the results of these studies to larger populations of students. Despite conducting the study at a school with 1800 students, Jacobson and Reid's (2010) study had three participants: all of whom were white males. One of

the participants experienced a drop in essay quality below baseline levels after the maintenance phase. It was learned that the student passed the district's graduation exam for writing. This is a historical threat to validity since the event took place outside of the study, but it impacted the data.

For the second SRSD study, Ray et al. (2019) also used a small sample size of four students in the 10th grade. The researchers administered SRSD instruction in a one-to-one setting or a one to two setting, so the study does not reflect essay instruction administered to a large group of students. The authors acknowledged that the study is limited. They recommended that for future research, it would be beneficial to conduct a true experiment using a larger random sample with a control group and a treatment group.

The third and final SRSD study conducted by Kiuvara et al. (2012) similarly used a small sample size of six students. A unique limitation of this study was that the participants were offered incentives such as chips, candy, computer time, and art supplies. At the end of the study, the participants were offered a larger incentive such as a sports magazine, movie tickets, or a \$15 iTunes gift certificate. The compensation may have influenced the students' motivation and performance.

The case study on Leigh Thompson (Johnson et al., 2003) only showed the perspective of one teacher. Even though the researchers presented criticisms about the five-paragraph essay that teachers should be mindful of, the case study cannot be easily generalized to other teachers with different demographics.

Lin et al.'s (2020) sample of 31 high school English teachers is also difficult to apply to the larger population. Since the study took place over 3 years, historical events outside of the study may have shaped the teachers' instruction that was recorded. The researchers recognized

that some of the participants in the study may have had more experience in teaching argumentative writing, while some participants were less experienced with the genre. Conversely, some of the participants' students may have had more experience with writing argumentative essays. The researchers chose to combine the findings from all grades instead of outlining each finding individually for grades 9 through 12. However, there may be nuances between each grade level, so the researchers recommended that future studies examine each grade level individually.

Beck et al. (2015) also followed the trend of small sample sizes, with five teachers and 15 students participating in the Think-Aloud-Protocol. The authors discussed that the students may not have been showing their true writing process while thinking aloud. Thinking aloud may have interfered with the students' composing process. The authors used their Think-Aloud-Protocol questionnaire and interviews to collect data. Therefore, the self-reported information may not accurately reflect what happened during the experiment.

Finally, the last two studies on collaborative writing and peer review share similar limitations to the other studies in this literature review. Abbas and Herdi (2018) used a small sample size of 23 college level students. The authors realized that 90 minutes was too short for a writing class, so that was a limitation in the methodology. Since the study took place over the course of the semester, other events outside of the study could have influenced the students' writing abilities. Baker's (2016) sample size of 91 college students was larger, but still difficult to apply to other populations since the students were enrolled in sociology courses at a small college. The researcher acknowledged that outside factors such as a student visiting the writing center, could have impacted a student's final paper. Even though data were collected on the

changes made between the first drafts and the final drafts, the researcher did not retrieve the final grades of the participants' papers.

Conclusion

Teachers can apply a variety of strategies in the full cycle of the writing process to boost the quality of their students' essays. Strategies like Self-Regulated Strategy Development and the Think-Aloud-Protocol can help students to organize their ideas to build momentum before writing. Arranging students into pairs and small groups can help students to promote their argumentative thinking skills. These pairs and small groups are especially powerful for peer editing and revising. Finally, teachers should identify windows of opportunity to conference with their students during the writing process to provide feedback before the final draft.

The research studies in this literature review provide evidence-based approaches that teachers can implement for their students' needs as writers. Future publications should continue compiling research-based writing strategies to efficiently inform writing teachers about the steps they can take in their classrooms to improve their practice. Writing teachers in all grade levels need access to this information to continue growing in their careers and to deliver the best instruction for their students.

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