

Highlighting the Exigency of Writing Instruction among Young Learners

By

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Abstract

Writing instruction, otherwise known as the teaching of writing, among learners of various age brackets is a phenomenon that has been in the spotlight considerably. Kelmon (2020), (2013) present the entire trend as a process. Bulut (2017) examined the attitude of students towards writing instruction. This descriptive study conducted a survey of the operation and practices engaged in during writing instruction among young learners. The dependent variables of the learners' disposition to writing instruction, the place of the reward system in writing instruction, the inclusion of models during writing instruction and the evaluation of the logical scheduling of the writing instruction were used. With a questionnaire (Young Learners' Writing Survey), the study elicited data from the focus groups of 60 First to Fifth (1st – 5th) Grade students and 12 selected English Language teachers of young learners of Gwinnett County Public Schools. Data obtained was analyzed using the simple percentage to determine the proportions of the available data. Both the qualitative and quantitative dimensions were utilized in this work. Findings indicated that the attitude observed among students of writing is class-dependent, the reward system is used but not duly recognized in line with the writing instruction, the use of models of instruction reflects more significance at the upper elementary level and that there is evidence of logical rather than arbitrary schedules for the writing instruction in the schools. Recommendations were proffered as effective strategies in perspectives that will enhance the pedagogy of writing instruction and improve the writing skills of young learners.

Keywords: *writing instruction, young learners, reward system, instructional models.*

Introduction

Writing is one of the four (4) basic skills of language. Others, being speaking, listening, and reading also exist. In all of these skills, writing, notably, draws varying responses from students as well as teachers. This paper examines the teaching and learning of writing by seeking to highlight its pedagogical concerns

and emphasis from the perspectives of both the teachers of young learners and their students. Reports from Trola and Graham (2003) indicates that writing is one of the most complicated literacy activity for adults and children. Usually, both parties view writing as being more challenging than other language skills. Bulut (2017) posits, in corroboration, that writing is viewed to be a difficult language skill, despite having inherent benefits. Among young learners, other language skills, apart from writing, are directly considered or linked with literacy and knowledge development. Hence, the common evidence of students giving higher priority to their reading skills and more often, discounting the writing skill.

Similarly, pedagogical practices directly and indirectly emphasize other skills as though they were deemed more essential than writing. Reading tasks are duly assigned and regularly assessed. Performance from such assessments is used, to a large extent, to determine overall academic achievement and even placement, in some cases. Meanwhile, in the same system, writing instruction, apparently, fares with comparably lesser stakes.

With the use of systematic and statistically determined details, this work attempts to foreground practices and operations that would, suitably, generate facts of pedagogical significance to handling the writing instruction among young learners. In anticipation, this investigation will reckon with the growing level of research into writing instruction for young learners.

Research Objectives

The particular purpose of this study includes.

- * To elaborate on the value of writing instruction among young learners.
- * To discuss findings on current practices and operations in the writing instruction among young learners.

Research Questions

This investigation reviews, in its entirety, the following research questions;

- * To what extent do young learners exhibit a constructive disposition towards the writing skill?
- * Does the writing instruction, among young learners, improve significantly with the use of any given reward system?
- * Does the inclusion of writing models, during instruction, facilitate students' participation in Writing?
- * Is the writing instruction among young learners significantly arbitrary?

Definition of Terms

In this write-up, the following terms take on these contextual meaning and usage.

Young Learners: These refer to students in the Elementary level of learning. Particularly, students of the Kindergarten up to the Fifth Grade (K – 5) are the targeted young learners in this case.

Writing Instruction: In this study, this concept refers to the teaching and learning of writing in English. Its intended usage in this paper denotes more than the term “handwriting”.

Statement of the Problem

Young learners in the school system reflect both positive and negative attitudes towards the writing instruction. Berman & Cheng, (2010), though in a study conducted on undergraduates, report that students identified the skill of writing, as more difficult than listening and reading. For some students, such locus may likely arise from an outright dislike for writing. For others, an evident dearth of experience in the use of writing skills may inform their attitude. Still, for some others, the difficulty encountered in writing may stem from an undefined way of handling writing instruction for learners in the elementary classes. Evidence from Nesamalar, Saratha & Teh, (2001) as found in Cole and Feng (2015) further corroborate that writing is the skill that most students are least proficient in when acquiring a new language. That similar indication confirms that writing prove to be a challenging area of language skills. Cole and Feng (2015) outrightly state that writing is “... a universal area of weakness for ESL students.” These views point towards the background of students' perspective to writing.

Perspectives from studies such as Kelmon (2013), Kelmon (2020) Kelmon (2014) as well as reports from the National Commission on Writing (2003) express the growing concern over students' writing. Cole and Feng (2015) found that numerous researchers discovered the need for English as a Second Language (ESL) students to be exposed to a variety of genres, the strategies and methods in order to succeed in the writing of English.

With the purpose of discussing and elaborating on the necessity and practice of writing instruction among young learners, this study examines the current procedures and operations in the writing instruction among the elementary group of young learners with a design to discover and implement effective strategies that will improve the writing skills among those students. Conceivable discourse from this study, reasonably, complements research studies in the teaching and learning of writing among young learners.

The Pedagogy of Writing Instruction

The skill of writing does not develop naturally but must receive adequate practice known as instruction in writing. Swedlow (1999) in Graham (2019) acknowledged that more than 85% of the population of the world can write. Writing is, so versatile, that writers use it in different contexts to record information or create imaginary ideas. Kelmon(2014) views the writing instruction as a process that can, potentially build into young learners the skills of research, planning, organizing, revising and editing. Kelmon (2020), (2013) also, present the entire trend as a process. In other words, the process of writing instruction comprises different skills that the learners are made to engage from one level of learning to another. In school, students' writing are means used to explore their levels of interpreting meaning and understanding. Available evidence from Graham (2019), Graham and Herbert (2011) maintain that in schools, students write about the materials read or presented in class. At work, especially in this age of the social media, workers, across all levels, use writing to perform the different job roles. Kelmon (2020) concluded that young learners, at any class level in the elementary, can be prepared through writing processes that will require them to write opinion pieces, engage in information writing to convey facts and ideas clearly. In informal contexts, like the home, writing provides a means for initiating and maintaining personal connections especially through tweets, text messages, email, blog. Many people even record personal accounts in writing.

These overwhelming indicators affirm the essence of writing instruction in schools. So, at every level of learning, writing instruction is important because success in writing will yield good results both in the in-school and post-school experiences. Therefore, writing instruction needs to be typically and deliberately taught to young learners who are still at the foundational level of learning. Due to this vast indication, teachers need to handle writing instruction differently. Views from Bergen (2008) retain writing instruction as a structural approach built on a year-long plan of daily activities in writing. The young learners are at the foundation years of learning and need to be fruitfully engaged to develop a sound footing in all their lives of learning. Explicit and systematic delivery is equally important to writing instruction in schools.

Whereas Graham(2019) recommends that elementary grade teachers devote one hour a day to writing and writing instruction and use a variety of instructional practices to promote students' writing success and growth; Kelmon(2014) expects that young learners be exposed to writing throughout the whole day at school both through direct writing activities and note-taking. Both analyses contain intentional steps in the pedagogy of writing instruction to young learners. Every good teaching will prove somewhat challenging yet remain considerably attainable.

The Rewards System and Writing

The writing instruction is applied using different instructional practices. In schools, the practices or even procedures involved in writing instruction is not usually applied at a uniform level. Most are applied, but not frequently. Graham (2019) observed that most schools apply such teaching procedures in less than once a month. Others made many different instructional adaptations over the course of the school year. All these cited factors draw into question the depth and intensity of writing instruction in the typical classroom. However, motivation for writing was observed as one inhibiting factor that is largely ignored in the writing instruction discourse. (Wilcox et al, 2016 in Graham, 2019). To embed rewards into the writing instruction, schools may set goals that address motivation. If such a reward system is hinged on efficacy and value, then a positive identity can be developed.

Students, especially at the elementary level, need actions that can motivate writing. Skills Therefore, teachers must lay a framework that writing instruction be viewed as an educational priority that needs be valued and rewarded. What young learners write ought to be viewed as an accomplishment and be rewarded. Harris, Graham and Mason (2008) encourage the motivation of struggling young writers as a strategy that would yield a positive impact, if applied.

Inclusion of Models in the Writing Instruction

Earlier cited research studies considered writing as an activity within specific contexts such as schools, places of work or online communities (Kelson, 2020, Bergen, 2008). As a result, writing must involve an interaction between the context and the mental and physical resources that writers bring to the task of writing'. Teachers of writing must deliberately shape writing in multifaceted ways. Among young learners, the use of models such as brainstorming, O.R.E.O.(Opinion, Restate, Explain, Opinion) and R.A.C.E.(Restate, Answer, Cite, Evidence) have been developed and used for both the lower and upper levels of the elementary learners. The effectiveness of these operations includes giving insight into writing through these cognitive and physical actions.

Harris, Graham and Mason (2006) named a Self-Regulatory Strategy Development (SRSD) as a strategy and instructional model designed to promote designated areas of behaviour, knowledge and motivation. The strategy, which was particularly applied on young learners had a positive impact on the writing of the students with evidence of more knowledge and stronger performance in instructed genres like the story, persuasive writing, personal narrative as well as informative writing. The procedure basically confirms what Bergen (2008) opines in the stance that a structured approach to daily writing helps every child become a confident, capable writer.

Sowell (2019) argued for the use of models in the Second language Writing classroom. The debate indicated that appropriate models that must fit the task, be at the students' levels will help the students successfully craft their own texts.

Method

The survey research method, as used in this descriptive study, investigates the patterns and trends in the relationship between the writing instruction among young learners and the variables that directly and indirectly have impact on it. Data was mainly gathered through observation and the use of the questionnaire (Young Learners' Writing Survey). Items were designed to collect data on the basic aspects of the study such as describing the disposition of young learners' towards writing instruction, gauging the rewards system and instructional models used in writing instruction and evaluating the logical presentation of writing instruction in schools. The focus groups observed in this study were 60 elementary students (First (1st) to Fifth (5th) Grade) and twelve (12) Teachers of Writing. The sample population was drawn from three (3) schools in the Gwinnett County School District. The latter were the actual respondents in the study. Questionnaires were administered to have the respondents make choices and respond to questions that elicited information on the research effort and formed the basis of a credible line of reasoning in the entire study.

Variables in this study were of two categories. The dependent variables included attitude towards writing tasks, writing models, reward systems, elementary level of education, teachers of writing, while the independent level was the young learners in the elementary level, K - 5.

The composition of these variables hinted on these cited groups in this study- Young learners (K -5) or students at the elementary level, Teachers of English, Language Arts and Writing.

Also, this study presents both a qualitative and quantitative dimension. The qualitative aspect features the collecting and analyzing of non-numerical data from the use of the questionnaire (Young Learners' Writing Survey) to understand the concept of writing instruction among young learners. On the other hand, the quantitative aspect features a calculation of the proportion and percentage of the available data.

Research Hypotheses

With the view to conduct a reliable analysis, this study formulated the following hypotheses:

- * Young learners' disposition towards the writing skill is not class-dependent.
- * Teachers apply the reward-based approach more in writing than in reading instruction.
- * Writing models facilitate learning significantly among young learners
- * Logical schedules are utilized for writing instruction among young learners.

Analysis

The focus groups selected for this study featured sixty (60) young learners and 12 teachers of English, Language Arts and Writing. Based on the data obtained from the survey, the following considerations were explored.

On learners' disposition towards the writing skill, data from their teachers' responses revealed that twenty-four (24) young learners, (which indicates 40%) in the lower elementary showed more encouraging attitude towards the writing instruction. The remaining thirty-six (36) or 60% were more indifferent to writing. Also, the reward-based system worked better with the lower group of young learners more than all the others. However, the data indicated that writing models were hardly used to facilitate writing instructions at that level and most of the instruction, among them, tilted more to an arbitrary dimension.

Out of the twelve (12) teachers used in this study, ten (10), which is about 83.3%, established that more young learners, particularly in the upper elementary level typically showed an indifferent attitude to writing instruction.

With regards to rewards, only six (6) teachers, which is 50% acknowledged the use of rewards in facilitating the writing instruction. In other words, only a half of the population of teachers consider the concept of reward in writing instruction. Eight (8) teachers, which is about 67% of teachers indicated that using models were useful to writing instruction in their classrooms.

All twelve 12 (indicating a 100%) teachers revealed varying dimensions of the reward system and its efficacy across all the levels of young learners. However, the same proportion (100%) evidently agreed to a logical schedule in place for the writing instruction.

Findings

Attitude was class dependent as observed in the analysis. Based on the survey conducted on the young learners used in this study, the variable of attitude was evidently dependent on class. Young learners in the lower classes showed little or no evidence of negative attitude towards writing instruction. More reluctance and even resistance appeared among young learners in the upper elementary, who, to a large extent, saw writing as difficult.

The reward-based system was used across all the levels, though with variations. In the lower elementary, rewards were mostly game time while the upper elementary writers had extra recess as rewards. Most of the times teachers use their discretion.

Models were more useful in the higher elementary classes because writing instruction at that level showed significant connection to reading.

The writing instruction is evidently logical in the elementary level of learning. The development of a planned, but flexible professional decision in writing instruction will obviously help the pedagogy of writing.

Discussion

Evidence from this study has indicated that the writing instruction in elementary schools ought to take into account the attitude of young learners, predominantly those at the middle and later stages of elementary level. That group indicated a significant trend of dislike and reluctance to writing, attributing difficulty to the writing task. This position refutes the null hypotheses that students' attitude to writing is class dependent and must not be generalized. Even in higher levels of learning, like the university, Berman and Cheng (2010) observe that the English Language skills of undergraduate and Graduate students indicate margins of difficulty, as well.

Particularly, the reward-based system should be recognized by schools and utilized by teachers. In addition, schools need to be required to develop implementation plans of effective rewards for supporting the writing instruction. Mostly, decisions that will make writing instruction more effective are needed. The SRSD model suggested in Harris et al (2006) can be further reviewed and possibly adopted.

Finally, teachers need to put into place procedures for writing instruction and enact the vision through daily lesson units. Instructional models and designs should target improving writing instruction within and across all classes of the elementary with evident support and alignment to reading. Sowell (2019) suggests the use of models that are appropriate, fit the task, are at the students' level, maintaining that these help the students successfully craft their own texts. The O.R.E.O. and R.A.C.E. models discussed in this study can equally be useful.

Recommendation

Effective writing instruction will enable students learn and develop as writers. Increasing how much the young learners write still will be dependent on conducting regular needs assessment to determine the content and the pedagogical needs of teachers as well as the strengths and needs of students. It is important to note, at this juncture, that every possible change, no matter how small, will eventually move towards a broader perspective of improving writing instruction. Hence, change should be emphasized in the contexts of the research variables used in this study. As a result, collective efforts of both the teachers and the young learners are required. Ismail (2011) posits that the writing skills can be developed when the learners' interest is developed and given frequent opportunities to, actually, practice writing. A carefully designed course on writing can increase students' writing efficacy. Being out of practice or growing inconsistent with the writing schedule only makes it difficult. There should be a resolve to make students write for at least, a designated time frame daily.

Conclusion

The evidence made available in this research supports the position that the pedagogy of writing instruction should lay increasing emphasis the central

variables that improve young students' attitude to writing. The foregrounded variables which include a reward-based system of teaching as well as the inclusion of models in writing instruction, among others, need to be upheld.

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