

Research: Fundamentals of the Sentence Writing Strategy

Study 1

Overview

This study focused on the instruction of several writing strategies in five fifth-grade inclusive general education classes in urban schools where a large proportion of students were living in poverty. Students in three participating classes served as the experimental group whereas students in the two other classes served as the comparison group. A total of 113 students participated, and 14 students with LD were enrolled in the classes. The three classes of experimental students were taught to use the Sentence Writing Strategy, plus adaptations of the Paragraph Writing Strategy and the Theme Writing Strategy. The Fundamentals of the Sentence Writing Strategy program was used for the sentence writing instruction, and a researcher provided the instruction. The comparison students participated in the district's chosen writing curriculum for the same amount of instructional time and were taught by their regularly assigned teachers.

Results

There were no differences between the experimental and comparison groups on the pretest, which required the students to write an essay. Four major measures were derived from this test including the percentage of complete sentences and the percentage of complicated sentences (i.e., the percentage of sentences that were compound, complex, or compound-complex sentences).

Experimental students as a whole group earned significantly higher scores on the posttest than the pretest on the majority of the writing measures, whereas the comparison students did not. For example, separate ANOVAs revealed significant differences between the experimental students' pretest and posttest complete sentence scores in favor of the posttest [$F(1, 57) = 89, p < .001, \eta^2 = .610$], representing a large effect size. Significant differences were also found for the experimental students between the pretest and posttest on the complicated sentences score [$F(1, 57) = 61.3, p < .001, \eta^2 = .518$], also representing a large effect size.

For the experimental students with LD, separate ANOVAs revealed significant differences between the pretest and posttest complete sentences scores [$F(1, 8) = 32, p = .001, \eta^2 = .8$] and complicated sentences scores [$F(1, 8) = 19.57, p = .002, \eta^2 = .710$], with both of these differences representing large effect sizes.

The mean score of the whole group of experimental students on the state competency exam was within the "Proficient" range (i.e., a passing score), whereas the mean score for the whole group of comparison students was in the "Basic" range (i.e., a failing score). The mean score of the experimental students with LD was in the "Basic" range and was not significantly different from the mean score of the whole group of comparison students.

Conclusions

This study showed that students can benefit from instruction in fundamental skills associated with the Sentence Writing Strategy when it is delivered within the large-group format of general education classes. Although students in the experimental classes as a whole group scored in the passing range on the state writing competency test on average, students with LD did not. Therefore, although they benefited from the instruction, the students with LD may have needed more practice and more emphasis on mastery than was provided in the large-group format in order to learn the skills to a level that would allow them to pass the minimal competency exam.

Reference

Bui, Y., Schumaker, J. B., & Deshler, D. D. (2006). Effects of a comprehensive package of writing strategy interventions on the writing performance of students with disabilities on state writing competency exams. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 21*(4), 244-260.

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Study 2

Overview

The focus of this study was on whether general education teachers could teach fundamental skills associated with the Sentence Writing Strategy successfully. Thirteen general education teachers were randomly assigned by teams to either teach the Sentence Writing Strategy or a reading comprehension strategy to their regularly assigned sixth-grade classes. The five teachers who were randomly assigned within their teaching teams to the writing strategy condition taught the Sentence Writing Strategy using the Fundamentals program to a total of nine general education classes. A total of 529 students participated in the study, with 213 students receiving sentence writing strategy instruction and 316 students receiving reading strategy instruction. A total of 28 students with disabilities received the writing strategy instruction, and 23 students with disabilities received the reading strategy instruction. These students were included in general education classes for most of the school day.

Results

Two measures were utilized: (a) a test of student knowledge of the Sentence Writing Strategy and associated concepts and (b) a test of student ability to write prompted sentences. On the latter test, students were given 11 prompts to write a certain type of sentence (e.g., "Write a sentence that has one subject and two verbs" or "Write a sentence with one subject, two verbs, and an infinitive.")

The hierarchical linear model approach with SAS PROC MIXED was used to compare the posttest scores of the experimental and control students. The students were nested within classes within the analyses, and pretest scores were used as the covariate in each analysis. For the whole group of students, a significant difference was found between the posttest scores of the experimental and control students on the sentence writing strategy knowledge measure [$F(1, 27.7) = 43.06, p < .0001$] and on the sentence writing measure [$F(1, 24.8) = 52.45, p < .0001$] in favor of the experimental students. Likewise, for the students with disabilities, a significant difference was found between the posttest scores of the experimental and control students on the strategy knowledge measure [$F(1, 51) = 97.43, p < .0001$] and on the sentence writing measure [$F(1, 16.6) = 41.94, p < .0001$], in favor of the experimental students with disabilities. After instruction, the students with disabilities in the experimental classes were able to respond correctly to 76% of the sentence-writing prompts while the whole group of students in experimental classes responded correctly to 85% of the sentence prompts. In contrast, the comparison students with disabilities and the whole group of comparison students correctly responded to 27% and 32% of the writing prompts, respectively.

Conclusions

Thus, this study showed that a variety of teachers can produce positive results when they teach the Sentence Writing Strategy in their general education classes using the Fundamentals of the Sentence Writing Strategy program. Students in the experimental classes earned significantly higher scores on a test of their knowledge of sentence writing skills as well as on a test of prompted writing skills than students in the comparison classes.

Reference

Fritschmann, N., Schumaker, J. B., & Deshler, D. D. (in prep.). *Effects of instruction in fundamental sentence writing in general education classes*. Lawrence, KS: Edge Enterprises, Inc.