

Socio-cognitive Approach to Teaching Writing

Impact on Pupils' Compositions

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

1. The socio-cognitive approach to writing programme can be integrated into the mainstream English Language curriculum.
2. English Language teachers should help low progress students by teaching them how to incorporate key thinking processes in writing.

BACKGROUND

Proponents of the socio-cognitive approach suggest that explicit teaching of the thinking process, which reflects genre-specific features, will have an impact on improving writing competence. Based on the review of empirical studies of the socio-cognitive writing approach, the current study adapted a few key points to be more appropriate for the study of teaching narrative writing in primary schools.

First, explicit teaching of the genre-specific thinking process was emphasized while considering young struggling learners' cognitive abilities, with self-regulation also explicitly taught. To provide students with a form of visible thinking process, a graphic organizer was used as a model for cognitive and meta-cognitive thinking processes.

Second, students were prompted to consider their writing goal and intended audience on the graphic organizer to help make writing decisions.

Third, the "WWW, WHAT2, HOW2 and WHY" chart was used to reduce time required to educate teachers before the intervention and students during the intervention.

FOCUS OF STUDY

While the last two decades have witnessed a growing body of research on the quality of student writing, research on the impact of the socio-cognitive approach on young learners' writing has remained scarce. To fill this gap, this study investigates the effect of the socio-cognitive approach on the writing quality of fourth graders in Singapore.

This study aimed to (1) understand how primary school teachers in Singapore teach writing using traditional methods; and (2) investigate any differences in the quality of compositions produced by students under the traditional methods and a method based on a socio-cognitive approach to writing. Through class observations and in-depth analysis of pupils' compositions, the study sought to explain the impact of the writing programme on the quality of writing produced by the low progress students.

KEY FINDINGS

- Teachers helped pupils learn how to write narratives through instructional scaffolding, which includes elements such as explicit outcomes and expectations, schema building and development of metacognition.
- Significant improvements in mean scores of participants in the experimental groups on macro-organization suggest that the socio-cognitive writing approach is effective in helping low progress students improve in macro-organization. The WWW, WHAT2, HOW2 + WHY mnemonic chart was found to be useful in guiding students' story planning in line with the seven-element story scale adapted from Harris and Graham (1996), which improved students' narratives in logical ordering of ideas and increasing number of key elements that made their stories more interesting, developing more in posttests as compared to pretests.
- Number of words and number of different words were examined to investigate effects of the socio-cognitive writing program on productivity. With respect to number of different words, it was found that experimental groups 2 and 3 performed significantly better compared to all other groups after treatment. The present study revealed that students generally wrote longer texts in the posttest regardless of groups.
- The observation that students with lowest proficiency levels made the most improvement in some aspects of syntactic complexity in effect is related to the findings of macro-organization. This association is plausible because students would obtain higher scores in macro-organization by elaborating on character development, setting, or conflict in narrative stories.
- Low progress students were found to make generally fewer errors in capitalization, spelling, and punctuation in their posttest writing. Control groups 1 and 2 made more capitalization errors, and control group 3 made more punctuation errors in posttest. It can be inferred that the improvement observed in low progress students might not be due to the practice effect.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Implications for practice

- School leaders can further support pupils by extending the duration of the research programme, to allow pupils more practice with forming the required thinking processes under the guidance of their teachers.

Implication for policy and research

- Consider how the application of the socio-cognitive approach to writing should adapt across different abilities of the students, to inform policies that target low progress students for continual assistance.
- Encourage further research on what instructional scaffolding functions should be used for what kinds of genres.

Proposed follow-up activities

- Dialogue with school leaders and ministry officials about mechanisms for implementing the socio-cognitive approach to writing, with particular focus on helping low progress students improve.
- Incorporate the socio-cognitive approach to writing as a topic within pre-service and in-service professional development programs.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants included 98 Primary Four pupils and six English language teachers from a primary school.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A quasi-experimental study design has been adopted. At the beginning of each academic year, students who were underachievers in the English language were selected based on the previous semester's composition examination results by their respective form teacher to participate in the socio-cognitive writing programme as the experimental group. As the underachieving students were selected from classes of different academic abilities, the experimental group

was further divided into three proficiency groups, namely Experimental 1, 2, and 3. Underachieving students of lower academic abilities were assigned to the Experimental 1 group. Underachieving students of relatively mid academic abilities were assigned to the Experimental 2 group. Underachieving students of relatively higher academic abilities were assigned to the Experimental 3 group. The experimental group was made up of 55 students. The control group for this research was made up of 43 students from the same primary four classes. They were not enrolled in the intervention programme but writing samples were collected from them during pretest and posttest. Within the control group, the students were also subdivided into three proficiency groups. Students of lower academic abilities classes were assigned to the Control Group 1. Students of mid academic abilities classes were assigned to the Control Group 2. Students of relatively higher academic abilities were assigned to the Control Group 3. Besides, 21 class observations were conducted.

REFERENCES

Harris, K. R., & Graham, S. (1996). *Making the writing process work: Strategies for composition and self-regulation*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

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