Guided Writing Lessons: Second-Grade Students’ Development of Strategic Behavior

Sharon A. Gibson
San Diego State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
Guided Writing Lessons: Second-Grade Students’ Development of Strategic Behavior

Sharan A. Gibson,
San Diego State University

Abstract

This study describes intra-individual change in strategic behavior of five second-grade students during three months of guided writing instruction for informational text. Data sources included sequential coding of writing behavior from videotaped writing events and analytic assessment of writing products. Students’ development of self-scaffolding supported orchestration of attention across word, sentence, and text levels while writing was studied. Participants encountered challenges in the following linguistic resources: textual organization, degree of explicitness, and presentation of details through appropriate sentence structures.

Understanding writers’ development is consequential for effective instruction and student achievement, allowing implementation of appropriate types and levels of instructional scaffolding. In-depth information is needed, then, on the strategic, generative ways in which young writers construct intent to convey information and facility with the structures of informational text. Specifically, this study investigated the ways in which second-grade students developed strategic behavior and orchestrated their attention across word, sentence, paragraph, and text levels during writing.
An influential body of research contrasts the nature of planning, drafting, revising, editing, and sharing processes for novice and expert writers. Flower and Hayes (1980), for example, investigated differences between novice and expert adult writers from a cognitive, problem-solving viewpoint. They noted that composing requires balancing a series of constraints. Weak writers utilize a writing plan in a step-by-step manner, whereas good writers develop initial, high-level plans and return to and develop those plans while writing. Revision, then, is a series of iterative cognitive processes requiring control structures (Hayes, 2000). Writers’ ideas occur in pre-verbal, “gist units” (Bereiter, 1980), requiring multiple decisions for word choice and sentence structure or “translation” (Flower & Hayes, 1980).

Metacognitive, generative processes used during writing have not yet been studied extensively for young writers (Juzwik, Curcic, Wolbers, Moxley, Dimling, & Shankland, 2006), and little is currently known regarding the basic psychological processes that occur as naïve writers become expert writers (Cameron, Hunt, & Linton, 1996). The development of a self-extending system (Clay, 2001) for writing is dependent on active engagement while utilizing strategic behavior and developing control structures. Engaging in self-monitoring and self-correcting behavior is postulated to create momentum for learning, focusing awareness across hierarchical levels for an integrated construction of messages across word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, text structure, and genres. Learning about writing can be accelerated when teachers are able to build students’ abilities to notice and interact with specific features of the construction of text. Based on a theory of writing as recontextualization, Cameron, Hunt, and Linton (1996) have proposed, for example, a theory of writing instruction requiring social scaffolding within a linguistic-enriching environment.

Creating effective instructional intervention requires in-depth knowledge of (a) writing development; (b) effective instructional frameworks; and (c) multiple, interacting causes of failure for individual students. Bryant and Bradley (1983) noted the importance of a strategy approach over a deficit approach to writing instruction. Young and/or naïve writers typically lack the control structures that facilitate their orchestration of both existing skills and skills in formation. The systems of learning and development (McNaughton, 1995) of poor writers are both limited and limiting (Glasswell, 2001). There is evidence, however, that strategic behavior for writing can be taught to and learned by young writers. Bradley (2001) found that first-grade writers were able to not only discuss and evaluate the characteristics of their peers’ writing, but to apply that knowledge to their own work as writers.
Sipe (1998) identified important shifts in one first-grade student’s composing, from concentrated attention for basic encoding processes to confident and quick revision for meaning. Boocock and McNaughton (1998) utilized a cross-sectional descriptive design and 5-minute observation of individual students, identifying evidence of primary grade children’s development of monitoring and searching strategies. While competent writers improved, however, the poorest writers did not. The authors recommended longitudinal studies of specific children, identifying intra-individual change over time.

The importance of reading and writing informational text is well recognized. There is evidence, for example, that writing can enhance young children’s ability to reason about and understand concepts and information (Chambliss, Christenson, & Parker, 2003). Newkirk (1987) demonstrated that primary grade students were able to improve their non-narrative composing from (a) labeling and lists; and (b) question-answer couplets, and attribute series; to (c) true, ordered paragraphs. Children do appropriate features of information books into their own writing when high levels of exposure are provided (Chapman & Filipenko, 2005). Read (2005) analyzed first and second grade students’ conversations during paired writing, finding that these children were concerned with both form and content encouraging them to reread and revise their writing. Positive effects have also resulted from the application of cognitive strategy instruction to writing through the use of think sheets (Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony, & Stevens, 1991). These authors argued that multiple-component writing instruction utilizing dialogue, scaffolded instruction, and collaboration is likely to be more effective than “simple, quick-fix writing strategies and methods” (p. 368).

The purpose of the current study is to provide a developmentally- and event-based account of second-grade students’ responses to guided writing lessons focused on informational text. This descriptive study utilized detailed analyses of students’ writing and writing behavior during guided writing lessons in order to describe participants’ development of strategic behavior. The questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What changes over time in strategic behaviors were observed as second-grade students produced informational text?

2. What aspects of informational text were most challenging for second-grade writers?
Method

Participants

Participants were five second-grade students (two boys and three girls) in a public elementary school within a suburban school district in the southwest of the United States. All participants are referred to by pseudonyms within this article. Each child was selected by the classroom teacher, and considered to be making average progress in literacy development. The researcher was also the instructor for the guided writing lessons. Participants continued to participate in all classroom literacy instruction, with the exception of the 25- to 30-minute time frame for the additional guided writing lessons. These lessons typically took place during a portion of the classroom’s independent writing time.

Guided Writing Lessons

Guided writing is defined in this study as instruction presented to small, temporary groups of students who share similar needs at a particular point in time (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Guided writing provides an important context for teachers’ “in-the-moment” assessment and guidance of student writing; to observe students during specific writing events and provide immediate instructional scaffolding for writing processes targeted to the needs of a specific group of students.

The researcher presented a series of daily, guided writing lessons to the same five students for three months. These lessons focused on informational text and a series of interest-building activities. For example, the group engaged in brief experiments with magnets and floating objects, and investigated the invention of Velcro and paperclips. A typical lesson format consisted of discussion and demonstration of strategic behavior, experiment or activity, guided writing, and sharing of examples.

The researcher chose instructional goals and activities for each lesson based on observation and analytic assessment (Fearn & Farnan, 2001) of each student’s writing (see Table 1). Strategic behaviors for writing were presented, providing explanation, demonstration, and examples of the processes that students could use to organize information, include appropriate details, construct clear sentences, spell challenging words, and include correct mechanics. In order to utilize the voice and text structures of informational text, for example, the instructor presented such strategies as:
• Think of a first sentence that will tell your readers the one, interesting piece of information that you are writing about.
• Be sure to include enough information so that your readers understand what you mean.
• Reread your writing to see if it makes sense.

Table 1. Example of Lesson-by-Lesson Analytic Assessment of Students’ Writing Products

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>but wonder</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>sur/sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>first second</td>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>0/4</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2/2</td>
<td>to/two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>0/1</td>
<td>1/1</td>
<td>wite/white</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>1/11</td>
<td>5/11</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>0/1</td>
<td>thar/they’re</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>when</td>
<td>0/1</td>
<td>0/1</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>0/1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>3/3</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>do’not/ don’t</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cari</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>when</td>
<td>3/3</td>
<td>0/3</td>
<td>1/1</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>whit/white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>meny/ many</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>3/3</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>1/1</td>
<td>1/1</td>
<td>than/then</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>2/2</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>Na</td>
<td>Na</td>
<td>wite/white</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teacher talk and demonstration during lessons prompted students to be mindful of their decision making while writing. The instructional scaffolding provided during lessons included reminders to students to use a writing behavior that had been previously taught; explanation of writing strategies (verbal explanation and charts listing useful strategies, praise for the use of strategies by students, and teacher labeling of student strategic behavior); presentation of examples; demonstration and think aloud for strategic behaviors; and prompting for student decision making. Instruction did not focus on revision and editing as separate and distinct processes. Instead, revision and editing were taught in the context of students’ initial production of text.

**Data Sources**

*Lesson videotapes.* Each guided writing lesson was videotaped and transcribed. Transcripts were coded within three overarching levels: topic of instruction, type of instructional scaffolding, and explicitly taught strategic behavior. A grid was then created for each topic of instruction, mapping the types of instructional scaffolding utilized in each lesson for each set of strategic behaviors. This mapping procedure allowed for the identification of strategic behavior supported by high levels of instructional scaffolding. A comparison was also made of the teacher and participants’ verbal statements while engaged in each exploratory activity. For each lesson, teacher and students’ verbal statements directly describing the topic were identified, and placed within a two-column grid. The use of specific vocabulary and sentence structures was then compared.

*Writing event videotapes.* Each student was individually videotaped once a week, as he/she completed a writing product for that day’s guided writing lesson. Each of these videotaped writing events was coded using line-by-line sequential behavioral analysis. SignStream™ (MacLaughlin, Neidle, & Greenfield, 2000), a software application designed for analyzing American Sign Language, was adapted for this purpose. SignStream™ is a multimedia database tool allowing for the transcription and analysis of video-based language data. For this study, each writing event video was segmented at the sentence level, and the student’s writing behavior was coded. The broad categories used for coding included Not Writing, Sustained Writing, Rereading, Talking, and Correcting/Revising. Each coded video segment was also re-viewed and annotated. The researcher then completed an audio taped self-interview while viewing each writing event as a whole, commenting on students’ ways of working while writing. These self-interviews were transcribed.
Summaries were constructed from SignStream™ coding and researcher interviews, describing patterns of strategic behavior for each writing event. The summaries addressed the following questions:

1. For what apparent purposes did the writer reread?
2. What self-talk was evident, and for what apparent purposes?
3. What other types of self-scaffolding were evident?
4. What overt self-correction occurred?

Each summary was placed within a grid and compared across participants and lessons. For this study, strategic was defined as knowledge of ways of working in order to convey information and ideas through writing. Strategic behavior occurs as writers consider information, work on it, make a decision, and evaluate the results (Singer, 1994).

Writing products. Each individual writing sample was evaluated analytically (Fearn & Farnan, 2001). Questions utilized for this analysis were developed from the lesson transcript mapping procedure described above, and addressed those categories of strategic behaviors taught through high levels of instructional scaffolding:

1. How many details are included?
2. Does the writing address a main point?
3. Is the writing clear and understandable?
4. Which transition words are used?
5. What sentence structure is used?
6. Is the presentation of a sequence of events clear and understandable?
7. Does the first sentence (and/or title) tell readers what the text is about?

Results

Analysis of participants’ strategic behavior while writing informational text indicated a distinct point in time during lessons when each student developed a more active, strategic stance while writing. Analysis of participants’ writing products demonstrated challenges to participants’ linguistic resources for informational text. Overall, however, participants developed a greater repertoire of control structures and resources for the production of informational text. Importantly, the more
complex and integrated strategic behavior observed in later lessons appeared to provide students with generative experience orchestrating writing processes across hierarchical levels of language use.

**Change Over Time in Strategic Writing Behavior**

**Rereading and self-correction.** It was typical throughout lessons for participants to reread after a distraction or after s/he had given attention to a difficult-to-spell word. Students seemed to be using rereading to regulate their own attention to writing. In later lessons, students also began to reread for the purposes of monitoring and correcting the clarity of their ideas, sentence structure and/or word choice. This rereading and in-process revision was accomplished independently and integrated within the construction of participants’ drafts. Rereading appeared, then, to become more usefully directed by students’ expanded control structures for their production and monitoring of informational text structure. Participants’ self-correction was accomplished throughout lessons using (a) quick return to a previous line or sentence, (b) rereading of short phrases, or (c) rereading from the beginning of the text. Participants most commonly corrected ending punctuation, letter formation, and capitalization in early lessons. In the last month of lessons, they also began to reread and self-correct for word choice, overall organization, and composing at the phrase level.

**Self-talk and use of resources.** Participants used self-talk to support and sustain their writing. Self-talk during writing was observed sporadically for each participant throughout lessons, most typically for spelling support. As participants wrote a difficult-to-spell word, they verbalized phonemes or syllables. In later lessons, participants also verbalized each word while writing. This behavior tended to occur after an interruption, such as the spelling of a difficult word. Independent, verbal accompaniment to writing appeared to serve the purpose of sustaining attention to word and sentence levels.

Self-directed use of resources was observed from each participant as he/she encountered specific challenges. These overt self-scaffolding moves became more consistent across participants in later lessons, and were directed at higher levels of decision-making. Participants consulted their own texts by referencing the spelling of a word in a previous sentence. In later lessons they also consulted their own texts, however, this was done in order to consider what details or transition words to include.
The character, then, of participants’ strategic behavior altered over the course of guided writing lessons. Rather than using self-correction primarily for the purpose of mechanical control, participants shifted to self-correction for word choice, organization, and phrase-level composing. Similarly, participants shifted reference to their own text to monitoring for the clarity and correctness of information presented. Participants also began to utilize self-talk beyond attention to spelling, and to re-read in order to monitor for clarity.

**Example: Kim’s strategic writing behavior.** In the second week of lessons, Kim wrote a text describing celery (see Figure 1). During her writing of this text, Kim reread twice after spelling the difficult words *skinny* and *why*. She self-corrected for letter formation and use of capital letters. Kim also monitored the correct orientation for the letter *b* in the word *bad*. When writing this word again in the medial section of her text, she referred back to her own previous spelling. During her work on difficult-to-spell words, Kim put her head down close to the paper and crossed off attempts quickly. When working on her spelling for the word *why*, for example, Kim twice crossed off her spelling of this word as *way*. The teacher then intervened with the correct spelling. Kim did not engage in any overt self-talk during this writing. She constructed a title that described the content relatively well. She also maintained a focus throughout her text, as she provided a list of details. These details were nonspecific, however, in relationship to the discussion during the lesson regarding the roots, veins, and leaves of celery. Kim’s sentence structures and word choices for this text were simple and repetitive. Overall, Kim’s writing demonstrated a limited use of strategic behavior and unsophisticated use of informational text structure.

In the last week of lessons, Kim wrote a text describing an experiment with vinegar and baking soda (see Figure 2). During this writing event, Kim utilized a variety of resources. She corrected her spelling of the word *mix*, for example, by referencing the teacher’s example. Kim also looked back at one of her own

*Figure 1. Example of Kim’s Writing at Week Two.*
previous texts, in order to spell the word another as a nuth. Kim reread for several
different purposes. For example, she reread from the beginning of her text after her
work to spell the words together and bubbles. She also reread in order to monitor
the clarity of her writing so far, returning to successively earlier points in her text
each time. After writing And, Kim crossed this word off and then reread from
the beginning of her text and made a new start on this sentence. When the teacher
intervened, asking “I wonder what happens next?” Kim reread her text aloud in
order to identify points already made regarding the sequence of events. Kim self-
corrected her spelling of words, and she added missing periods. She utilized self-talk
to scaffold her spelling for difficult words through articulation of phonemes and
syllables. When writing the word bubbles, for example, Kim first wrote be. She then
changed this initial attempt to bu after saying the word slowly to herself. Kim also
verbalized her writing word by word to herself, particularly after working on a spell-
ing challenge. This verbalization appeared to serve the function of monitoring, and
attention to sentence structure and word choice. Kim also articulated punctuation
to herself, stating “Period!” after writing the sentence “It is cool.”

Analysis of Kim’s strategic behavior for this later writing event, then, indicates an active stance using a variety of strategic behaviors independently, flexibly, and in an integrated manner. Kim’s writing for this event also demonstrated

![Figure 2. Example of Kim’s Writing at End of Lessons.](image)

a more sophisticated use of linguistic resources for informational text. Her sentences
were more complex and the vocabulary used in this writing was more directly related
to the group’s discussion. Kim’s use of rhetorical devices for informational text
remained somewhat limited, however, as she continued to use a personal voice. Kim
did not include a topic sentence or illustrative title in this writing. This text did,
however, maintain focus on a specific topic.
Improved Strategic Behavior and Expanded Attention to Language Use

As participants’ use of strategic behavior increased, rereading, self-correction, self-talk, and use of resources resulted in a reiterative set of opportunities to compose across hierarchical levels of language (see Figure 3). Participants applied this highly active strategic behavior to their awareness and construction of the structures of informational text. This strategic behavior, then, became more fully integrated within participants’ “in-the-moment” writing production. Participants utilized self-scaffolding and self-correction to engage in active attempts to convey information clearly through sustained attention to word- and sentence-level segmenting.

During the 10th week of lessons, for example, Cari constructed a text titled “Leaf Science.” Cari utilized self-scaffolds in order to orchestrate her attention to spelling processes, the construction of relatively complex sentence structures, and the presentation of a sequence of ideas. Point-by-point analysis of Cari’s writing
behavior (see Figure 4) illustrated the integration of her attention across levels of language use, constituting a self-extending system for writing development.

![Table of Cari's text, segmented to demonstrate attention to levels of language use](image)

- **Leaf**
- **Science**
- **Trees have leaves**
  - and leaves need
  - **oxygen.**
- **Do you know that**
  - **people**
  - **need trees**
  - **for them to stay**
  - **alive?**
  - **And if**
  - **someone cuts**
  - **a tree**
  - **then we will have less**
  - **oxygen.**
- **People**
- **can get sick and die**
  - **without**
  - **oxygen.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Carli's text, segmented to demonstrate attention to levels of language use</th>
<th>Phonemic Analysis</th>
<th>Lexical Knowledge</th>
<th>Sequence of Ideas</th>
<th>Extended Sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leaf</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trees have leaves</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and leaves need</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oxygen.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know that</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>need trees</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for them to stay</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alive?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And if</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>someone cuts</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a tree</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>then we will have less</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oxygen.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can get sick and die</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oxygen.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4.** Cari’s orchestration of attention to levels of language through strategic behavior.

In contrast to her writing during early lessons, Cari demonstrated long periods of sustained writing for this text. Her phonemic and orthographic analysis of words was carried out quickly and with ease for such partially correct attempts as
siinse for science, and pepol for people. Cari corrected her first attempt to write the word with quickly and easily. She supported her spelling of several additional words (i.e., someone, oxygen, and alive) with self-talk, saying the word slowly to herself. Based on this process, Cari added a medial /m/ to the word someone.

After brief work on specific spelling challenges, Cari either re-read or verbalized word-by-word in order to continue writing, apparently scaffolding her attention back to the sentence or proposition level. Cari also utilized re-reading, typically two or three words at a time, when moving to a next clause within a sentence. For example, she paused and reread after writing “and if someone cuts a tree” and “Do you know that people need trees.” This rereading appeared to constitute a self-scaffolding response to the task difficulty level at specific points in her writing work. Cari utilized several different types of resources when writing this text. She referred back to her own previous spelling of the word oxygen, and copied the word leaf from a neighbor’s paper. As Cari finished writing the first three sentences of her text, she actively solicited her teacher’s help in order to proceed, reciting the details already written in her text. Cari constructed her last sentence in this text in response to her teacher’s question: “Do you think people know what would happen to us without oxygen?”

**Challenging Aspects of Informational Text Construction**

In general, these second-grade students appeared to lack familiarity with the structure of informational text. Writing outside of the more familiar narrative problem/resolution structure created challenges in overall organization, degree of explicitness, and presentation of details through clear sentence structures. Participants did, however, improve in their use of specific features of informational text. This improvement occurred alongside the increase in active, strategic behavior described above.

Participants’ fascination with each of the hands-on activities presented prior to writing was both immediate and obvious during these lessons. It was also clear that students encountered challenges as they moved into writing about these events. Students’ talk during experiments and investigations indicated lack of specific vocabulary and many hesitations and re-starts as they struggled to structure their thinking into clear verbal statements:

Teacher We have two things. First we have vinegar and then I have baking soda.
Cari  Oh, it’s like a volcano but they make a volcano and they have the water, and you put, I tried it and it was, it, I made a volcano and rises up and then it went all over my room.

Informational text writing required participants to develop the ability to construct unfamiliar sentence structures, using signal words and complex ideas presented through multiple clauses. The most common transition word used by students throughout these lessons was *and*. The teacher presented multiple examples and opportunities to rehearse useful sentence structures orally. For example, the teacher explained, Good writers have a good first sentence and a good last sentence. Listen to Kim’s first sentence:

*I know something about bats. Isn’t that a great first sentence to start with? Say that sentence: I know something about bats, period. That told people what you were going to write about and that you were going to tell them something interesting.*

In later lessons participants began combining *and* in such phrases as *and if*, *and finally*, and *and then*. Rachel, for example, wrote:

*Here is what happens when you mix vinegar and baking soda together. it will make bubbles and rise up. And if you tack a nather scoop of backing soda. it will rize.*

Participants utilized signal words for sequence with relative ease, however, when the exploratory activity lent itself well to sequential description:

*An experiment with oil and water. Frist I have a cup of water 10 inches longe. Next I get vegtable oil one drop. Then you mixed it with a pop-cikel stik. Last I looked at the bottem. And that’s all!* Use of words denoting cause/effect relationships, such as *because*, was infrequent and typically connected to a personal comment: “I think bats are cool because they can hang upside down.” Participants appeared, then, to require high amounts of instructional scaffolding and time to practice for the construction of sentences using signal words for informational text.

Writing products across the study demonstrated a general increase in quantity of details well related to the current lesson’s hands-on exploration (increasing from an average of 8 to 16 details per text per student). Participants’ responses demonstrated that they were not clear in early lessons on either the definition of, or the distinct need for clear details in informational text. As the guided writing lessons progressed, however, they began to develop their own ways of talking about details as is shown in this exchange between the teacher, Rachel, Kim, and Sam:
Today think about echolocation or about baby bats. Think about the food they eat, or how they fly. Pick one interesting thing and write about lots of details.

Like this? [showing her writing book]

Yes, like you did. Do you know what details are?

You know, like, little, like little parts that you want to include of your sentence or story.

Right. Tell about echolocation. Tell how it works and what they do with it. And why it’s important.

A lot about a little.

Stronger progress for the inclusion of details was observed in later lessons as the teacher explicitly connected this strategic behavior to the need for clarity so that readers would understand the intended message. As participants began to talk explicitly about what they wanted their texts to communicate, they also shifted to rereading and self-correction with attention to intended meanings. Their strategic orchestration of attention from word-level to the construction of phrases and propositions provided good support for their improvement as writers of informational text.

Participants’ writing addressed a specific, main point 83% of the time. They often did not maintain this focus throughout a text, however. Although they were able to include more details in their writing over time, they experienced challenges matching these details up in a logical way with a chosen, main point. In early lessons, 23% of the time, their writing was not clear:

First I made a shape it was a metear it looks like it is going very fast because the pont is up and I made a a the shape it was a srcel it was a little one it floated!

When the text was not clear, the writer had failed to include the explicit information that would allow readers to understand intended implications:

I tried an experiment to see what kinds of objects would float in water. First, I made a shape out of a piece of tin foil. It was shaped like a meteor and pointed up, which made it look like it was going very fast. This object did not float. Then, I made a second object out of tin foil. This object was shaped like a little circle, and it did float!

In early lessons, students did not tend to include a first sentence that clearly indicated the topic or main idea. Sam, for example, began his writing about objects that float with the sentence “I poured the water out of the cup.” In this brief
experiment, Sam had poured out the water, put a rubber band in the cup first, and poured the water back in order to determine if a change in sequence would cause the rubber band to float. His text did not reflect this experiment clearly. Later, however, he began a text about baby bats with the sentence “Did you know baby bats hook onto their mothers’ fur because they can’t fly until they are a few weeks old?” Sam then provided information regarding mother’s milk and baby bats’ survival. Analysis of Sam’s writing behavior during this period of time indicated that he was rereading in order to determine what ideas to write about next, and for word choice. He was also utilizing self-talk as a scaffold to bring his attention back to his sequence of ideas and to self-monitor and correct his construction of sentences. His self-corrections addressed issues of clarity as well as mechanical control. Sam’s increased use of strategic behavior, then, supported improvements in his ability to construct informational text.

Example: Sean’s informational text. Sean’s writing demonstrates specific aspects of participants’ improvement in the construction of informational text. In the first week of lessons, Sean wrote a text describing an experiment with floating objects (see Figure 5). Sean’s sentence structures are relatively sophisticated in this text and show some match to the group discussion: “But I’m not quite sure all stainless steel will sink.” Sean demonstrated confusion over his use of ending punctuation with both unneeded and missing periods. Sam may have placed periods after his construction of individual propositions:

- my tea strainer.
- is stainless steel.
- but it sank to the bottom of the cup.
- full of water.

While Sean included detail in his text, he did not, however, provide sufficient rhetorical devices in his writing to insure that his readers would understand the intended message. He did not include a title or topic sentence,

Figure 5. Example of Sean’s Writing in Week One.
for example, and resorted to personal voice with statements such as “I wonder.”

In the last week of lessons, Sean wrote a text describing how a bat eats moths (see Figure 6). In this text, Sean’s sentence structures are varied. He began the text with a topic sentence, “Bats like moths.” He used signal words in his sentences with a degree of sophistication, “When they bite it, the moth’s wings fall off.” Sean also used aspects of informational text structure well in this writing. He began with a simple topic sentence and stayed on topic throughout most of his text. Details included are well matched to the group discussion and address relatively sophisticated aspects of bats’ food procurement using specific vocabulary. Sean also wrote with an appropriate voice and stance for informational text, including a pronunciation guide for the word echolocation and a picture to illustrate this concept. Sean constructed a relatively sophisticated single paragraph as he moved from his topic sentence to a description of the moth powder and bats’ use of echolocation to find food.

Discussion

This study provides a developmentally-based account of second-grade students’ responses to guided writing lessons focused on informational text, addressing the need for description of intra-individual change over time in children’s writing strategies. The small number of participants for this study allowed for in-depth analyses, but limits the generalizability of the findings. The intent of the study was not to identify effects of guided writing lessons in isolation from students’ participation in other instructional contexts. A wide range of contexts and factors
undoubtedly influenced participants’ writing. Further research should investigate
the effectiveness of a variety of types of instructional support provided to students
while they are actually engaged in writing. The ability of influential literacy teachers
to orchestrate and resolve instructional episodes effectively through moment-by-
moment decision making requires high levels of instructional expertise (Ruddell,
2004). Examination of the interaction between teacher and students would provide
information on effective teachers’ use of clarifying, validating, and generative re-
sponses during students’ writing.

**Writing Informational Text**

Becoming a successful, young writer of informational text requires facility
with specific aspects of the structure of informational text, linguistic resources, and
control structures for the internalization of strategic behavior. Even with high levels
of instructional scaffolding, second-grade students experienced difficulty with over-
all organization, degree of explicitness, and presentation of information through
clear sentence structures. They also, however, demonstrated progress. Across three
months of guided writing lessons, students internalized strategic behaviors for writ-
ing. Students’ independent, expanded use of self-scaffolding (rereading, self-talk, and
use of resources) supported their active attempts to convey information clearly.

Teachers should be prepared to provide high doses of genre-specific instruc-
tional support. This instruction should include demonstration and think aloud,
combined with verbal interactions where all students are actively and consistently
engaged in high amounts of talk and writing. Young, naïve writers need specific,
direct instruction that is delivered as close as possible to the point of need. Students
should have extended and guided opportunities to put new learning into practice
immediately. Instruction should directly address the vocabulary, sentence, and text
structures needed for informational text, improving students’ linguistic and rhetori-
cal resources.

Teachers should also teach explicitly for students’ control over a set of im-
mediately useful sentence structures that are specific to informational text. Young
writers need opportunities to hear and try out sentence structures that utilize signal
words and clauses appropriately for specific types of expository text structure.
Teachers need to teach directly and explicitly for knowledge of the most useful rhe-
torical devices for informational text. Presenting strong examples of mentor texts
with a variety of expository text structures could improve students’ writing, as long
as attention is explicitly drawn to those elements of text structure that students will be able to appropriate into their current writing.

**Strategic Behavior for Writing**

Writing instruction can be targeted at expansion of students’ active stance and use of strategic behavior during initial text production. The progress of participants in this study demonstrates that this goal can be accomplished through integrated writing instruction without an exclusive focus on revision, and/or editing as distinct processes. Effective writing instruction may result in individual student’s construction of a higher quality of drafts; so that each student’s “momentarily best effort” (Fearn & Farnan, 2001, p. 70) improves over time. The development of active strategic behavior for writing is well supported by instructional interaction with students at the point of writing, so that students learn how to take action across hierarchical language levels and internalize detailed awareness of ways in which information is conveyed through written language.

Teachers’ expertise for writing instruction can be assisted through descriptions of “in the moment” instructional scaffolding. The constructive and encoding-based nature of writing appears to require particular kinds of scaffolding. For many students, modeling alone may not best develop internalization of appropriate strategic behavior. Instead, teachers need to teach students, directly and intentionally, how to put models into practice. As teachers “lean in” to assist individuals during writing, interaction should focus on what the writer is currently constructing rather than to correction or praise for already-written segments. Teachers need to assist children as they search their oral messages for the phonemes, morphemes, words, phrases, sentences, and ideas that need to be recorded next (Clay, 2005). This interaction instantiates feed forward:

- What information do you need to add now?
- What could you do now to help yourself?
- Say it to yourself first. Does it sound right?
- Could you start the next sentence like this: “Then, .....”?
- Would rereading help you to know what to write next?
- How could you tell your readers why that happens?
Guided Writing Instruction

Guided writing lessons provide strong opportunities for teachers to observe and teach intensively. Lessons can be structured to include joint, independent, and ambient activities (Glasswell, 2001). In one setting, then, teachers can orchestrate an integrated set of instructional activities: (a) explanation and demonstration of strategic behavior, (b) guided writing, and (c) a close look at peers’ written work. Guided writing lessons keep the writing process intact, by integrating strands of learning for students across mechanical control, spelling, sentence structure, text structure, and communication. Guided writing lessons also provide high amounts of applied practice for each individual student; time to write with immediate assistance as necessary.

Close work over an extended period of time with one group of students is also an important context for the development of teacher expertise. In guided writing, teachers can refocus on shared goals and understandings, provide appropriate degrees of explicitness matched to the writing behavior of individuals, and reconstruct and modify the nature of the support provided for writers (Glasswell, Parr, & McNaughton, 2003). Teachers may otherwise tend to underestimate students’ need for detailed and specific levels of instructional scaffolding, and assume that modeling, student choice of topic, and extended time to write will in and of themselves cause improvements in student writing (Gibson, 2007).

Guided writing lessons are delivered to temporary groups of students with similar interests and/or needs. It is not essential for every student to participate in a guided writing group. Teachers may meet with one group only for a period of time, for lessons that are integrated within other classroom organizational structures (e.g., writers workshop or interactive writing). This daily, concentrated instruction over time for a specific group of students is directed by intensive assessment procedures. Guided writing provides a context for teachers to notice what individual students actually do when they write from one lesson to the next. Students’ personal appropriation of strategies taught can be directly and immediately observed. Guided writing instruction, then, allows the teacher to engage in reflective practice for writing instruction directed by detailed observation. Engagement in close, reflective work over an extended period of time with one group of students will improve teachers’ instructional interaction for all students.
References


**About the Author:**

**Dr. Sharan A. Gibson** is a faculty member of the School of Teacher Education at San Diego State University. She teaches courses in literacy instruction for preservice teachers, as well as clinical, graduate level courses for the reading masters and reading specialist credential programs. Dr. Gibson also directs the Reading Recovery program at San Diego State University.