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Self-Selected vs. Assigned Writing Topics: The Effects Topics Have on First Graders' Writing Performance

By K.P. Buchanan

Introduction

When asked about early writing experiences in school, many adults have memories of writing papers on topics such as "What I Want to Learn in School This Year" or "My Favorite Trip." The teacher probably thought that if the topic was of interest to her students, they would become motivated to write. In essence, the purpose for writing most often comes from the teacher, and not the students. Rarely are students allowed to choose their own topics for writing assignments. The focus of writing instruction is usually, therefore, is teacher-centered rather than child-centered. It has historically been the child's task to ascertain just what the teacher wants in a writing piece. It follows that the children had very little ownership of their own writing.

Although some teachers still approach writing in this manner, many see the value in students providing their own purposes for writing. In 1983, some began to change the ways in which writing was taught with the publication of Donald Graves' book *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Wong-Kam, AU, Sumida, & Jacobson, 1995). In this publication, Graves stresses the importance of children choosing their own topics for writing. When a teacher assigns a topic, the child must write, "using someone else's knowledge, for someone else's reasons, and in the worst cases, with someone else's enthusiasm" (Graves, 1983, p. 25). However when a child is allowed to choose the topic, writing instantly becomes more meaningful and personal. The author states, A child writes about a topic because he thinks he knows something about it (p. 21).

Statement of the Problem

Since many teachers have altered the ways in which they teach writing, one would expect to find an abundance of published research comparing the more traditional method with the newer child-centered approach; this is not the case. Very limited statistical research exists concerning writing sample quality and topic selection. The purpose of this research is to statistically compare the quality of writing samples when students are provided a teacher-assigned topic versus when they are permitted to self-select.

Review of Literature

Though limited quantitative studies exist, a large amount of qualitative literature is available on students' writing topics. Most of the literature stresses the importance of children choosing their own topics for writing, and there are many reasons for this method of pre-writing instruction.

Writing is difficult enough when you write about something that interests you, and it is even more challenging when someone else supplies you with a topic (Bratcher, 1997; Manning & Manning, 1995). Stice, Bertrand, and Bertrand (1995) posit, Children tend to learn to write faster, better, and more joyfully when they do so for their own purposes, under the guidance and encouragement of a knowledgeable teacher (p. 251). Turbill (1983) suggests, "Children write best, and develop most rapidly as writers, when they write on topics they care about" (p. 43). Motivation for writing should come from the child and not from a topic a teacher has selected (Calkins, 1986, Turbill, 1983). Graves believes, "You can tell a good writing classroom by the presence of the child's interests in the room" (Calkins, 1983, p. 27).

Self-selecting writing topics makes writing personal and gives children's writing a

"voice" (Graves, 1983, Manning, 1999). When students are provided a topic, they may have insufficient background knowledge or limited interest to write effectively about it (Manning & Manning, 1995). Children should be encouraged to write about what is interesting and meaningful to them (Bratcher, 1997; Calkins, 1983; Calkins and Harwayne, 1987; Graves, 1983; Manning, 1999; Turbill, 1983). Calkins and Harwayne (1987) believe the first step in helping children care about writing is encouraging them to write about topics that matter most to them. Writing on self-selected topics also helps children see themselves in a new light. Murray (1982) writes, "I . . . hear voices from my students they have never heard from themselves. I find they are authorities on subjects they think ordinary" (p. 157).

Allowing children to choose their writing topics encourages them to be responsible and take ownership of their learning (Turbill, 1983). Cambourne (1988) highlights the value of children making decisions about when, how, and what to learn. The author suggests children are depowered when they lose the ability to make decisions. Children develop autonomy when they are given responsibility to make choices (Fresch, 1995). Calkins (1983), who refers to story starters and teacher-assigned topics as "writer's welfare" (p. 25), believes children become dependent when they are given topics on which to write. Graves (1983) underscores that children who have been placed on the "writer's welfare" panic when they are asked to self-select a topic: "The anxiety is not unlike that of the child whose mother has just turned off the television set. 'Now what do I do?' bellows the child" (Graves, 1983, p. 21). Turbill (1983) stresses that control of the writing process should be left in the child's hands from the very beginning.

When children are allowed to choose their writing topics, communications among teachers and students increases, and the social culture of the classroom is changed. Manning and Manning (1995) suggest it is the teacher's job to help students discover their own topics, and this can be accomplished when students share their topic ideas with each other. According to Glazer (1999), writing must be facilitated by conversation (9, 88). Graves (1996) believes children should share their writing with one another so that they may understand why people write and learn to be sensitive toward personal issues they may want to explore through writing. Through conversation, students begin to realize that their lives are full of what Calkins (1983) calls "small treasures" (p.27). When students share their thoughts, they recognize their ideas are worth writing about (Calkins, 1983).

Since the qualitative literature provides many reasons for allowing children to self-select writing topics, there is a need for quantitative research to validate these claims. This action research study attempts to supplement this need for statistical data regarding the self-selection of writing topics by young children.

Statement of Hypothesis

First graders are likely to produce better quality writing samples when they are allowed to self-select a topic as opposed to when they are provided a teacher-assigned topic. A first grade writing sample will be considered "better quality" if it is longer and contains a larger variety of words.

Method

Nineteen (19) first graders (10 boys and 9 girls) participated in this research. The age range for the students was 2 years 9 months, while the mean age was 6 years 7 months. Eighteen of them were white, and one was black. All of the students were in a regular, self-contained classroom in a rural Georgia elementary school. The school-wide demographic data percentages were as follows: students eligible for free or reduced lunch (38.7%), special education (10.8%), gifted education (3.3%), and English speakers of other languages (0.0%) (Georgia Public Education Report Card, 1998). These students were selected to participate because their teacher expressed interest in the hypothesis of the study. The teacher desired to know the results in order to plan more effective writing instruction.

Materials

The students used lined writing paper and pencils for both writing assignments. A data collection form was created to record results and other pertinent information.

Design and Procedure

Visits to the first grade classroom occurred in two sessions on the same day and at the same time for two successive weeks. The visits coincided with the teacher's introduction to creative writing in the month of October.

During the first session, the students were asked to write on the topic "What I Like to do at Home." After assigning the topic, the students were permitted to talk briefly to each other about details they could include in their writing. Once the students had shared their ideas with the students at their tables, writing time began. The students worked on the writing assignment while the teacher circulated around the room assisting individual students. Children were encouraged to sound out the words they did not know how to spell, but the teacher would provide spellings on small post-it notes if the need arose. The writing samples were collected approximately 25 minutes after the topic was assigned.

During the second session, the students were allowed to write on a topic of their choosing. The teacher clarified that they did not have to write on the topic that was provided last week. They were encouraged to come up with their own topics that interested them. Like the previous visit, the students were permitted to share ideas with their group before they began writing. The same procedure was followed, but students were still writing after the 25-minute time period expired. The students were allowed to continue writing until their pieces were complete.

Results

Three different types of data were derived from the two sets of writing samples. The first, referred to as the Mean Length of Utterance (MLU), was a count of total words divided by the number of sentences. The second was a count of the total number of words. There was a count of the total number of different words. For this count, words that appeared two or more times were counted only once.

After these three types of data were obtained from each of the writing samples, three Paired Samples *t* tests were calculated. "The *t* test was used because this research was trying to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the two sets of writing samples. (See Table 1)

The MSU data revealed a *t* value of 1.71 ($p < .10$, $df=18$). This indicates a tendency for the children to use longer sentences when they self-selected a topic. It is important to note that first graders have a propensity to write long, and often run-on, sentences with the use of the conjunction "and." If a child wrote a sentence such as this, it was treated as one single sentence.

The Paired Samples *t* test on the total word count data produced a *t* value of 2.91 ($p < .01$, $df=18$). This reveals a statistically significant relationship between the two writing samples. Given that the level of significance is at the $< .01$ level, one can infer that students, on average, write more when they are allowed to self-select a topic than when they are assigned a topic.

When a Paired Sample *t* test was calculated for the total number of different words, a *t* value of 5.41 ($p < .001$, $df=18$) was the result, indicating a statistically significant relationship between the two writing samples. With such a high level of significance, one can conclude that students' writing samples when they self-selected topics included a greater variety of words than when they were assigned a topic. This set of data was obtained since first graders have a tendency to add unnecessary words in their writing. For example, one student wrote, "At home I will play with my jump rope when I get home." When students wrote on topics of their own choosing, they were less likely to include redundant words and phrases. (See Table 2)

It is important to note that three children chose to miss part of their recess in order to complete their writing when they were allowed to self-select their topic. This suggests that

when students are given the opportunity to choose their own topics, they may elect to put more effort into their writing and view writing in a positive manner.

Conclusion

The results for the t tests support the hypothesis of this study: First graders are likely to produce better quality writing samples when they are allowed to self-select a topic as opposed to when they are provided a teacher-assigned topic. Since the size of the sample in this study is very small, substantive claims cannot be made; however the results suggest there is some support for statistical validation to add to the qualitative literature that encourages the self-selection of writing topics by children. It would be advisable to replicate this study in other classrooms and grade levels. Since the statistical research on this particular topic is limited, there is much room for investigation.

TABLE 1 Three types of Data Obtained from Two Sets of Writing Samples

Teacher-assigned topics			Self-selected topics			
Student	MLU	Total# words	Total #	MLU	Total # words	Total #
			Different Words			
A	20.50	41	30	12.67	38	31
B	9.50	19	15	6.50	13	12
C	9.25	37	16	14.50	29	21
D	10.00	10	9	8.67	26	18
E	10.00	10	10	6.50	13	11
F	29.00	29	17	44.00	44	32
G	3.78	34	17	5.10	51	26
H	41.00	41	19	26.00	52	28
I	9.50	19	12	3.71	26	16
J	24.00	24	18	33.00	33	23
K	10.00	30	14	7.25	29	20
L	6.20	31	18	7.33	22	16
M	25.00	25	14	59.00	59	18
N	10.33	31	18	55.00	55	29
O	5.80	29	14	13.33	40	23
P	9.25	37	21	35.00	35	26
Q	25.00	25	15	27.00	27	19
R	8.00	8	8	15.00	15	14
S	9.75	39	31	7.10	71	43

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Table 2 Results From Paired Samples t Tests

Data	Paired samples results		
	t	df	p
MLU	1.71	18	.10
Total word count	2.91	18	.01
Total different word count	5.44	18	.001

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