

2007

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Sharan A. Gibson
San Diego State University

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Recommended Citation

Gibson, Sharan A. (2007) "Preservice Teachers' Knowledge of Instructional Scaffolding for Writing Instruction," *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*. Vol. 20: Iss. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer/vol20/iss2/3>

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Preservice Teachers' Knowledge of Instructional Scaffolding for Writing Instruction

Sharan A. Gibson
San Diego State University

Abstract

This study reports on an analysis of preservice teachers' dialogue journal entries for evidence of ways in which teachers develop conceptual understanding for writing instruction. Teachers' propositional statements were identified and coded at a specific level for three themes: (1) level of instructional scaffolding, (2) focus of proposed instruction, and (3) hierarchical levels of language. The study identified a set of dilemmas faced by teachers as they developed pedagogical content knowledge for writing instruction, centered on participants' assumptions regarding a direct, causal relationship between the provision of models for effective writing and the improvement of students' expertise for writing.

Learning how to teach writing well is a difficult, current, and consequential area of need. In 2002, only 23% of U.S. fourth grade students scored at a proficient level in writing on the National Assessment of Education Progress (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). In spite of (or even due to) current emphases on literacy instruction and the interdependent nature of reading and writing development, preservice teachers often receive only limited instruction in writing theory and pedagogy (Norman & Spencer, 2005). This study investigated preservice teachers' development of conceptual understandings for writing instruction through analysis of the instructional scaffolding, focus of instruction, and hierarchical levels of language that occurred within their propositional statements.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge for Writing Instruction

A substantial body of research informs our understanding of teachers' thinking, planning, and decision-making (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Expert teachers possess richly elaborated knowledge that is specific to particular contexts and classroom events (Carter, 1990). These expert teachers are able to integrate their knowledge of content with effective instructional activities that connect to the prior knowledge and dispositions of their students (Shulman & Quinlan, 1996). Attention is needed, then, to the ways in which teachers become more expert at knowing what to pay attention to within students' thinking, and how to translate pedagogical content knowledge into appropriate tasks for students.

Teachers can have difficulty adequately attending to instruction for both form and function in writing (e.g., Troia & Maddox, 2004). Effective writing instruction, however, addresses multiple aspects of students' competence, including the teaching of skills and strategies and enhancing students' knowledge and motivation (Graham & Harris, 2005). As students become skilled, they learn how to operate effectively across a wide set of hierarchical levels of language and text structure; from the content and style of a writing piece to an accurate use of sentence and paragraph structure, punctua-

tion, spelling, and letter formation. Effective writing instruction requires (1) in-depth understanding of the multifaceted subject matter of writing, (2) learning to think about this content from students' perspectives, and (3) knowing how to represent this content in appropriate and engaging ways (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1990).

Instructional scaffolding consists of specific instructional steps taken to help students learn how to complete tasks that would be insurmountable without assistance (Lyons, 2004; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Instructional scaffolding is essential to effective teaching based on its capacity to keep each particular task whole while students are learning the various sub skills needed in order to be independently successful (Clark & Graves, 2004). Effective scaffolding for literacy instruction requires a strong interaction between (1) the teacher's knowledge of specific ways in which students need to think and act in order to work effectively, and (2) the changing competencies of individual students from one lesson to the next (Gibson, 2004).

Traditionally, teacher education programs have first taught generic teaching knowledge to preservice teachers and then taught teachers how to apply this knowledge in practical terms. A situative perspective (Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996), however, assumes that activity is an integral part of learning situated within specific physical and social environments. University educators not only provide research-based knowledge, but also create a rich interaction with teachers' own classroom-based and experience-based instructional knowledge (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

For this study, propositional statements within a set of dialogue journal entries written by elementary-level preservice teachers were analyzed in order to investigate teachers' development of the rich, interconnected knowledge base that is required for effective writing instruction. Dialogue journals (a written conversation between students and the course instructor) are often utilized in teacher education programs in order to promote student reflection (Garmon, 2001; Lee, 2004), which in turn is hypothesized to be an important factor in altering teachers' underlying belief systems for teaching (Zeichner & Liston, 1987). Although the body of research

investigating the use of dialogue journals in teacher education programs is relatively limited, studies have documented their general effectiveness (Garmon, 1998).

The dialogue journal entries that were analyzed for this study, however, were explicitly connected to preservice teachers' ability to analyze writing samples and to describe effective writing instruction. Teachers were required to write journal entries that described their evaluation of a series of student-produced writing samples, and to describe needed instruction. The semester-long assignment, then, provided a conversational context situated in teachers' own practice with students, their cooperating teacher's instructional practices, and the subject matter of writing development and instruction for elementary students. All this was integrated with and enriched by the content and activities of the language arts methods course itself.

The intent of this study is to enhance knowledge of preservice teachers' developing expertise for writing instruction. I analyzed teachers' dialogue journal entries for evidence of specific ways in which teachers were developing their conceptual understanding of instructional scaffolding for writing instruction. I posed these questions:

1. What level of instructional scaffolding is described in preservice teachers' propositional statements for writing instruction?
2. To what hierarchical levels of language do preservice teachers' propositional statements for writing instruction refer?
3. Do preservice teachers' propositional statements for writing instruction focus on improvement of a writing product or the writer's skills?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were the 28 (out of 30) students completing the second semester of a fifth-year, post baccalaureate teaching credential program who agreed to participate in the study. These preservice teachers (28 females and 2 males) completed their university coursework as a stable cohort, and were currently teaching within their second field placement in eight different schools and two school districts in southwestern California. Each participant was enrolled in the second semester of a two-semester methods course in language arts instruction with an emphasis on writing instruction which was taught by the researcher.

The Methods Course Context

The activities for the language arts methods course were based on the belief that learning how to teach is an "inherently complex and messy business" (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998, p. 147). A specific set of instructional tools was presented across a continuum of approaches (i.e., writers' workshop, 5-stage processes, conferencing, peer feedback,

writer talks, journal writing, guided and shared writing, and interactive writing). Each class session also included opportunities for participants to discuss the pros and cons of each instructional approach (Grossman et al., 2000). Course participants were asked to articulate their current knowledge about writing instruction within every class session through such activities as partner talks, responses to teaching scenarios, quick writes, journal entries, job interview simulation, and response to readings. The choice of these activities was based on the assumptions that (1) articulating their own understandings would cause teachers to construct a more detailed knowledge set, and (2) exposure over time to their peers' thinking would stimulate on-going integration of new pedagogical knowledge and knowledge of students into a more elaborated and effective model of writing instruction.

Dialogue Journal Entries

All 30 students enrolled in the language arts methods course were required to collect and analyze writing samples on a weekly basis throughout the semester from their current student teaching placements, and to write a journal entry for each sample. The journal entries prompted pre-service candidates to describe (a) how this student is responding to writing instruction, and (b) how writing instruction could best help the student. In my role as both researcher and course instructor I responded to each of these entries. Students then responded to my comments and also constructed the next entry based on a new writing sample. Each student maintained the writing samples, their narrative entries, and my comments in a 3-ring binder.

Data Analysis

All 140 of the participants' dialogue journal entries were analyzed using coding and content analysis procedures (Krippendorff, 2004). This process began with identification and transcription of all propositional statements about writing instruction contained within the dialogue journal entries ($n = 297$), and constituted a purposive sample of the entire set of narrative, journal responses. Each propositional statement was then coded at a specific level within three themes: (1) level of instructional scaffolding, (2) a focus on improving either the writing sample or student expertise, and (3) hierarchical level of language.

First, each propositional statement was coded at a low, medium, or high level of instructional scaffolding. Propositions coded at a low level of instructional scaffolding, for example, included statements that the student should simply be asked to edit their paper, be given greater choice as to topic or more opportunities to write, or asked to use a checklist or rubric during writing. Statements coded at a high level of instructional scaffolding included description of a series of steps, such as teacher modeling or explanation, plus guided practice with a new skill or strategy. Secondly, each proposition was analyzed to determine whether or not it focused explicitly on improving a specific piece of writing or the skill of the writer:

Focus on writing sample:

Brenda should make a timeline to depict the slice of life she is writing about as well as the main points of the narrative. This would ensure that she includes all moments that are important to tell in this story. (KL/102)

Focus on writer's skill:

An exercise that might help Arriana would be one where she has to write about one topic in depth. This would help her to focus her attention and get her in the habit of writing for the reader. (SA/208)

Third, each proposition was also coded at one of 13 levels of language use: context, genre, clarity, organization, ideas/topics, fluency, paragraph structure, sentence structure, word choice, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, or letters.

Three additional steps were then taken in order to examine relationships among these three themes, and to confirm or reject emerging findings. First, the relationships between each of the three themes were examined. The set of propositions were re-examined, for example, that exhibited both a high level of instructional scaffolding and an explicit goal to improve the child's writing skill, on a participant-by-participant basis. Secondly, a simulation-of-interviewing procedure (Krippendorff, 2004) was used to reiteratively analyze the study's emerging hypotheses. Four sets of participants' journal entries were chosen randomly. A set of interview-like questions were developed based on tentative, emerging findings (e.g., Do the statements appear to assume a direct, causal link between teacher modeling and improved writing?). These four sets of entries were subjected to multiple re-readings, and their content compared against the questions. This procedure constituted a check for accuracy of the study's findings. Finally, a second researcher also reviewed two participants' complete sets of journal entries, in order to confirm and expand the study's emerging findings. One of these journals contained the least number of propositional statements coded for a high level of instructional scaffolding, and the other contained the most.

Limitations

This study was conducted on a short-term basis, across one semester. The study did not investigate whether or not participants were able to put their descriptions of writing instruction into practice, nor ways in which their pedagogical understandings would have altered based on such practice. It was not the purpose of this study to specify the contexts that were individually responsible for teachers' current understandings of effective instruction. Data for the study focused on participants' dialogue journal entries in order to gain insights into their development of knowledge regarding instructional scaffolding for writing instruction. The intent of the study was not to investigate the effectiveness of dialogue journals in particular as an instructional tool within language arts methods courses. Rather, it was assumed that each individual teacher integrated learning from informa-

tion and experiences across a set of contexts, including the dialogue journal experience itself as well as the university-level methods courses, student teacher placements, interaction with students and cooperating teachers, and their own school experiences.

Results

Low to Medium Levels of Instructional Scaffolding: Modeling and Opportunities to Practice

Both significant strengths and important weaknesses were evident in preservice teachers' conceptualization of instructional scaffolding for writing instruction. Over half of the propositional statements coded at a low level of instructional scaffolding occurred in the first set of journal entries:

I also think that teachers need to provide/allow many chances for students to write, as well as give positive feedback. The more a student is allowed to write, the more comfortable, confident, and better the student gets. (DC/141)

Across the semester the percentage of statements coded at a low level for scaffolding declined steadily from 58% to 10%. Beyond the initial set of entries, a medium level of instructional scaffolding was most prevalent:

Since the content of her story was well developed with a beginning, middle, and end I wouldn't worry too much about her doing much revising. However, I would advise her to do some editing and proofreading of any punctuation or spelling or grammar errors. I would ask her to correct her mistakes and polish up her story by letting other students read it as well as the teacher. (KM/181)

Participants' propositional statements coded at lower levels of scaffolding evidenced their understanding of students' need for exposure to models, as well as for extended and enjoyable opportunities to write. The analysis of these statements, however, also revealed a problematic conceptualization of the relationship between instructional activities and student learning. Teachers appeared to assume a direct, causal relationship between (a) the presentation of models of good writing, student choice for writing, and extended time to write with (b) better writing. Teachers emphasized the importance of models (both teacher modeling of good writing and high quality literature), and the provision of free choice and time to write, to the development of higher levels of student engagement, attention, motivation, and creativity:

- Also, writing should be fun and interesting. Allowing students to pick their own topics and be creative will help them enjoy the process more and continue on to being a better writer. (SK/321)
- Teachers first of all need to be a role model for their students. By giving examples on the board and having dialogue journals will show that teachers can and do enjoy writing. (LD/228)

It is inaccurate to argue, certainly, that these propositions are incorrect in and of themselves. These preservice teachers appeared to assume, however, that these factors would automatically lead to better writing for all students whether or not teachers provided explicit explanation. These statements did not articulate ways of drawing students' attention to crucial aspects of the models provided, or to specific ways to apply these models to their own writing:

Erin is a second language student, and therefore struggles with adding prepositions and conjunctions to her writing. To help Erin correctly formulate her writing I will do a lot of guided writing activities. By modeling the correct way to write sentences, Erin will gradually change her own writing. (UF/885)

Some students, at least, will be in need of explicit discussion of the purposes and intended application of modeling (Glasswell, Parr, & McNaughton, 2003).

Hierarchical Levels of Language: Understanding Writing as a Cognitive and Language-Based Skill

As teachers described their recommendations and propositions for writing instruction, they consistently addressed both higher (i.e., ideas, topics, genre, clarity, organization) and lower (i.e., punctuation, spelling, and capitalization) levels of language use. These preservice teachers did not demonstrate an overriding concern for the mechanics of writing over aspects associated with writers' voice, purposes, or intended message at any point within the semester. This finding was consistent across low, medium, and high levels of instructional scaffolding.

Analysis of propositions across hierarchical levels indicated both strengths and weaknesses in participants' conceptualization of instructional scaffolding for writing instruction. Within the hierarchical level of organization, for example, participants' propositional statements reflected low to high levels of instructional scaffolding:

Low Scaffolding

Writing in and out of class will get children used to putting their thoughts down on paper in an organized fashion. (HW/101)

High Scaffolding

Guided writing will be a great way for Jimmy, to teach him how to organize his thoughts with a web. Next, he could write a sentence about each thought. It would be a good idea if the teacher models the web method so he understands what is expected. (RN/221)

Similarly, participants' propositions also reflected low to high levels of scaffolding for statements about spelling:

Low Scaffolding

He could be reminded about the little rule that says "I before E." Because he wrote quietly instead of quietly. (KM/143)

High Scaffolding

In order to help Dan with /th/ the teacher could post the letters on a poster and show pictures representing words that have the sound. She could focus on the mouth to display the sound it makes, and the poster should be placed where he can easily refer to it. The teacher would give a minilesson on the poster and also talk about other words with /th/. (RS/408)

Teachers frequently identified a specific goal, however, without reference to a broader set of cognitive, language-based proficiencies. The statements of these preservice teachers, for example, demonstrated that they valued writing practice. Teachers emphasized the need for opportunities to write continuous text with high levels of engagement, for extended periods of time, everyday:

- In my kindergarten classroom, there are students who would continue to write if time allowed during independent writing time. There does not seem to be enough time for them to write and I believe their writing skills would only get better faster if they were allowed more time to do so. (LC/431)
- Teachers should give the students opportunities to write about something that interests them. Their writing should be consistent and continuous, meaning they should practice for a certain amount of time every day. (KB/313)

Teachers did not extend this concept, however, to students' development of cognitive and language-based skills in support of fluent writing. Where writing is conceptualized as putting thinking down on paper, then fluency can be defined as the ability to produce many ideas quickly and with ease (Fearn & Farnan, 2001). Fluent writers are able to conceptualize, organize, and communicate a set of important and interesting ideas quickly and in volume. In this study, preservice teachers did not describe instruction focused explicitly on teaching students how to both think and write fluently.

High Levels of Instructional Scaffolding: Teaching Students How to Write

The propositional statements in this study also contained intermittent evidence, however, of a stronger model of writing instruction. These statements occurred along two dimensions: (a) writing instruction focused on the expertise of students, and (b) high levels of instructional scaffolding. Earlier in the semester and associated with low levels of instructional scaffolding, participants typically focused their instruction on the improvement of a particular piece of writing:

He could benefit from reading his story out loud to someone. He might realize that a part of it does not make sense at the beginning.

Very few propositional statements were coded both high in instructional scaffolding and focused on improving a specific piece of writing (rather than the writer's skill). Statements with low and medium levels of instructional scaffolding,

however, were relatively evenly divided between a focus on student expertise or improvement of a specific writing sample.

Most teachers demonstrated stronger pedagogical reasoning at points within the journal entries, however, working on transforming their content knowledge into pedagogically powerful forms that were adaptive to students' current strengths and needs. More than two thirds of the teachers constructed propositional statements (typically in the second half of the semester) that described an explicit connection between recommended instruction and the development of student expertise. These entries identified instruction that would (a) build on students' prior knowledge, and (b) support the author's purpose or intended message:

After reflecting on this writing sample, I see how important it is for a teacher to check in with his/her students during the writing process. This will give the teacher a more informed response to a student's writing because she/he will know what the student was attempting to write and then can plan for instruction. (KJ/575)

Teachers also described instruction designed to support students' increased quality of attention to specific aspects of writing tasks; becoming consciously and strategically aware of their own thinking and organizing processes for writing:

Clarence could improve his character development by doing some kind of pre-writing planning. He could make a chart, for example, of the different characters in his story. By organizing thoughts like this on paper first Clarence would be able to see where his story is headed and what kinds of character development will take place. (DH/903)

Across all participants, when preservice teachers described instruction that included a high level of scaffolding they described students' behavior as multifaceted and active:

Another thing I noticed about Kelsey's writing is his overuse of apostrophes. He wrote 'he will get ecsited when he see's ethr dog's he even get's ecsited when he see's sum one.' Apparently Kelsey enjoys using apostrophes, but he is obviously using them incorrectly. Perhaps he would benefit from a few lessons that remind the students of the correct ways in which to use apostrophes. The teacher could display the rules for using apostrophes along with example sentences that include the use of apostrophes. The teacher could use the overhead projector to display sentences that have not yet incorporated the use of apostrophes, and let the students come up and add apostrophes where they think they should be included while explaining their reasoning behind their thoughts. (KM/372)

Later in the semester, however, preservice teachers were more likely to have described an instructional activity that focused both on students' learning and high levels of instructional scaffolding:

One strategy that I think might help Diana would be to use a concept map type of graphic organizer. She can put her topic sentence in the main bubble and then add some supporting detail sentences that all connect to her topic sentence. These sentences will become the details in her paragraph that support her topic sentence. Once she starts to use these graphic organizers she will have a better way to organize her thoughts. Eventually she will be able to write complex paragraphs with supporting details that all relate back to the topic sentence. (MF/545)

In summary, teachers' propositions included all three levels of instructional scaffolding, with an emphasis later in the semester on high levels of instructional scaffolding in integration with a focus on improving the writer's skills. Teachers' propositions presented a problematic assumption that the provision of modeling and opportunities to write would automatically cause improved student performance. Participants consistently addressed high to low levels of hierarchical language use, both across the semester and across all levels of instructional scaffolding. Teachers also, however, typically described instruction without emphasizing writing skill as a cognitive, language-based proficiency. For example, teachers did not appear to connect fluent transcription to fluent thinking.

Discussion

This study presents evidence that preservice teachers are able to describe effective writing instruction that begins to integrate (1) subject-specific aspects of writing skill with (2) more elaborated pedagogical knowledge and knowledge of their students' prior knowledge and interests. The teachers in this study demonstrated significant strengths in attention to writing skills across hierarchical levels of language, modeling, and opportunities to write for extended periods of time on self-chosen topics and ideas of interest. Participants' statements demonstrated concern for students' use of both high and low levels of language use across all levels of instructional scaffolding, from spelling to the communication of ideas. In the second half of the semester, participants began to describe instruction that would (a) build on students' prior knowledge, (b) support the author's purpose or intended message, and (c) increase students' quality of attention to specific aspects of writing tasks. Teachers did more than describe opportunities for students; they described instruction that would be more likely to teach students *how* to write.

These preservice teachers also encountered significant areas of difficulty, however. It is appropriate and necessary for teacher educators to develop the knowledge and skill needed to identify predictable dilemmas faced by preservice teachers, as well as ways of helping teachers negotiate their own responses to these dilemmas (Grossman et al., 2000). The results of this study should remind teacher educators of the absolute importance of attention to teachers' thinking.

Specifically, this study identified a specific set of predictable dilemmas that are likely to cause interference with teachers' acquisition of a set of effective instructional practices for writing instruction. Preservice teachers may:

1. Assume a direct, causal relationship between modeling, student choice, and extended time to write to improvement in student writing;
2. Underestimate students' need for detailed and specific levels of instructional scaffolding, including an explicit intention to show students how to use new learning independently;
3. Neglect the cognitive, language-based aspects of writing skill; and/or
4. Experience confusion regarding the relationship between fluent thinking and fluent transcription.

For each of the challenges listed above, teacher educators face a corresponding dilemma. For example, the tendency of preservice teachers to refer explicitly to both high and low levels of language use may mask the need for explicit discussions of the relationships between student development in cognition and writing. Because the act of writing that is most easily observed is transcription, the roles that thinking and language use play in fluent, skilled writing may need to take center stage in teacher education courses. Similarly, teacher educators need to identify ways to continue a strong emphasis on instructional modeling of effective writing processes and texts, while also drawing teachers' attention in powerful ways to the difficulties many students will encounter when required to move from "Point A" (i.e., modeled writing) directly to "Point B" (i.e., independent writing).

Further research is needed to investigate the ways in which preservice teachers are able to expand on their written description of effective writing instruction when interviewed and through analysis of the content of class discussions. It would also be useful to investigate the degree to which preservice teachers are able to implement effective types of scaffolding for writing lessons, and to interview teachers regarding their decision-making as they plan and implement lessons. It is essential for teacher educators to continue to sensitize ourselves through such research to the types of dilemmas encountered by preservice teachers as they learn to teach writing effectively by engaging in on-going cycles of research and course reform, and learning how to listen to the thinking of the teachers we educate.

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Deborah Bainer Jenkins, Ph.D.
 Professor & Interim Chair
 University of West Georgia
 109 Row Hall
 Carrollton, GA 30118
 678-839-6181
mer@westga.edu

Adrian Rodgers, Ph.D.
 Assistant Professor
 The Ohio State University at Newark
 1179 University Drive
 Newark, OH 43055
 740-366-9261
rodgers.50@osu.edu