Increasing Writing Performance:

Finding Strategies that Inspire Fluency and Self-Confidence

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A Special Project

Presented to

Dr. Gretta Merwin

Heritage University

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree of

Masters of Education

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Catarina T. Castillo

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ABSTRACT

This project was designed to see if writing strategies would increase

writing performance and self confidence in early writers. The project used the

Darla Wood-Walters Writers' Workshop as the method of instruction.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

<u>Background for the Project</u>

According to the Washington State Report Card for the 4th grade

students of 2005-2006 school years, the Washington Assessment of Student

Learning indicated low mastery in writing. Results of the scores from the

Washington State Report Card showed fourth graders performed at a lower

proficiency level in 2005 than in 2003 (OSPI, 2006).

Currently Washington State's statewide testing program on student

achievement was comprised of a series of criterion-referenced tests in reading,

writing, mathematics and science. The standard- based assessment incorporated

short constructed responses and extended responses in order to successfully pass

the component of writing. Students failed in all areas due to the lack of writing

strategies and self-efficacy as writers. According to self-efficacy theorists, low

self-efficacy caused motivational problems. Students had no faith of success on

specific writing tasks, gave up quickly, or avoided or resisted (Margolis &

McCabe, 2006). Students lacked the language and word choices that would

engage a reader on published written work. Students lacked ability to select

relevant details for strong answer responses on the WASL.

Current educational reform reflected in the NCLB placed little emphasis

on writing, an unfortunate oversight as writing was critical to school success.

Writing was the primary means by which students demonstrated knowledge in school and provided a flexible tool for gathering, remembering, and sharing subject-matter (Graham & Harris, 2005).

Research showed that for many years the teaching of writing focused almost exclusively and to the point of obsession on teaching the forms of writing, the parts of paragraphs, structure of sentences, and the elements of style. Moreover, knowledge of form did not translate into strategies and skills necessary to extract from subject matter the ideas that made up a piece of writing (Hillocks Jr., 2005).

Statement of the Problem

The problem examined in this study was to identify a successful teaching strategy that would help first grade students increase their word count in writing. Secondly, the problem was to identify a strategy that would also increase first graders' self-confidence as writers.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the study was to research the effects of a research -based writing model of instruction, Darla Wood-Walters Writers' Workshop, on first grade writers. Specifically the researcher wanted to see if the model provided measurable evidence to prove that first grade students' writing contained an increase in word count. Also the researcher wanted to see if use of the model improved self-confidence.

Delimitations

The study compared writing samples within a typical first grade classroom. The teacher requested student samples of writing with prompts and without prompts which provided models. The class was composed of 21 average first grade students of similar background, race, and socioeconomic status and ability levels. The study of sample writing was obtained from October 2006 to December of 2006 in a small rural community located in Eastern Washington State.

The elementary school where the research was conducted had approximately 615 students. The staff consisted of 35 teachers with the average teacher experience of 9 years and 68.6% with at least a Master's Degree. The student demographics were: 50.2% males and 49.8% females, 0.3% Asian, 1.8% Black, 92% Hispanic, 5.9% White. Free and reduced meals were 89.9%. Special education at 12.6%, transitional bilingual 65.9 and migrant at 22% finished the demographics of the population (OSPI, 2006).

Assumptions

The district in which the research was done used Darla Wood-Walters Writer's Workshop as the primary instruction in writing. The researcher was trained in the instruction model provided by Walters of teaching concepts of writing to the earliest writers.

Hypothesis

Implementation of Darla Wood-Walters Writers' Workshop will improve the writing scores of first graders in the area of word count. In addition, first graders will have increased self-confidence as writers because of the implementation of the program.

Null Hypothesis

Implementation of Darla Wood-Walters Writers' Workshop will not improve the writing scores of first graders in the area of word count. In addition, first graders will not have increased self-confidence as writers because of the implementation of the program.

Significance of the Project

The writing process affected all areas of learning. The researcher noted that fourth grade students' written scores had dropped from 36.7% to 28% in the past three years. Therefore, this drop in scores illustrated that educators had lost ground in their instruction in writing. The method of instruction in writing had caused serious problems in many schools. Teachers were over focused on procedures, processes, genres, and testing. Instruction lacked focus on thinking, communication, inquiry and exploring language (Routman, 2005). The requirements for strong writing strategies needed to be in place in order for students to pass the WASL. Research stated that teachers needed to focus on the youngest of the learners starting at kindergarten and first grade. Research stated

that teachers should not expect high-quality writing from students unless teachers had demonstrated high- quality expectation in students' written work (Rief, 2005).

Procedure

The researcher gave the students a plain piece of paper at the beginning of the school year and asked the students to write any idea that came to mind. The writing was used as a pre-writing sample. The researcher then used Walters' writing workshop of instruction models and use of prompts. Students were handed lined paper with a picture of a dog being bathed by a child. The students were asked to write a story of what was happening. The writing was used as a post sample. A *t*- test was conducted to look at the pre and post word count to check for data on the difference of using a researched-based model of instruction of Darla Wood-Walters Writers' Workshop. The researcher also created a survey to measure students' self-confidence as writers. The survey portion had twelve questions on how students felt as writers and what helped as the writing took place. The students had to color in a happy face for "yes" and a sad face for "no", while the teacher read the questions.

Definition of Terms

Darla Wood-Walters Writers' Workshop. Darla Wood-Walters Writers'

Workshop is a writing program adapted by the Pasco School District that is used

in the primary grades to teach writing.

Phonological. Phonological is the awareness of the constituent sounds of

words in learning to read and spell. (What you hear)

Orthographic Orthographic is the awareness of the symbols that represent

sounds in a writing system. (What you see)

Acronyms

OSPI Office of Public Instruction

NCLB. No Child Left Behind

WASL. Washington Assessment of Student Learning

DWW. Darla Wood-Walters Writers' Workshop

CHAPTER 2

Review of Selected Literature

<u>Introduction</u>

The ability to communicate through writing had been central to school

success and essential for successful participation in the workplace and in a

democratic society. Yet the quality of student writing in the United States has

continued to be a concern to educators. By fourth grade, over half of students

wrote so poorly that their writing skills were not adequate for meeting classroom

demands. Poor writing skills placed children academically at risk, not only during

the early elementary years but in secondary school as well (Lane, 2006). The

latest results from the National Assessment of Education Progress report card on

writing indicated that in 2002, only 23% of the nation's fourth graders and 31% of

the nation's eight graders scored as proficient in writing. In addition, a report

from the National Commission on Writing in America's schools argued that

school reforms have not given adequate attention to writing and recommended

improvements in teacher education in writing across all disciplines (Norman &

Spencer, 2005).

Research-based writing programs have been developed in support of

writing instruction based on specific sequences of instruction. Learning to write

was the ability to write letters and spell words that required multiple skills

(Ritchey, 2006). Fifty years of research into grammar instruction confirmed what

many teachers had long suspected. When it came to improving writing, traditional grammar instruction simply did not work. A meta-analysis of twenty-five years of writing research found that traditional grammar instruction was the most ineffective method of improving writing (Cali, 2007). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the researcher focused on the increase of word count and self confidence of young writers. The researcher chose to focus on the following subsets: writing in the early grades, programs that support strategies in writing, self confidence as writers, and teaching writing to struggling young student.

<u>Writing in the Early Grades.</u>

Research on literacy learned during the last decades had revealed much about how young children learn language and how it had supported educators in making sound curricular decisions. From the earliest ages, children interacted with the world of print. In the world at large, written language was always "in context" and included additional symbol systems of numbers, colors, movement and shape, as well as culture markers. For many children, the beginning of literacy appeared in activities such as pretend play, drawing, conversations about signs in their environment, and writing. Children often experimented with written language, often in playful ways, like frequently mixing writing and drawing creating a mixed medium that combined graphic forms, letters, and words. Considering these, teachers could help improve students' writing skills by giving them ample time to practice and encouraged children to experiment with writing

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materials. These informal lessons ensured that children enjoyed writing and saw it as an important form of communication (Neuman, 2007). Young children expected the print in the world to make sense during the earliest efforts to write, and while not yet conventional, reflected the meaning of their efforts. Knowing about young students meant that school-based teaching need not begin with a "blank slate." Rather, supportive teaching began as educators tapped into the diverse and rich experiences all language users had been building over the first five or six years of life (NCTE, Retrieved April, 19, 2007).

Self Confidence as Writers

Good writing came from caring enough to craft it to the best of one's ability. If one dif not give students ways to connect writing time for craft thinking, one would get what one asked for (Rief, 2005). Research had made it clear that when teachers provided the following; creativity, imagination, and passionate beliefs, feelings, opinions and questions during the instruction, students were motivated. Students had motivation to write more because it had a more meaningful purpose and connection within student's life experience increasing the number of words on specialized writing (Rief, 2005). Writers needed constructive response. Comments such as "Here's what I noticed you did well," or "These are the questions that came to mind as I was reading what you wrote," were genuine and far more helpful than the awkward notes many teachers had jotted in the margins. Offering constructive comments while students were in the midst of

writing and not after a paper has been turned in helped students become better

writers and built self confidence as risk takers within their attempt of writing

 (Rief, 2006).

<u>Programs that Support Strategies in Writing</u>

Developed nearly 20 years ago, The Six Trait Writing Model had been

used in every state in the nation, and beyond, in providing strategies for young

writers to master the key traits of good writing. The Six Trait Writing Model

helped students understand what worked well and what needed to be improved in

writing (NWREL, 2002).

Research suggested that common instructional practices in the primary

grades underestimated the ability of students to comprehend and produce

informational text. The study of children's informational writing processed in first

grade had a goal of design of effected instruction. Teachers learned to share the

process in ways that improved the quality of writing. Process approached in

writing instruction in primary-grade classrooms had become widespread due to

the influence of Calkins (Reads, 2005). The researcher found that Lucy Calkins,

in her First Hand Writing Model, had created a series of books designed to help

primary teachers teach a rigorous yearlong writing curriculum. The seven books

supported a month long unit of study in the teaching of writing. Each book

contained word by word models of how to teach and extend writing and provided

representative examples of children's work (Calkins, 2003).

Teachers found that writer's workshops were effective in helping students master the principles of the writing process. The term "writer's workshop" referred to an environment conceived to encourage written expression. Because writing was difficult and risky, children needed to know that the environment was predictable and a safe place for risk taking (Smith, 2000).

Research showed that students needed ownership of topics, choice, extended opportunities to write, freedom to rewrite with a focus on sharpening and reseeding content, engrossing models of writing, provocative rewriting stimulation, and productive and timely feedback from kindergarten through high school (Thomas, 2000).

Teaching Writing to Struggling Young Writers

Literacy development required both informal and formal adult guidance and instruction. Recent studies provided a wealth of information about how children developed as writer. The foundation for successful literacy development was established before children entered the formal learning environment of kindergarten and first grade. Learning to write occurred along a developmental continuum with no set beginning or end points. While literacy skills and abilities developed over a lifetime, the early years were most critical (NWEWL, 2000).

The research-based model of The Four-Block Framework for writing had been developed in 1989-90 for a first-grade classroom. In the 1990-91 school years, 16 first grade teachers in four schools used the framework and made

modifications to suit variety of different school populations, including a Title 1 school. Since 1991, the framework had been used in numerous first grade classrooms where children struggled with writing. The writing block framework had addressed the six major research-based components of instruction. The components have been set as goals as: 1) seeing writing as a way to tell about things, 2) writing fluently, 3) learning to read through writing, 4) applying grammar and mechanics in one's own writing, 5) learning particular forms of writing, and 6) maintaining the self-confidence and motivation of struggling writers (Cunningham, Hall & Sigmon, 1999).

The research on the use of Phonological Awareness has identified that struggling first grade students can progress at different rates. Therefore to move emergent/early fluency readers into the writing process teachers would need to model and guide the use of phonetics. Teachers had to sound out words, copy and use sight words in meaningful ways to provide strategies for writing. First graders enjoyed the independence of early independent writing, the power of words to express thoughts, and the opportunity to describe experiences to classmates. The true purpose and promise of phonics instruction had been to expand and refine struggling children's writing powers. In the complex processes of writing, letters, sounds and words were the keys to help children grasp and use language as a tool. Children acquired the tools and learned how to use them under the guidance of a

skilled teacher that provided a wide range of learning opportunities (Fountas & Pinnell, 2003).

Teachers found that the writer's workshop model helped students master the principles of process writing in particular. The term, "writer's workshop" referred to an environment conceived to encourage written expression. Because writing was difficult and risky, children needed to know that the environment was a predictable and safe place for risk taking (Smith, 2000). Writer's workshop can also be paired with reading activities to create a powerful motivating tool when teaching literacy. Research has shown that students needed ownership of topics, choice, extended opportunities to write, freedom to rewrite with a focus on sharpening and reseeding content, engrossing models of writing, provocative rewriting stimulation, and productive and timely feedback from kindergarten through high school (Thomas, 2000).

<u>Summary</u>

Research on the writing in the early grades, programs that supported strategies in writing, self confidence as writers, and teaching writing to struggling young students, provided insight on how students increase word count and develop self-confidence. Early intervention of strategies had been identified as being a crucial component in quality instruction of writing.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Treatment of Data

Introduction

The researcher decided to conduct a study on the instructional approach of Darla Wood-Walters Writers' Workshop upon a classroom of first graders. The researcher's main objective was to obtain data on Darla Wood-Walters Writers' Workshop instructional model to validate whether students increased in word count and self-confidence as young writers. The students received writing modeling during the first fifteen minutes with thirty minutes of individual practices five days a week throughout a three month period before final data was obtained.

Methodology

The study was conducted in the educational setting of an elementary school in Eastern Washington. The research method for gathering the data was quantitative. The purpose of the study was to analyze the pre-and post-test scores of word count in writing. The second part of the study used the Two-dimensional Chi-Square to investigate whether the students had an increase in self-confidence as writers. The sample group was grouped according to ability and that grouping remained consistent throughout the study.

Participants

The researcher used students from the researcher's first grade class. The classroom consisted of 21 students, 8 girls and 13 boys. The researcher selected 5 girls and 5 boys that had the same ability variables. The students had been in the same school since kindergarten with instruction in DWW that would support the students when entering first grade.

Instruments

The researcher used pre- test and post-test writing samples to obtain data on the amount of word count from each student. The second data-gathering instrument was a survey consisting of twelve questions. The twelve questions were based on a yes or no response. The researcher read the questions out loud to the students to provide a clear understanding of the questions.

Design

The researcher used the One-Group Pretest-Post-test Design (Gay & Airasion, 2003). This design was used because it involved a single group that was pre-tested and exposed to a treatment and then post-tested. The success of the treatment could be determined by comparing pre-test and post-test scores. The second part of the study used the Two-dimensional Chi-Square to investigate whether the students had an increase in self-confidence as writers by conducting a survey of twelve questions that required a yes or no response.

Procedure

      The researcher became acquainted with the student writing abilities within the first month of the school year. The researcher started the review of DWW during the writing block in letter formation, sentence structure, and primary conventions in a whole group setting. The researcher continued to model writing for a half-hour on a daily basis for the month of September. The researcher conducted a pre-test writing the first week of October. The first prompt used by the researcher was a plain writing piece of paper given to students who had the opportunity to choose their own topic to write about. The students were given a time frame of 45 minute to write. The researcher continued to model writing five times a week using DWW in order to increase writing skills, conventions, build on vocabulary and sentence structure and encourage students to become risk takers and gain self-confidence as writers.

      Due to limitation of time the researcher conducted the post-test in the month of December. The post-test consisted of a picture prompt that contained a picture of two children pulling a dog in a wagon. The students were given the paper with the picture prompt and instructed to write student ideas of what was occurring in the picture. The students had the same time limit as in the first prompt. The students' pre-tests and post-tests were compared at the end of December to obtain data on word count increase. The whole study was concluded with a student writing survey to determine levels of self-confidence.

Treatment of the Data

The data for analysis was comprised of the scores obtained by the pre-test and the post-test samples of word count in student writing. The writing prompt was done in the fall at the beginning of October, 2006, for the pre-test and then with the post-test at the end of December of 2006. The student writing survey was analyzed at the end of December for the purpose of analyzing students' self-confidence as writers.

The researcher looked at the pre and post writing using the standard statistical procedure and used the non independent t-test from the Window Statpak by L.R. Gay and Peter Airasian. The non-independent t-test was used because the researcher was performing a pre-experimental design. A Two-dimensional Chi-Square survey was used to compare the growth of students' self-confidence as writers.

Summary

The researcher used a pre-experimental design to compare the pre- and post- writing scores administered in October and December to determine word count of first graders. The researcher also used the one -dimensional Chi-Square for the survey to determine self-confidence as young writers.

CHAPTER 4

Analysis of the Data

Introduction

        The researcher conducted a study to investigate if the effects of a research -based writing model of instruction, Darla Wood-Walters Writers' Workshop, would increase word count of first grade writers. The students received writing modeling instruction five days a week with the time frame of 15 minutes of teacher modeling and 30 minutes of student independent practice. Specifically the researcher wanted to see if the model provided measurable evidence to prove that first grade students' writing increased in word count. Also the researcher wanted to see if use of the model improved self-confidence.

Description of the Environment

        The researcher used students from the researcher's first grade class in a small rural community located in Eastern Washington State. The intention of the study was to instruct students using DWW to increase the students' writing abilities and self-confidence. The classroom consisted of 21 students, 8 girls and 13 boys. The researcher selected 5 girls and 5 boys that had the same ability variables. The students had been in the same school since kindergarten with instruction in DWW that supported them when entering first grade.

Implementation of Darla Wood-Walters Writers' Workshop will improve the writing scores of first graders in the area of word count. In addition, first graders will have increased self-confidence as writers because of the implementation of the program.

The data indicated that there was a significant difference between the October pre-test and the December post-test scores. Based on the non-independent *t*-test the data showed that the null hypothesis was rejected and that the hypothesis was supported at p >.001. Meanwhile, the second portion of the hypothesis was rejected at p <.10.

Null Hypothesis

Implementation of Darla Wood-Walters Writers' Workshop will not improve the writing scores of first graders in the area of word count. In addition, first graders will not have increased self-confidence as writers because of the implementation of the program.

Through the use of DWW instruction every student made growth as measured by the pre and post test. The parametric test of significance used to determine whether there was a significant difference was the non-independent *t*-test. The significance was determined at p > .001. The data indicated that the null hypothesis was rejected at p > .001. Therefore, the hypothesis was supported at p>.001. But the second portion of the null hypothesis was supported as data

indicated no increase in self-confidence writers because of the implementation of the program at p<.10.

Results of the Study

The result of the study demonstrated that first grade students made better than expected growth when using DWW and writing prompts to increase word count. However, the exposure to DWW and prompts and modeling of sentence structure, conventions, fluency as writers did not build student self-confidence.

Table 1& 2 illustrated the first grade word count scores during the pre and post test from October and December of 2006 school year.

Table 1

First Grade Word Count Scores for 2006

Student Name	Pre-test October	Post-test December
Student 1	20	55
Student 2	50	120
Student 3	25	102
Student 4	25	46
Student 5	20	102
Student 6	36	50
Student 7	30	98
Student 8	35	59
Student 9	40	120
Student 10	20	65

Table 2

t-test for Non-independent Samples

Statistic	Values
Number of Pairs	10
Sum of D's	516.00
Mean of D's	51.60
Sum of D's Squared	33040.00
t-Value	6.11
Degrees of Freedom	9

Findings

The data showed a significant difference between October's word count scores and the December word count scores. The hypothesis was supported at p> .001. The null hypothesis was rejected at p>.001. Therefore, first grade students achieved better than expected growth in DWW writing instruction with the use of writing prompts.

The survey data was analyzed. While the use of the DWW writing model increased children's achievement in building word count, it demonstrated no improvement in developing self confidence as writers and was rejected at p< 10.

Summary

       The research project focused on standard statistical procedure. The researcher used a One-Group Pretest-Post-test Design to compare student word count and self-confidence from October to December. All scores were compared and evaluated. The data showed a significant difference between the October word count and December word count. The null hypothesis was rejected at $p > .001$. The hypothesis was supported at $p > .001$. The first grade students who received the implementation of DWW writing model improved in word count scores.

       The researcher also used a Two-dimensional Chi-Square survey to analyze data on self confidence. The data provided support that the hypothesis was rejected at $p < .10$. First graders did not show an increase in self-confidence as writers because of the implementation of the program. The null hypothesis was supported $p < .10$.

CHAPTER 5

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The study was designed to determine if using the DWW writing model assisted in increasing word count and building writing self-esteem. The students received writing modeling instruction five days a week with the time frame of 15 minutes teacher of modeling and 30 minutes of student independent practice. The writing model of DWW was incorporated into the writing curriculum to provide the students with valuable writing strategies in building vocabulary, comprehension, and writing conventions so that the students could build self-confidence as writers.

Summary

The researcher conducted this study to determine if the DWW writing model would increase word count and self-confidence of first graders by providing modeling, independent practice and writing prompts as well as providing writing strategies. The data was obtained in October and December from the researcher's class in the 2006-2007 school year.

The data showed a significant difference between the October word count scores and the December word count scores. The null hypothesis was rejected at $p > .001$. The first grade students who received the DWW writing model of instruction achieved better than expected growth in word count in their writing.

However, the null hypothesis was supported at p<.10 and first graders did not have an increase in self-confidence as writers because of the implementation of the program.

Conclusions

Based on the non-independent *t*-test the data showed that the null hypothesis was rejected and that the hypothesis was supported at p >.001. However, the Two-dimensional Chi-Square data obtained from the first graders demonstrated no support in self-confidence as writers because of the implementation of the program. The null hypothesis was supported p<.10.

Recommendations

The researcher concluded that using DWW writing model was an essential piece of the writing curriculum to be implemented at the primary grades. This writing strategy increased word count. However, it did not support one of the most important parts of writing-- that of building self-confidence as a writer. The researcher was quite disappointed with the data on self-confidence. More research needs to be done as to what educators need to put into the writing curriculum in order to build self-confidence in young writers. The researcher will continue providing support in building self-confidence during the writing block and stress the importance of how self-confidence does not only affect first graders, but all grade level writers who seem to be struggling in writing.

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Word Count
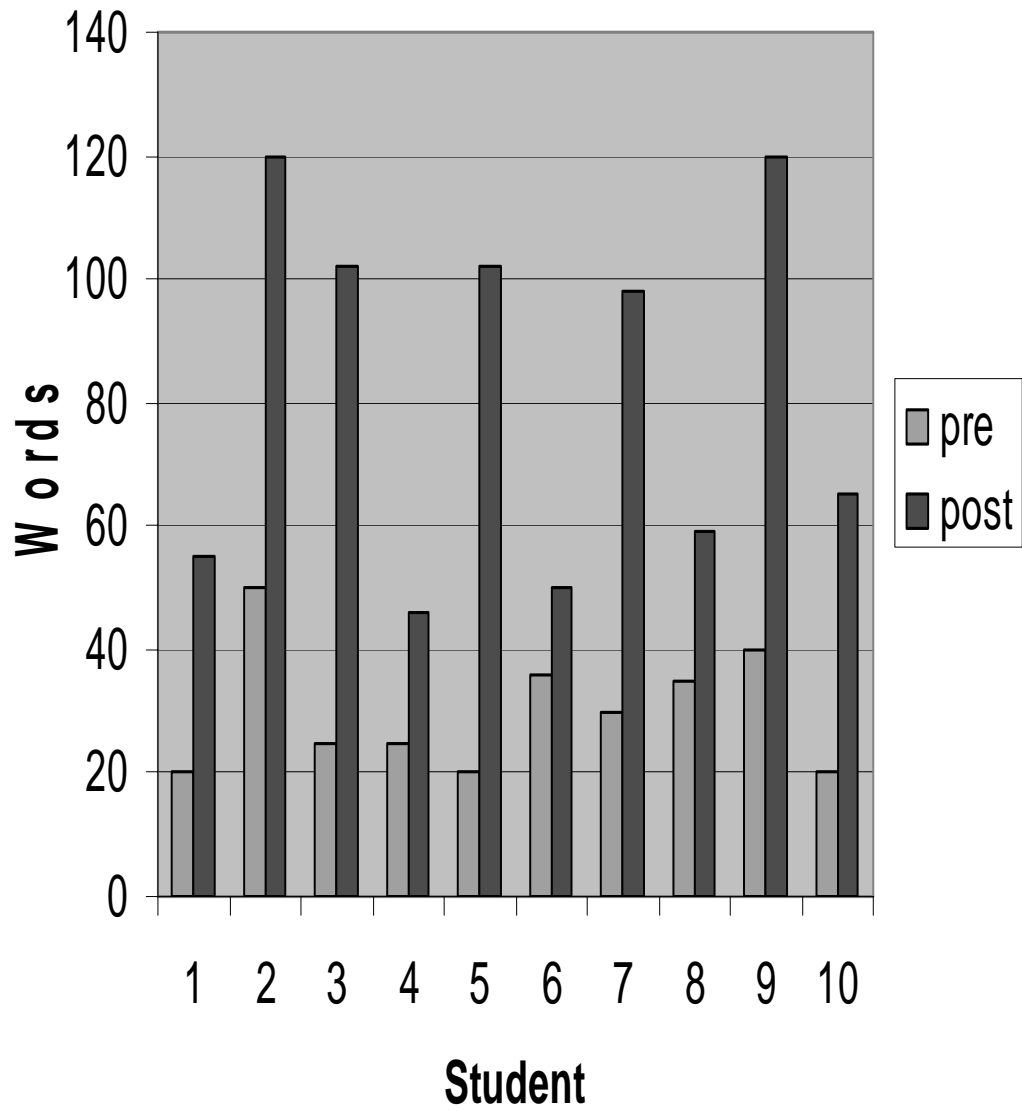
Student writing sample

Pre-test A

El gatito
Habia una vez un gatito
que tenia mucha hambre.
Nadien lo queria en sus
casas. Un dia vino una
niña que se llevo a el
gatito le dio de comer
una hamburguesa. El
gatito se acabo toda
la hamburgesa.

Name Anah.   Mayo /2 /2006

Yo miro un perro en un carro. Tambien
una niña y un niño. El niño esta cyoy
galando. Pero el perro esta muy
grande. La niña esta pensan como
galar el perro. La niña no tiene una
idea. La niña se llama Ana. El niño

se llama Edgar. Se quieren llevar
el perro para afuera. Para jugar afuer con
el perro. El niño queria juga a las
escondidas pero la niña no queria
jugar a eso ella queria jugar a
otra cosa ella queria jugar a
pasiar el perro. Pero el niño dijo
que el perro estaba muy grande
para pasarle. Pero la niña dijo
que mejor jugaran a otra cosa.
Queria jugar adentro de la
casa el niño dijo que si
queria jugar adentro de la
casa dijo que a que jugaron
dijo que a busquar el perro. Pin

Post-test B

Survey of Writing Questions

1. Do you like to write?	Yes	No
2. It is hard to think about what you want to write?	Yes	No
3.What do you kike to write about?	Yes	No
4. Does it help when you use a pattern to write?	Yes	No
5. Do you like to write in your journal?	Yes	No
6. Would you write more if it was your own idea?	Yes	No
7. Would you write more if you had a given idea?	Yes	No
8. Would you write more if you had picture to inspire you?	Yes	No
9. Does it help you to write when you use a picture?	Yes	No
10. Does it help when you write in a group?	Yes	No
11. Do you like to write by yourself?	Yes	No
12. Do you feel your are a writer?	Yes	No
Total	Yes	No