

The effects of Sustained Silent Writing on the writing scores and perception of writing confidence and competence of Primary 5 students

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of Sustained Silent Writing (SSW) on improving pupils' writing scores and their perceptions of confidence and competence in writing. The sample consisted of seven classes of Primary 5 pupils of which three classes formed the treatment group and the other four classes made up the control group.

A writing perception survey and the pupils' writing scores in the Semestral Assessment 1 were used as pre-treatment measures. The treatment group was involved in 15 minutes of SSW before each writing lesson for a period of two terms. The control group was involved in 15 minutes of Sustained Silent Reading before each writing lesson for the same duration. Both groups were post-tested using the same writing perception survey and their Semestral Assessment 2 writing scores were collected.

The data obtained were analysed using a series of mixed analyses of variance (ANOVA) tests. The results indicated that the treatment group showed more significant improvements in their writing scores and their perceptions of confidence and competence in writing.

Introduction

The use of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is well-documented in many countries. In Singapore primary schools, English teachers adopt the *Strategies for English Language And Reading (STELLAR)* approach for language teaching, and Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is conducted at the start of every English lesson. SSR has been proven to improve pupils' reading comprehension (Kornelly & Smith, 1993), interest in reading and reading skills (Weller & Weller, 1999).

With the success that SSR has achieved in improving reading skills and attitudes towards reading in mind, we explored the effects of Sustained Silent Writing (SSW) in improving pupils' writing scores and self-perceptions of their writing confidence and competence. There has been minimal research done on the effects of SSW, particularly in Singapore. Therefore, the intention of this study was to explore what effects, if any, SSW had on pupils writing scores and perceptions, and determine the significance of such effects. Specifically, we wished to:

- i. Examine the effects, if any, that SSW had on pupils' writing scores and perceptions;
- ii. Apply key takeaways from this study to impact pupils' language learning experience in writing lessons.

Learning the English language involves a wide variety of language arts skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Smelstor, 1979). To be competent English users, pupils need to be actively involved in the learning process and practise regularly. In Singapore, primary schools adopt the STELLAR approach to language teaching and learning. For the upper primary levels, STELLAR strategies include Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), Supported Reading (SR), Know-Want to know-Learnt (KWL), Retelling (RT), the Writing Process Cycle (WPC) and Differentiated Instruction (DI). These strategies cover the four language skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing. Among these skills, pupils generally face more difficulties in writing, and are seldom motivated to write.

Wixson (1982) highlighted that the natural way to learn language was in a predetermined sequence: listening, speaking, reading and writing. His study documented that while listening and speaking take place naturally in a classroom, little is done for reading and writing. He proposed that reading and writing are intimately related and should be brought together. From the STELLAR approach, much emphasis is placed on honing pupils' reading skills – each lesson starts with SSR for five to 10 minutes and the learning of grammar and vocabulary items is based on reading texts. However, writing activities are introduced less frequently, and WPC takes place only once per unit. To improve pupils' writing scores and their attitudes towards writing, more can be done to increase the opportunities for pupils to write creatively and freely.

Expressive writing or journal writing are examples of Sustained Silent Writing (SSW), which is the practice of involving the student and the teacher in writing anything that the student wishes – spelling words, letters, a diary entry – for a given length of time on a regular basis (Voorheis, 1988). Such examples of SSW have been used sporadically by teachers, but there is little structure and no local research on whether SSW boosts pupils' writing scores and their perceptions of their own confidence and competence in writing.

Holt and O'Tuel (1988) reported that Sustained Silent Reading and Sustained Silent Writing were effective in significantly improving reading achievement, writing and attitudes towards reading among seventh graders. It is believed that regular writing practice in the form of SSW can lead to the same benefits that SSR has achieved. In view of the supporting evidence regarding the importance of regular reading and writing practices in school, this study aims to investigate the effects of introducing SSW on a regular basis.

Methodology

A total of 241 Primary 5 students were recruited for this study. The seven classes in the Primary 5 level were divided into groups of different abilities – High Ability or HA (5A and 5B), Middle Ability or MA (5C and 5D) and Low Ability or LA (5E, 5F and 5G). Within each ability group, one class was randomly assigned to be the experimental group and other(s) to be the control group.

Sustained Silent Writing (SSW) was introduced in Term 3 and Term 4 of the academic year 2016. There were two dependent measures: one of writing performance and one of writing perceptions. Students' writing scores and writing attitudes were tracked over the terms.

For the writing performance scores, the teachers did the marking together, using a set of standardised rubrics to award the content and language scores. The scripts for each composition were marked by two markers to increase reliability. The two composition scores were then averaged in an attempt to ensure that one score did not skew the data. These writing performance scores were based on the students' writing in Semestral Assessment 1, Continual Assessment 2 and Semestral Assessment 2. The scores from these assessments were used to track the performance of the students' writing ability.

For the writing perceptions scores, a survey was distributed before and after the introduction of Sustained Silent Writing. The writing perception scores covered in six domains: (a) the perception of others' impression of one's writing ability, (b) the perceived writing ability (general), (c) the perceived writing ability (specific), (d) perceived improvements in writing ability, (e) confidence and (f) perceived interest. Each domain consisted of four item statements which students responded to using a Likert scale of 1 to 5. The scores on the four item statements were aggregated to give an overall score for each domain. There were two points of data collection – one each in Term 2 and Term 4. The Term 2 writing perception scores were used as a baseline for comparison and the Term 4 scores were used post-treatment.

For the experimental group, the teacher began a 1.5 hour writing lesson after 10 minutes of Sustained Silent Writing. This was followed by 20 minutes of pre-writing exercises from the writing package, and subsequently, 50 minutes were allocated for pupils to complete the composition practice. Pupils were free to write on topics related to the writing task or of their own choice.

For the control group, the teacher began a 1.5 hour writing lesson with 10 minutes of Sustained Silent Reading, and followed this with 20 minutes of pre-writing exercises from the writing package, and finally, with 50 minutes for pupils to complete the composition practice.

Two sets of analyses were conducted. In the first set, a series of mixed analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to assess the effects of SSW on students' writing scores in the different student ability groups across the different times. In the second set, a series of mixed ANOVA were used to assess the effects of SSW on students' writing perception scores in the different student ability groups across time. When main effects or interaction effects emerged, follow-up analyses were conducted.

Results

Two sets of analyses were conducted using SPSS 20.0.

First, preliminary analyses were carried out to examine the means and standard deviations of the variables. In the first set, a series of mixed analyses of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess the effects of Sustained Silent Writing on students' writing scores in different student ability groups across the different times. In the second set, a series of mixed analyses of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess the effects of Sustained Silent Writing on students' writing scores in different student ability groups across time. Next, when main effects or interaction effects emerged, follow-up analyses were conducted, at a significance level of .05.

Effects of Sustained Silent Writing on Students' Writing Scores

A 2×3 between-subjects ANOVA was used to analyse the effects of ability and treatment on the difference of Total Writing Scores across different time. A significant main effect of ability emerged. This implies that the introduction of Sustained Silent Writing intervention does result in changes in student mean writing scores depending on student ability level. The means and standard deviations are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Mean Writing Scores of Primary 5 Pupils (SD in Parentheses)

	Grade	SA1 (Pre-Intervention)	CA2	SA2
Intervention	High Ability	24.72 (5.85)	27.49 (5.08)	27.13 (4.17)
	Middle Ability	19.30 (7.59)	24.33 (4.96)*	22.78 (5.12)
	Low Ability	15.45 (4.80)	20.48 (4.72)*	22.26 (5.63)
No Intervention	High Ability	28.51 (5.17)	31.18 (4.51)	31.38 (3.93)
	Middle Ability	19.66 (6.57)	25.34 (5.46)*	24.39 (4.80)
	Low Ability	14.52 (6.71)	18.28 (4.93)	19.52 (3.96)

Note. The maximum possible score was 40. * $p < .05$

Further tests revealed that the Low Ability (LA) group made larger improvements than the High Ability (HA) group when they received the writing treatment programme, $F(1,214)=7.32, p=.007$. The Low Ability (LA) group also made larger improvements than the Middle Ability (MA) group when they received the writing treatment programme, $F(1,214)=4.24, p=.041$. Pupils from the Low Ability (LA) group improved the most with the introduction of Sustained Silent Writing.

Effects of Sustained Silent Writing on Students' Writing Perception Scores

A 2×3 between-subjects ANOVA was used to analyse the effects of ability and treatment on the differences in Total Writing Perception Scores. A significant main effect of ability emerged, $F(2,197)=4.49, p=.012, \eta^2_{\text{partial}}=.044$. This implies that the introduction of the Sustained Silent Writing intervention does result in changes in their mean writing perception scores depending on student ability level. The means and standard deviations are summarised in Table 2. The writing perception scores of pupils from the High Ability (HA) group improved the most with the introduction of Sustained Silent Writing.

Table 2

Mean Writing Perception Scores of Primary 5 Pupils (SD in Parentheses)

	Grade	T1	T2	Diff (T2-T1)
Intervention	High Ability	2.96 (0.60)	3.26 (0.54)	0.30 (0.60)*
	Middle Ability	2.83 (0.49)	3.25 (0.51)	0.42 (0.58)*
	Low Ability	2.76 (0.52)	2.72 (0.62)	-0.04 (0.55)
No Intervention	High Ability	3.52 (0.54)	3.62 (0.58)	0.09 (0.57)
	Middle Ability	2.83 (0.52)	3.16 (0.58)	0.33 (0.41)*
	Low Ability	3.12 (0.56)	3.32 (0.68)	0.20 (0.71)

Note: * $p < .05$

Further tests were conducted to analyse the six different domains of the writing perception. The means of three of the domains, (a) General Ability Perception Scores, (b) Improvement Perception Scores and (c) Interest Perception Scores were found to be significantly different for pupils who received the Sustained Silent Writing and those who did not ($p < .05$).

Discussion

The results show statistically significant improvements in writing performance scores among the Low Ability pupils. This group of pupils benefitted from the Sustained Silent Writing intervention which improved their confidence in ideas and content generation. There were informal observations that, as the study progressed, there were improvements in terms of pupils overcoming writing 'inertia'. Based on this, it is suggested that pupils engage in Sustained Silent Writing before they embark on a writing task.

As the study progressed over time, there were also significant improvements in the writing perception scores among the High Ability pupils. As the Sustained Silent Writing intervention was introduced regularly into the classrooms, writing became a habit. Hence, it resulted in changes in pupils' attitudes.

Conclusion

This research was a pilot study on the effect of Sustained Silent Writing on a specific sample population which was selected as its members were more competent in writing. It is suggested that a Sustained Silent Writing intervention be introduced into classrooms and pupils be encouraged to write freely (on a given topic or personal choice) so that writing eventually becomes a habit.

It is suggested that this study be replicated at other levels (Primary 3, 4 and 6) to examine the extent of its benefit to larger and more diverse profiles of pupils. This is also to determine if the results recorded in the pilot study will hold true to populations of different ages and profiles.

References

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