

The effects of sustained silent writing on pupils' writing scores and perception of writing attitudes

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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 writing attitudes. The sample consisted of 25 classes, 942 pupils from Primary 3 to 6. A writing perception survey and the pupils' writing scores in the Semestral Assessment 1 were used as pre-treatment measures. All pupils received 15 minutes of SSW before each writing lesson for a period of two terms. Pupils 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 pupils from different primary levels responded differently to the SSW treatment. Specifically, all upper primary pupils, Primary 5 and 6 showed significant improvements in their writing scores. No significant differences in overall writing attitudes were observed for all primary levels.

Introduction

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. Among the four language skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing, pupils generally face more difficulties in writing, and are seldom motivated to write.

With the success that Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) has achieved in improving reading skills and attitudes of pupils towards reading (Siah & Kwok, 2010), Sustained Silent Writing (SSW) was first introduced in 2016 to a group of Primary 5 students. SSW is a localised approach of free writing, which is the practice of involving the student and the teacher in writing anything that the student for a given length of time on a regular basis (Voorheis, 1988). Examples of SSW include expressive writing or journal writing.

Albeit not a foreign concept to many teachers, SSW are often used sporadically by teachers and there is little implementation structure. With the exception of the earlier exploratory study by Fahmi, Wah & Wong (2018), a review of literature revealed no local research on whether SSW boosts pupils' writing scores and their perceptions of their own confidence and competence in writing.

From a scan of current literature, we identified that there appears to be no local research on whether SSW boosts pupils' writing scores and their perceptions of their own confidence and competence in writing, with the exception of the earlier exploratory study by Fahmi, Wah & Wong (2018). The results of their exploratory study suggested positive impacts of SSW treatment on 241 Primary 5 students. Compared to those under control group, Middle and Low Ability pupils receiving SSW intervention showed statistically significant improvements in their writing performance scores (Fahmi, Wah & Wong, 2018). Although no significant improvements in writing performance scores were observed for the High Ability pupils, it was observed that for those who received the SSW intervention, their writing perception scores improved. They viewed writing more positively and are more confident to write.

Having observed the positive effects of SSW in improving pupils' writing scores and self-perceptions of their writing confidence and competence, this inquiry looks into the effects of Sustained Silent Writing (SSW) on writing performance score and writing perception scores of pupils in the Primary 3 to Primary 6 English Language classrooms.

Specifically, we wished to explore:

1. In what ways can we replicate and extend the positive effects of SSW on pupils' writing scores and perceptions to other Primary Levels?
2. How, if any, do the effects of SSW differ across primary levels and pupils' ability groups?
3. How can key takeaways from this study be applied to impact pupils' language learning experience in other class writing lessons?

Methodology

A total of 942 Primary 3 to 6 students were recruited for this study. There were a total of 25 classes: six classes each for Primary 3, 4 and 5; and seven classes for Primary 6. The classes for each primary level were divided into groups of different abilities – High Ability or HA (A and B), Middle Ability or MA (C and D) and Low Ability or LA (E, F and G).

SSW was introduced in Term 3 and Term 4 of the academic year 2017. All teachers were briefed on the way to conduct SSW in their classrooms. Each teacher began a 1.5 hour writing lesson after 10 minutes of SSW. During the ten minutes, pupils were given a topic to write on freely in the classroom. Pupils were assured that their SSW pieces would not be graded and were not meant to be a form of evaluation. Topics given were related to the composition topic and the themes of the STELLAR unit. Hence, some prior schema was activated. Pupils do not discuss the topic with their peers prior 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.

There were two dependent measures: one of writing performance and one of writing perceptions. The 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 standardized 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 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 previously trialled survey (Fahmi, Wah & Wong, 2018) was distributed before and after the introduction of SSW. 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 (see Annex A). 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. Pupils spend about 10 minutes to complete the survey and they were told to complete all questions. . The Term 2 writing perception scores were used as a baseline for comparison and the Term 4 scores were used post-treatment.

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 primary levels and 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 primary levels and 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. 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 SSW on students' writing scores in different primary levels and 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 SSW on students' writing scores in different primary levels and 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 $2 \times 3 \times 4$ mixed-subjects ANOVA was used to analyse the effects of ability and primary levels on the difference of Total Writing Scores across different time. A significant main effect of primary levels emerged. This implies that the introduction of the SSW intervention does result in changes in students' mean writing scores depending on their primary levels. The means and standard deviations are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Mean Writing Scores of Pupils (SD in Parentheses)

Primary Level	Grade	SA1 (Pre-Intervention)	SA2
3	High Ability	16.32 (1.45)	16.14 (1.94)
	Middle Ability	12.53 (2.32)	11.75 (2.17)
	Low Ability	9.17 (3.47)	8.96 (2.72)
4	High Ability	14.79 (2.02)	14.53 (2.60)
	Middle Ability	11.26 (2.80)	11.05 (2.93)
	Low Ability	8.35 (2.88)	8.03 (3.14)
5	High Ability	30.06 (6.92)	32.51 (3.61)**
	Middle Ability	24.13 (3.34)	25.70 (4.53)**
	Low Ability	12.40 (10.61)	20.17 (0.85)**
6	High Ability	28.19 (4.07)	32.59 (4.09)**
	Middle Ability	21.38 (5.67)	27.15 (4.40)**
	Low Ability	16.70 (7.96)	22.00 (8.52)**

Note. The maximum possible score for Primary 3 and 4 was 20; Primary 5 and 6 was 40.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Further tests revealed that the upper primary levels, Primary 5 and 6 made significant improvements in their writing scores with the introduction of SSW. No significant improvements were observed in the middle primary levels. For both of the upper primary levels, all students showed highly significant improvements with SSW intervention, regardless of their ability groups ($p < .001$).

Effects of Sustained Silent Writing on Students' Writing Perception Scores

A $2 \times 3 \times 4$ mixed-subjects ANOVA was used to analyse the effects of ability and primary levels on the difference of Total Writing Perception Scores across different times. No significant effects were observed. This implies that the introduction of SSW intervention did not result in changes in their mean overall writing perception scores across all primary levels and student ability groups.

Further tests were conducted to examine each of the six domains of the writing scale for each primary level and student ability groups. Significant results were observed in some domains for some primary

levels and ability groups. The means and standard deviations of domains with significant improvements are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

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

Primary Level	Grade	Domains	T1	T2
3	High Ability	Specific Writing	3.75 (0.76)	4.08 (0.78)**
		Interest	3.51 (1.02)	3.81 (0.90)*
4	Middle Ability	Confidence	2.84 (0.85)	3.21 (0.82)**
5	High Ability	General Writing	3.02 (0.80)	3.24 (0.87)**
	Middle Ability	Improvement	3.62 (0.77)	4.00 (0.71)*

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Similar to the earlier study by Fahmi, Wah & Wong (2018), the SSW intervention did not help to improve the writing attitudes of pupils from Low Ability (LA) groups. Results of this inquiry revealed that pupils showed improvements in different domains of the writing perception survey, depending on their primary level and ability groups.

Discussion

The results show statistically significant improvements in writing performance scores among the upper primary, Primary 5 and 6 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.

The positive effects of SSW were not observed in the middle primary, Primary 3 and 4 pupils. It could be because the teachers in both levels are to train the pupils to be familiar with the new composition format, a 3-picture stimulus for Primary 3 pupils and a thematic composition for Primary 4 pupils. Although SSW were carried out in the classrooms, it could not be carried out regularly due to time constraints. The levels with higher results had more consistent SSW time.

Additionally, free writing encourages idea generation, which is congruent to the composition format for Primary 4, 5 and 6 pupils. Given that the Primary 3 pupils are still using a 3-picture stimulus and were not required to create their own storyline for their composition, free writing may not be as beneficial for them compared to the other levels.

As the study progressed over time, there were also significant improvements in specific domains of the writing perception scores among the High Ability and Middle Ability pupils. When Sustained Silent Writing intervention was introduced regularly into these classrooms, writing became a habit and pupils gained greater confidence and interest in writing. Although there were no significant improvements in the writing attitudes of Low Ability pupils, there were significant improvements in their writing scores.

Conclusion

This research was an extensive study on the effect of Sustained Silent Writing on the writing scores and attitudes of pupils in the middle and upper primary classrooms in Singapore, with the intention of developing competency and fostering positive attitudes in writing. Results of this inquiry revealed that the SSW intervention was more useful in the upper primary classrooms. 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.

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Annex A

SSW Perception Survey

Listed below are statements about writing. Check one response for each question.

SD = Strongly Disagree D = Disagree N = Neutral A = Agree SA = Strongly Agree

S/N	Sentence	SD	D	N	A	SA
1.	My family thinks that I write well.					
2.	I think writing is easy for me.					
3.	I can write with sentences that are in order of the events happening.					
4.	I feel nervous when I need to write.					
5.	I feel that I am improving in my writing.					
6.	Other than school practices, I write regularly. (E.g., journal entries)					
7.	I think I am a good writer.					
8.	I know how to organise my ideas into different paragraphs.					
9.	I need less help to write well now than before.					
10.	My writing scores has improved.					
11.	My friends think that I write well.					
12.	I think my writing pieces are interesting.					
13.	I make sure that the sentences in my writing stick to the given topic.					
14.	I feel relaxed when I write.					
15.	I enjoy writing.					
16.	My teacher thinks that I write well.					
17.	I have more ideas for writing now than before.					
18.	I am comfortable to write.					

Sustained Silent Writing is when your teacher sets aside some time in class for you to write continuously on any topic.

Do you like it? Why or why not?

Annex B

Domains of the question items in perception survey

S/N	Sentence	Domains
1.	My family thinks that I write well.	Perceived others' impression of one's writing ability
2.	I think writing is easy for me.	Confidence
3.	I can write with sentences that are in order of the events happening.	Perceived writing ability (Specific)
4.	I feel nervous when I need to write.	Perceived writing ability (General)
5.	I feel that I am improving in my writing.	Perceived improvements in writing ability
6.	Other than school practices, I write regularly. (E.g., journal entries)	Perceived interest
7.	I think I am a good writer.	Confidence
8.	I know how to organise my ideas into different paragraphs.	Perceived writing ability (Specific)
9.	I need less help to write well now than before.	Perceived improvements in writing ability
10.	My writing scores has improved.	Perceived improvements in writing ability
11.	My friends think that I write well.	Perceived others' impression of one's writing ability
12.	I think my writing pieces are interesting.	Confidence
13.	I make sure that the sentences in my writing stick to the given topic.	Perceived writing ability (General)
14.	I feel relaxed when I write.	Confidence
15.	I enjoy writing.	Perceived interest
16.	My teacher thinks that I write well.	Perceived others' impression of one's writing ability
17.	I have more ideas for writing now than before.	Perceived improvements in writing ability
18.	I am comfortable to write.	Confidence

Annex C

Possible Free Writing Topics Linked to STELLAR topics

STELLAR Topic	Theme	Free Writing Topics
Unit 1 Prince Zak and the Wise Frog	Fairy Tales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write about a time when you had lost something precious. Imagine that you have dropped into a mud puddle and you discover another world out there. Who lives in this world? Describe what you see, and write about those who live there. How will you return to your world? You are the ruler of a new country. What is the country called? As the king or queen, write your five most important laws. Design a flag for your country, and explain what the design means.
Unit 2 Canoe Diary	Travelogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write about a time when you have been on a trip away from home. If you stepped into funny-looking shoes that would take you to the one special place you want to go, where would it be? Why? You and your family will be living alone on a small island for two weeks. There you will have shelter, food and fresh water. List ten items that you will take with you to the island, and explain why. Which of these items is most important to you? Why?
Unit 3 Ruby's Sunflower	Honesty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write about a time when you had taken part in a contest. You are looking through an album filled with photos of your family. Suddenly, the people in the photos begin talking. What do they say?
Unit 4 Making Ice Cream	Following Instructions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe your version of the world's most famous dessert. What if drops of rain sometimes came down as melted bits of chocolates? If you had to be outdoors during this kind of rain, what would you wear? Why? What else might you do during this type of rain? Pretend that you are the manager of an ice cream parlour that offers customers unusual and surprising flavours. Create a menu that lists and describes several new taste treats. Which do you think will be your customer's favourite?
Unit 5 A Nasty Accident	Road Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write about an accident that you had seen. It could be real-life or from movies. How might you make your bicycle fly? Imagine some creative possibilities and describe them. Draw a picture of your best idea.
Unit 6 The Four Friends	Friendship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write about your best friend. Imagine that a spaceship from another planet has landed in the schoolyard. The aliens inside are friendly. From which planet have they come? What do they look like? Why have they come to Earth? How would you make them feel welcomed? Think about all the great qualities your best friend has. If your best friend were an animal, which animal would he or she be? Explain.
Unit 7 Sport's Day	Sports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write about your Sport's Day experience. Invent and describe a game in which players do lots of running and use a piece of chalk and bell. The Bunny Hop is a dance that involves a lot of hopping with one's feet together. What if people did not walk, but danced the Bunny Hop instead? Think about your favourite sport. How would dancing the Bunny Hop change the game? Would you like to do the Bunny Hop all the time? Why or why not?

Unit 8 Statues	Party Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe a party game that you would like to play with your classmates. Imagine you are learning to be a magician. While you are learning, you make a few mistakes. Write a funny story about your accidental magic, and tell what you learned from it. Imagine you are a newspaper writer on Venus. When people from Earth visit your planet, they play a game you have never seen before but it is very common game on Earth. Write an article for your Venus newspaper that describes this game for your readers.
Unit 9 What is a Tsunami?	Natural Disasters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What if a rainstorm washed all the colours from the flowers in your garden? How could you put the colours back? How might you prevent this from happening again? The star you wished upon last night had granted your wish! What was your wish? How will this wish make you happy? How will it make your family happy? As you walk through the woods, you hear two trees arguing. What are the trees arguing about? Describe what they say to each other. How will you help them solve their argument?
Unit 10 Rat's Nest	Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write about a time when you were scolded by your parents for not keeping your room clean. You have found a very talented mouse. Where did you find it? Describe the mouse's talents, and explain what you will do to it. Invent a tool that will help you to clean your room. What will you call it? Describe how it helps you to do the job, and then draw a picture of it. You are babysitting for a smart, playful chimpanzee that does not want to go to sleep. Describe what happens at bedtime. What do you do to get the chimp to fall asleep? Oh no! Your shadow is misbehaving! As you sit writing, your shadow is doing other things. Describe what trouble your shadow is causing, and explain how it got away from you. Then tell how you will get your shadow back and keep it with you.
Unit 11 Leatherback Turtles	Conservation and Caring for Endangered Animals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write about any questions that you may have about any endangered animals. Write about any endangered animal. Describe what it might be like to live in the ocean with sea creatures. How would you breathe? Where would you live? What games would you play? Invent an unusual animal that is a combination of two kinds of animals. Think of a name for this new animal. For example, a cat combined with a crocodile might be called "kittydile". Write what is special about the new animal and then draw it.
Unit 12 Boring Street	Neighbourhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write about what you like and dislike in your neighbourhood. What if a grouchy troll lived on a street corner in your neighbourhood? This troll does not like people to cross the street at his corner, but today you must. Create a plan to get past the troll. Imagine that you are in charge of the playground on the day that the neighbourhood giant comes to play. What games can you design for children and the giant to play together? List as many as you can, and write the rules for the one you think would be the most fun.