

# Effective Writing Instruction for Students in Elementary Level

## Who Find Writing Challenging: Evidence-Based Practices

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### Abstract

*Writing is a crucial skill for academic and professional attainment, yet it remains neglected in literacy instruction. The negligence, along with inadequate instruction, makes writing more challenging for elementary students who have lower writing proficiency. To identify evidence-based practices of writing instruction, this article systematically reviews the latest literacy studies on writing instruction. Using four databases; EBSCOHost, Education Research Complete, ERIC, and Teacher Reference Center, with certain Boolean phrases, eight studies meeting inclusion criteria are selected. The article is a synthesis of findings across the eight studies reviewed. Different themes are created incorporating commonalities and unique findings and are discussed through the lens of the SRSD Model. Multiple strategies such as spontaneous prompting with instructional feedback, explicit instruction, mnemonic strategies, morphological word knowledge instruction, and technology instruction are evidence-based practices of writing instruction as they are proven to boost students' confidence, clarity, and the quality of writing. While, this review provides a general overview of writing strategies, future research could emphasize exploring effective strategies for teaching specific aspects/ areas of writing instruction, for instance, a synthesis of the strategies for teaching vocabulary or genre-specific writing.*

**Keywords:** writing instruction, elementary literacy study, SRSD, evidence-based strategies, poor writers

### Effective Writing Instruction for Elementary Students with Lower Writing Proficiency

Writing and formal education have evolved together (Halliday, 1987), stressing the importance of writing as a core of learning. However, writing skills, instruction, and achievement have been historically neglected in American Schools (Clifford, 1989,

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National Commission on Writing, 2003) and worldwide. This neglect is evident with consistent low writing proficiency achievements across the grades, over the years, as highlighted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2002, 2007, and 2011. For example, only 24% of students have performed at or above the proficient level in both eighth and twelfth grades (NAEP, 2011). Furthermore, approximately, half of the high school graduates are not ready for college writing (Graham & Perin, 2007) which projects a need for exploring effective writing instruction for better writing proficiency. The article targets for elementary level, primary grades or K-6 students, because of their crucial developmental trajectory and delay in addressing their literacy issues brings unsuccessful results in writing instruction later (Slavin et al., 1989).

The effects of limited writing proficiency permeate students' academic, social, and professional life. While writing enhances students' content learning (Graham & Perin, 2007), the inability to write effectively limits students' academic, occupational, and personal attainments (Graham, 2019). Students with and without LDs in experimental group are explored making significant achievements from pretest to posttest on several writing measures (Bui et al., 2006). Given the crucial role of writing, the ongoing poor students' writing achievements, and positive impact of experimental studies, this article attempts to fill the existing gap by exploring evidence-based writing practices.

Writing is a complex skill, requiring the coordination of affective, cognitive, linguistic, and physical processes (Troia, 2006). Students with or without having learning difficulties can find writing difficult. Additionally, limited time allocated for writing instruction (Graham & Harris, 2002) makes these challenges acute.

Furthermore, teachers find writing instruction challenging and demanding, particularly with struggling learners. A national survey on primary grades writing instruction revealed that only 28% of those certified teachers of teacher education programs, felt prepared to teach writing (Cutler & Graham, 2008). This challenge is even more pronounced while teaching students with learning disabilities as they struggle with foundational skills such as spelling, sentence formation, capitalization, handwriting, planning, and motivation (Troia, 2006). General teachers are confident and have more positive attitudes towards teaching writing than special teachers, however, they also feel inadequately prepared to teach writing to students with learning disabilities (Graham et al., 2023).

Evidence-based instructional practices would be beneficial for students with poor writing, as they can improve their skills dramatically if they get the detailed explicit instruction they require (Graham et al., 2005). Therefore, the article aims to explore evidence-based practices for teaching writing by synthesizing findings of writing-focused literacy articles and attempts to answer; what evidence-based writing instruction strategies support students who struggle with writing?

## **Method**

This article uses Boolean searches using the databases; EBSCOHost, Education Research Complete, ERIC, and Teacher Reference Center. A Boolean phrase (writing or writing instruction or teaching writing or writing pedagogy) and (poor writers or struggling writers or students with learning disabilities) and (K-6 or primary education or elementary education) got me 16 articles and they are further examined.

## **Search Criteria**

The article only reviews peer reviewed journal articles in literacy research conducted in last five years, focusing on writing instruction for poor writers or students with LD in the US primary level public schools' classrooms, whereas articles focusing on reading, mathematical language, science writing, clinical practices, genre-specific, assessment or behavior are excluded.

## **Theoretical Framework: Self- Regulated Strategy Development**

Self- Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) developed by Harris and Graham integrates cognitive and self-regulatory strategies to make writers effective and independent. In this study, it serves as the theoretical framework discussing structured, evidence-based approaches to improving writing performance among students, particularly those who face challenge to acquire it. Additionally, this framework has been greatly validated through research, demonstrating its ability to enhance content knowledge, strategic behavior, self- regulation skills, self- efficacy, and motivation in diverse students (Santangelo, et al. 2007). Its adaptability and focus on self-regulated learning make it best-fit to addressing the challenges elementary students face in writing.

The SRSD model advocates for six instructional stages, yet be flexible and adaptable to meet the diverse needs of learners and teachers. The stages are; a) develop background knowledge, b) discuss it, c) model it, d) memorize it, e) support it, and f) independent performance (Graham & Harris, 2005; Harris & Graham, 1996). And these iterative stages provide a structured pathway for students to develop and refine their writing skills, allowing for modifications based on individual needs. It breaks down complex writing tasks into manageable steps, SRSD ensures that students have a clear roadmap for completing their assignments.

## **Analysis and Synthesis of the Study Findings**

After creating a systematic summary table of the selected articles, this article analyzes the interventions used in the articles and synthesizes key findings to propose strategies for writing instruction to struggling students. The common and unique themes are presented and discussed through the lens of the Self-Regulated Strategy Development Model to highlight its relevance in writing instruction.

Moreover, writing being inherently challenging and even more demanding for students with learning disabilities (LDs) or emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs), the articles highlight various writing interventions to support these students adequately in terms of motivation, vocabulary development, spelling, and process writing integrated with technology.

## **Explicit Instruction: A Must to Writing Instruction**

One of the most common strategies proposed in the articles is explicit instruction. It is a core for successful writing instruction. As Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) model's stages "develop background knowledge" and "memorize it" emphasize on explicitly teaching foundational skills to ensure students internalize them (Harris et al., 2008), these studies call for explicit writing instruction, alongside rich language instruction for teaching any aspect of writing to students performing below basic levels.

Explicit, step-by-step approaches, such as simultaneous prompting and mnemonic devices, significantly enhanced both the writing quality and motivation of struggling learners (Nobel et al., 2021). Similarly, embedding explicit instruction within

short passages and practice activities was efficient for students' acquisition of new academic vocabulary. For example, a randomized control trial conducted by Wood and Schatschneider (2021) across 5th-grade classrooms in 38 schools presented substantial growth in students' academic vocabulary. Likewise, the PESTS mnemonic, which were designed to help students remember challenging spelling patterns significantly improved students' spelling accuracy (Grunke & Skirde, 2022). So, the interventions applied for improving writing instruction strongly advocate for explicit instruction.

### **Morphology- Focused Word Knowledge Instruction: A Pathway to Academic Word Success**

Students who find writing challenging often struggle with learning and using tier 2 and tier 3 academic words, and conversely, those who struggle with academic words are more likely to face difficulties in writing. Students struggle to acquire tier 2 words independently (McKeown, & Beck, 2007), yet they frequently appear in academic texts and are crucial for both reading comprehension and writing quality. Therefore, teaching academic words leads to academic success.

Wood and Schatschneider (2021) highlighted the significant positive impact of morphology-focused supplemental instruction on academic vocabulary use in fifth- grade students. The intervention compared word knowledge instruction with business-as-usual (BAU) English Language Arts instruction over a 20-week period. Aligning with the SRSD model, the intervention focused on teaching specific writing strategies such as *word tree activity*, where students inserted a root word and paired it with derivational morphemes (e.g. pay with payment, payer, payable). The study found that repeated exposure to targeted words and WKI included morphological knowledge were highly effective for enhancing students' academic words use in writing, which connects to SRSD's concept of helping students internalize.

### **Technology Integration in Writing Instruction: Enhancing Process Writing and Spelling**

The integration of technology has proven to be effective in writing instruction, particularly for students with learning disabilities and emotional language disabilities. The reviewed studies highlighted the influential role of Technology-Based Graphic

Organizers (TBGO) and assistive technology tools in improving students' writing process; from brainstorming to publishing as well as fostering motivation and self-confidence (Evmenova & Regan, 2019; Jozwik et al., 2020). TBGO supports students at each stage of the writing process, including planning, organizing, drafting, editing, and publishing. For example, students can set goals and brainstorm ideas before moving on to organizing their work using mnemonic aids such as IDEAS (Identify your claims, Determine three facts, Elaborate with evidence, Add transition words and Summarize your claim). This strategy enables their drafting by providing word prediction options and finally allows them to have peer review and feedback. By embedding technology within the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) framework, students improve their process writing, leading to enhanced writing quality. POWER (Plan, Organize, Write, Edit, and Revise) strategy has significantly positive impact on writing accuracy and quality among students with LDs and EBDs who used assistive technology (AT) tools for transcription (Jozwik et al., 2020). Employing a mixed-method design with a multiple-baseline approach, the study focused on middle school students and found that all participants showed improvements in writing quality and accuracy after POWER strategy instruction and were satisfied with the strategy as well.

Both studies emphasized the common theme of integrating technology with instructional interventions aligned with SRSD. These strategies present effective solutions for supporting students who struggle with writing, demonstrating how technology can enhance both the process and outcomes of writing instruction.

### **Simultaneous Prompting with Instructional Feedback: Elevating Writing Quality**

Simultaneous prompting with instructional feedback drastically improves both writing quantity and quality of students who face difficulties in writing. The study of Nobel et al. (2021) employed this intervention among fourth-grade students with learning disabilities for 12 weeks in 6 different session. The intervention embedded a planned, systematic instruction along with instructional feedback as non-targeted information method, where individualized, controlling prompts were presented to the students immediately before or after instruction to evoke a correct responses, was grounded on SRSD.

In the beginning, trained special educators set writing goals, introduced sentence formation and setting, and assisted student in composing text while adding non-targeted information and guided them to find and correct their errors. Finally, students get to practice writing stories using randomly assigned prompts, which aligns with SRSD's internalization. Moreover, students expressed themselves to be motivated and confident in writing along with longer and high - quality written products. By helping students view themselves as competent writers, the intervention aligned with the SRSD framework's objective of achieving the "Establish Independence" stage.

### **Mnemonic Strategies: A Success**

Mnemonic techniques are successful as effective writing instruction strategies for the students who find writing challenging. These strategies offer systematic, memorable ways for teaching and learning complex concepts of literacy education. The IDEAS strategy designed for teaching students paragraph, PESTS for teaching spelling, and POWER for teaching process writing are commonly evidence-proved strategies discussed in the reviewed studies, for teaching writing to the students who find it difficult.

Research highlights the significant effect of mnemonic strategies. The study by Grunke and Skirde (2022) explored that mnemonic technique PESTS not only improve spelling accuracy but also developed learners' confidence and engagement in writing tasks. It breaks down spelling instruction into memorable steps, including morphological knowledge, considering diverse learning needs. Similarly, Evmenova and Regan (2019) explored that mnemonic aids such as IDEAS enables better organization of ideas and enhances clarity in written expression of students. This aid provides a clear structure for writing a paragraph, helping students from brainstorming to the final submission, including revision and feedback. Likewise, Jozwik et al. (2020) POWER guides the process of writing, and resulted students with better quality, accuracy and satisfaction. Therefore, these strategies aligned with the idea of SRSD can empower educators with evidence-based instruction to overcome writing challenges and develop literacy skills.



## Conclusion

This article analyzes the findings of the studies and provides a synthesis of them as the evidence-based strategies for supporting elementary-level students who find writing challenging, including the learners with LDs and EBDs. Writing, an inherently complex skill to acquire, has been neglected in literacy instruction, contributing to a consistent poor level of proficiency among the students. Targeting the struggling writers, the article highlights the significant role of explicit and systematic writing instruction to address this gap.

This study discusses the successful strategies from different studies via the lens of Self-Regulated Strategy Development Model, which advocates for a structured framework for teaching foundational skills with an aim of enhancing independence. The strategies like spontaneous prompting with instructional feedback, inclusion of morphology-based word knowledge instruction, use of mnemonic devices like PESTS, IDEAS and POWER, integrating technology to assist different aspects of writing instruction are the evidence-based techniques explored in the article to address the writing challenges of the students for words learning, spelling learning, writing process and the building on the overall quality of their writing. Evidence from recent studies persistently shows the significant improvements in writing quality, accuracy and self-efficacy while implementing the above strategies.

This synthesis provides teachers the proven writing instruction to adopt to meet the diverse learner needs. Adopting such techniques not only improves students writing outcomes but also equip them with skills needed for their academic, professional and social success.

This article is limited to only few studies conducted recently, targeting the elementary level students. Future research should continue to explore innovative interventions in other possible aspects of writing, ensuring that effective writing instruction remains a cornerstone of literacy education.



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