Scaffolding Independent Writing in Kindergartners

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Abstract

During the 2013/2014 academic years, the authors received a URECA grant to explore the effectiveness of the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice on young children’s writing. Five kindergarten children were tutored once or twice a week with the Scaffolded Writing protocol. The kindergartners’ letter identification, phonemic/phonics awareness, and writing complexity were evaluated pre- and post-intervention with three tools from The Observation Survey for Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2013). The participants’ stanine scores on all three evaluation measures increased or remained constant after three months of intervention. Writing samples are included.

Introduction

During journal writing time, a kindergarten teacher looked over the shoulder of one her students. She noticed that the girl had written “I like my cats” four days in a row. “Wow! You must really like cats. What are your cats’ names?” asked the teacher. “Oh, I don’t have any cats. I have four rabbits,” explained the girl, “but I don’t know how to spell ‘rabbit’.”

The girl’s creative expression was censored by her own expectation that her spelling be conventional. She continually limited her writing to familiar, safe words such as “like” and “cats”, when perhaps she wanted to communicate more personal or interesting messages. The above scenario is not uncommon in primary grade (K-3) classrooms. Primary teachers often struggle with how to get their novice writers to take chances and write meaningful messages. Yet there exists a simple teaching practice that addresses the needs of novice or emergent writers. Bodrova and Leong (1998) coined this practice Scaffolded Writing. The authors claimed that Scaffolded Writing encourages emergent writers to take risks and write their thoughts down on paper. As a teaching tool, Scaffolded Writing supports children’s emergent writing and facilitates the transition to independent writing. Scaffolded Writing is a “successful application of the Vygotskian concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) applied to the area of literacy learning” (Bodrova & Leong, 1998, p. 1). In other words, a teacher can work with a student at his/her instructional level with the goal of moving the student to independence. With Scaffolded Writing, the teacher begins by supporting the learners’ writing with scaffolding techniques, then learners use the scaffolds on their own, and ultimately the learners write unassisted.

During the 2013/2014 academic year, we received an Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity (URECA) grant award to explore the effectiveness of the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice. We used funds from the award to purchase writing tools, video cameras, audio-recorders, and transcription software. The purpose of our research study was to determine the impact of the Scaffolded Writing practice on students’ learning. Specifically, we sought to answer
three questions:

1. How does the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice improve kindergarten writers’ letter identification?

2. How does the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice improve kindergarten writers’ phonemic and phonics awareness?

3. How does the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice improve kindergarten writers’ quantity and quality of writing?

**Related Literature**

In 1996, Elena Bodrova and Deborah Leong wrote a book and created a curriculum known as Tools of the Mind. The Tools of the Mind curriculum is described as a research-based approach to teaching early literacy. Scaffolded Writing is the primary tool for teaching writing in the Tools of the Mind approach. The Tools of the Mind website describes this teaching practice: “In scaffolded writing, children first plan what they want to write, draw it, and then write it, with the help of multiple mediators, such as lines drawn to represent words. The form that the writing takes (scribbles, lines, initial letter sounds, estimated/invented spelling, word patterns) depends on where children are in their writing development” (para. 25).

Bodrova and Leong (1995) conducted a controlled study of the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice with 115 kindergartners in an experimental group and 115 kindergartners in a control group. For the children taught with Scaffolded Writing, significant differences were found including: the number of words the children wrote, the complexity of their written messages, the number of new words in their writing, the children’s use of conventions, the children’s use of accurate spelling, and the children’s concept of a sentence. Due to time constraints and limited resources, we did not replicate this controlled study, rather we conducted a multiple case study with only five kindergarten participants.

In 2013, kindergarten teacher Amanda VanNess developed a writing program that incorporated the Scaffolded Writing practice (VanNess, Murnen, & Bertelsen, 2013). Not only did the authors lay out the exact steps of the process and how each step was designed to model effective writing practices, they also made explicit connections to how this practice shows exactly where individual students are developmentally with their writing. Scaffolding Writing allows us to see how well a students use correct letters to represent sounds, use correct (or invented) spelling, use proper spacing between words and capitalization, demonstrate directionality, and illustrate their writing with drawings (p. 579-580). Use of the Scaffolded Writing practice in her writing program yielded samples that exceeded standard expectations for kindergarten writing. Similar to the VanNess study, our research with individual kindergarten students yielded exemplary writing samples.

Limited research exists on the effectiveness or impact of this teaching practice on student learning (Bodrova & Leong, 1995; VanNess, Murnen, & Bertelsen, 2013). However, the research that has been conducted has yielded results that confirm the effectiveness of Scaffolded Writing. We wished to confirm the power of this teaching practice for ourselves.
Methodology

To determine the impact of the Scaffolded Writing practice on students’ learning, we measured five kindergarten students’ learning pre- and post- intervention in three domains: letter identification, phonemic/phonics awareness, and writing vocabulary. Specifically, we sought to answer these three research questions:

1. **How does the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice improve kindergarten writers’ letter identification?**

2. **How does the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice improve kindergarten writers’ phonemic and phonics awareness?**

3. **How does the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice improve kindergarten writers’ quantity and quality of writing?**

Participants and Setting

We conducted a multiple case study with five kindergarten students. Upon approval from our university’s Institutional Review Board, five kindergarten children were randomly selected by the researchers from the participating teacher’s class list. We did not have particular selection criteria other than the participants had to be kindergartners. There were three boys and two girls. The kindergartner’s names and identifying information were anonymized for presentation and publication purposes. These students belonged to a classroom of approximately 20 typically-developing peers in rural Putnam County, Tennessee.

The classroom teacher agreed without hesitation to let us work with her students. Parents of the five children signed the necessary consent forms. The undergraduate student author had prior experience working with the classroom teacher. We knew the classroom teacher provided a developmentally appropriate learning environment. A developmentally appropriate learning environment is one in which the developmental needs of children are met. Gestwicki (2011) outlined the developmental needs of primary-age children: “They need physical environments that help them develop a sense of industry by succeeding at learning tasks that match their mostly pre-operational learning style. They need environments that allow them to assume active roles in planning and directing their learning... They need environments that help their emerging interest and skills in literacy” (p. 216).

Our research took place during non-direct instruction periods of the kindergarten day, such as snack time, center time, or nap time (for the kindergartners who didn’t usually take naps). We worked with the children in an empty classroom next to their primary classroom. This was a quiet, comfortable location for the kindergartners.

Procedures

For three months, we tutored each child once or twice a week. We audio-recorded and sometimes video-recorded the tutoring events. We also took notes following each tutoring event and documented the students’ writing samples.

A typical tutoring session using Scaffolded Writing began with the preparation of materials: blank paper, a yellow highlighter, an alphabet chart, markers for illustrating, and a pencil. The following procedures represent an
early or first Scaffolded Writing experience for a student.

1. Begin by asking the student to work with you. Ask what he would like to write about today. It needs to be one sentence. If it appears he needs help narrowing down his choices, give him some prompts. Ask him to share what he did over the weekend, something he is excited about, something he would like to tell someone, etc.

2. Count how many words are in the sentence. Use your fingers and have him count along using his. For example, his sentence is, “I played a baseball game.” Count the words together, holding up a finger for each one: I (1) played (2) a (3) baseball (4) game (5).

3. “You have 5 words in your sentence. Watch me draw lines to show where we will write the words.” Using the yellow highlighter, draw a line for each word at the bottom of the page. Draw longer lines for longer words, thinking aloud as you do so. “Hmm, the word ‘baseball’ has a lot of sounds in it. I may need to have more space for that word.”

4. When all 5 lines are drawn, the student is ready to write with the pencil. Have him repeat the sentence to you before he begins. As he writes, stop after each word and read what is written so far.

5. If he needs help spelling a word, remind him to write the sounds he hears. You can implement the “rubber band” prompt, saying the word slowly and emphasizing each sound as you pull the air apart with your hands, imitating the stretch of a rubber band. Invented spelling is absolutely acceptable and even desired during this process.

6. When he is done, read the sentence together. Read the sentence several times. He may illustrate his message in the blank space above the sentence.

These exact steps were repeated for several tutoring sessions. In later tutoring sessions, we asked the kindergartners to do more of the steps on their own, such as drawing their own lines to represent words. By expecting students to apply scaffolding steps (such as drawing lines) on their own, we were gradually releasing responsibility from teacher control to student control. The teacher lessens the amount of support given each time, until the student is able to complete the entire process independently. This looked different for each student; some moved to independent writing after four to five sessions, whereas other students needed sustained teacher support. Figure 1 depicts one early intervention sample and one later intervention sample from Boy 3.

![Figure 1: One Early and One Later Intervention Sample from Boy 3](image-url)
**Evaluation**

Initially, we assessed the children’s letter identification, phonemic/phonics awareness, and their writing complexity with three assessment measures from the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2013). According to the Reading Recovery Council of North America (2013): “The Observation Survey is a teacher-administered standardized assessment that adheres to characteristics of sound measurement instruments: standard tasks, standard administration, real-world task to establish validity, and ways of knowing about reliability of observations” (para. 2).

The Letter Identification tool simply measures a child’s accurate identification of uppercase and lowercase letters. The Hearing and Recording Sounds tool measures a child’s ability to hear sounds in words (phonemic awareness) and the ability to represent those sounds with letters (phonics). The Writing Vocabulary tool measures the quantity and quality of individual words a child can write independently. Following three months of tutoring, we assessed the kindergartners again with the same three assessment measures.

**Findings**

Overall, we found, that after three months of intervention, the children’s stanine scores on the three evaluation measures increased or remained constant (See Table 1).

**Research Question 1: How does the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice improve kindergarten writers’ letter identification?**

The Letter Identification tool of the Observation Survey of Early Literacy (Clay, 2013) was an easy and quick assessment of the children’s abilities to identify individual letters (both uppercase and lowercase). Responses were counted correct if the child identified the letter’s name, or identified the letter’s sound, or identified a word that began with that letter. Figure 2 shows one child’s (Girl 2) pre- and post-record sheets from the Letter Identification assessment. Although no direct instruction of letter names took place during the Scaffolded Writing tutoring sessions, all five children increased in their abilities to identify letters. The largest increases took place for Boy 1 and Girl 2 as their scores increased by two stanines.

![Figure 2: Pre- and Post-Letter Identification Record Forms for Girl 2](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Letter I.D.</th>
<th>Hear/Record Sounds</th>
<th>Writing Vocabulary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>Post</td>
<td>Pre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl 1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy 2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy 3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Children’s Stanine Scores Pre- and Post-Intervention
Research Question 2: How does the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice improve kindergarten writers’ phonemic and phonics awareness?

The ability to hear, classify, and manipulate sounds in our language is known as phonemic awareness (Cecil, Baker, and Lozano, 2015). Phonemic awareness precedes phonics applications. When children can identify and record the appropriate letters that make the sounds, they are advancing in their phonics skills.

The Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words evaluation instrument requires the child to listen to and record a dictated sentence. The child’s work is scored by counting the child’s correct representation of the sounds with letters (Clay, 2013). Because the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice encourages children to listen for and record the sounds they hear in words, we anticipated that we would see increases in stanine scores for the Hearing and Recording Sounds measure. Three of the children’s scores increased from pre- to post-intervention by one or two stanines (See Table 1). It should be noted that the two children whose scores remained constant, had high abilities to hear and record sounds before intervention. Figure 3 depicts Girl 2’s pre- and post-record sheets for the Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words evaluation measure.

Research Question 3: How does the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice improve kindergarten writers’ quantity and quality of writing?

With the Writing Vocabulary early literacy assessment, the child is encouraged to write down all the words he knows how to write, starting with his own name and then moving to a personal writing vocabulary list (Clay, 2013). Only words that are spelled correctly receive points. Clay described this simple test as reliable and “very sensitive to instructional procedures of the classroom” (p. 106). Higher stanine scores tend to be obtained from children in classrooms where early writing is fostered. Lower stanine scores tend to be associated with classrooms that provide few opportunities for children to write.

Because the children had received focused, individual writing instruction for three months, we anticipated increased stanine scores for the children on the Writing Vocabulary assessment. Two children’s stanine scores remained constant from pre- to post-intervention. Three children’s scores increased by two to four stanines. Perhaps most impressive was Girl 2’s score increase from stanine 2 to stanine 6. Figures 4 and 5 depict Girl 2’s pre- and post-record sheets for the Writing Vocabulary measure.
Jessica asked Girl 2, “What do you think you’d like to write about today?” Without hesitation, Girl 2 shouted “Wednesday my cousin Carly is going to come!” “Wow!” Jessica responded, “That’s a really great sentence. Let’s use our fingers and figure out how many words that is.” Girl 2 quickly counted on her fingers: “Wednesday my cousin Carly is going to come to play. Ten words!” “Wow! Ten words! This is going to be a great sentence.” Jessica encouraged. Girl 2 confidently picked up the yellow highlighter and immediately began drawing short and long lines on the paper to represent her words. Then Girl 2 confidently and without hesitation wrote “Wensday” on the first line.

The above transcript/scenario was taken from a later tutoring session between our undergraduate student author and one of the kindergarten participants. Girl 2’s ease, confidence, and eagerness to write her message are clearly depicted. We feel certain that consistent implementation of the Scaffolded Writing teaching practice aided Girl 2’s writing fluency.

The participants’ identification of letters, letter sounds, and use of conventional spellings all increased or remained constant after three months of the Scaffolded Writing intervention. It is possible to attribute the participants’ academic growth to the general instruction taking place in the kindergarten classroom, and not to our interventions. Our observations of the children’s approaches to writing and their documented writing samples confirmed for us, however, that Scaffolded Writing definitely contributed to the students’ confidence and risk-taking while writing.

We understand that our multiple case study does not lend itself to generalizations beyond the five kindergartners that we worked with. In the future, we would like to expand our

Discussion

Jessica asked Girl 2, “What do you think you’d like to write about today?” Without hesitation, Girl 2 shouted “Wednesday my cousin Carly is going to come!” “Wow!” Jessica responded, “That’s a really great sentence. Let’s use our fingers and figure out how many words that is.” Girl 2 quickly counted on her fingers: “Wednesday my cousin Carly is going to come to play. Ten
our initial research and replicate Bodrova & Leong’s (1995) study with equal numbers of kindergarten students in experimental and control groups. Such a study would provide more generalizable evidence of this teaching technique’s effectiveness or ineffectiveness.

After completing this study, we were more convinced of the positive potential of this teaching practice. Scaffolded Writing guides young writers past scribbles and pictures to meaningful text. Scaffolded Writing is about taking the mystery out of the writing process. Figure 6 depicts some of our favorite writing samples.

From left to right and top to bottom, the children’s invented spelling in Figure 5 can be translated: “Grant will fight a dragon.”; “I vomited last night.” “We live in Tennessee. Me and my mom live in Tennessee.” and “I like my new skateboard and I like to ride it.” These samples demonstrate the participating kindergartners’ progress in sentence structure variety, phonetic awareness, conventional spelling, word length variety, and perhaps most importantly, risk taking.

As early childhood educators, we are concerned with how we can help our young students gain confidence and skills as writers. Our research confirms that the Scaffolding Writing practice has the potential to increase young writers’ knowledge and skills in letter identification, phonetic awareness, and writing vocabulary. We also observed additional, indirect outcomes for our kindergarten participants including increased writing confidence and fluency. Completion of this study provided us with valuable experience in teaching and interacting with young children, as well as experience in conducting and presenting educational research.

**References**


