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Helping Dyslexic Students to write: Process Writing Approach

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of process writing approach as an instructional method for teachers to help dyslexic students write. The author examines the writing difficulties faced by dyslexic students and discusses how both mainstream teachers and teachers specializing in teaching dyslexic students can help dyslexic students with their writing through the use of the process writing approach.

Key words: Dyslexic students, Writing difficulties, Teaching of writing, Process writing approach

Introduction

In recent years, teachers are enabled to help dyslexic students attending mainstream classes cope with reading and writing through courses. Teachers are informed of dyslexic students in their classes so that they can give these students special attention and extra help. There has been much interest in how to help dyslexic students read and write, especially those identified as at risk of academic failure. Though teachers are keen to help dyslexic students, they are constrained by the need to teach reading and writing to students of varying ability levels within the stated curriculum time frame. Though one-on-one tutoring to enhance dyslexic students' writing ability is ideal, this will be time consuming if a systematic approach to writing is not adopted. This paper explores the possibility of utilizing the process writing approach to enable teachers to help both non dyslexic and dyslexic students in their writing through encouraging generation of ideas of writing, facilitating some form of diagnosis of writing difficulties and offering differentiation in the help to be given to individual dyslexic students.

Background

Dyslexia, Dysgraphia and Writing

Dyslexia has been described by The British Dyslexia Association (n.d.) as "a combination of abilities and difficulties which affect the learning process in one or more of reading, spelling and writing. Accompanying weaknesses may be identified in areas of speed of processing, short term memory, sequencing, auditory and /or visual perception, spoken language and motor skills. It is particularly related to mastering and using written language, which may include alphabetic, numeric and musical notation" (para.15). According to the National Centre for Learning Disabilities Editorial Team (n.d.), dyslexia can affect people differently

depending upon the severity of the learning disability. Some with dyslexia can have trouble with reading and spelling, while others struggle to write, or to tell left from right. Some show few signs of difficulty with early reading and writing but later on may have trouble with complex language skills, such as grammar, reading comprehension, and more in-depth writing.

Dyslexia affects writing as much as reading. In Goodwin and Thomson's (2006) view, a student can be articulate and fluent verbally, demonstrating ability to understand concepts and ideas, and yet 'the writing may be disjointed, as if the very ideas have become muddled. The sequencing may be less clear, the vocabulary more restricted. The spelling of individual words may show letter reversals or additions, while some words may be missing all together' (p. 60). Goodwin and Thomson (2006) even identify characteristics of handwriting and writing that may suggest dyslexia as:

- Use of Upper-Case exclusively or randomly.
- Letters back to front.
- Irregular size or awkward shape of writing, poor spacing. Random or non-existent punctuation.
- Missing letters or words.
- Spelling errors: the same word spelt in different ways, letters in the wrong order, phonic approximations, omission of syllables, errors in suffixes.
- Use of similar but wrong words – malapropisms.
- Non-standard sentence structure, an impression of inexperience in writing.
- Misinterpretation of questions (p.7)

There is a specific term for written dyslexia - *dysgraphia* - which is a learning disability resulting from the difficulty in expressing thoughts in writing and graphing. It generally refers to extremely poor handwriting (Creative Mind Academy). According to the DSM-IV (APA, 2000), dysgraphia, known as a "Disorder of Written Expression," is a combination of excessively poor handwriting, multiple spelling errors, grammatical and/or punctuation errors within sentences and poor paragraph organization (Silbert & Silbert, 2012).

Students with dysgraphia often have difficulty with the sequence of letters and words as they write due to sequential/rational information processing which lead to perceptual problems (reversing letters/numbers, writing words backwards, writing letters out of order, and very sloppy handwriting). They could experiences extreme difficulty with the "mechanics" of writing (spelling, punctuation, etc.) and they tend to intermix letters and numbers in formulas (Creative Mind Academy, n.d.).

With dysgraphia, Stracher (2000) suggests that writing problems manifest themselves in three stages which include motor factors relating to legibility, spelling difficulties and organising writing and syntactic structures.

Dyslexia and Writing Challenges

In looking at students' essays, it can be argued that the characteristics of dyslexic students' written work might equally be found in the work of a non-dyslexic student: difficulty with spelling, handwriting, grammar, syntax and choosing words they can spell rather than those they want to use. Non-dyslexic students who have reading difficulties will also find written

tasks are laborious. Still, specific to dyslexic students, Richards has summarized the primary reasons for avoidance of writing as one or more of the following:

- They have a hard time getting started and feel overwhelmed by the task.
- They need to concentrate to form letters: it is not an automatic process.
- They struggle to organize and use mechanics of writing.
- They are slow and inefficient in retrieving the right word(s) to express an idea.
- They struggle to develop their ideas fluently (poor ideation).
- They struggle to keep track of their thoughts while also getting them down on paper.
- They feel that the process of writing on paper is slow and tedious.
- They feel that the paper never turns out the way they want.
- They realize that the paper is still sloppy even though substantial time and effort were spent.
- They are dysgraphic, which causes multiple struggles at the basic processing levels.
- They are dyslexic, which causes very poor spelling and interferes with automatic use of writing mechanics.

If good writing is characterized by accepted standards of punctuation, capitalization and spelling; choice of appropriate vocabulary; use of correct grammar and writing in a way that expresses ideas, opinions and thoughts in a creative and mature way (Silbert & Silbert, 2012), these are considered as writing challenges by dyslexic students.

For dyslexic students, besides the issue of handwriting - letters may be not joined up, use of upper-case letters, very untidy handwriting, with uneven spacing or letters of unequal size - they find writing simple sentences a challenge as they are often hampered by problems with basic spelling and grammar. Dyslexics spend a long time trying to get the spelling right and they have a tendency to use the words they feel they can spell, rather than the vocabulary they know; add or omit words, or modify the meaning of words or sentences by imposing their own idiosyncratic spelling pattern (Edinburgh Napier University, 2012). They write incomplete sentences, put too many ideas in one sentence, show inability to select between less and more important points and use random punctuation (Goodwin & Thomson, 2006).

Dyslexics find that long pieces of written work are hard to organise and structure. They have problems with expression, grammar, sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, sequencing and getting started. When tackling written assignments, one of the most difficult things for a dyslexic is getting their initial thoughts down on paper (Edinburgh Napier University, 2012). Though they have all the ideas in their head and know exactly what they want to say, they struggle with expressing their ideas.

Additionally, their short-term working memory deficit and slow information processing speed add to the complexity of dealing with words. The work produced by a dyslexic individual is often at odds with their verbal ability in class; the two do not match up. (Edinburgh Napier University, 2012).

One useful approach to help dyslexic students in overcoming the various problems with writing is the use of process writing model.

Process Writing Approach

Seow (2002) construes process writing as a programme of instruction which provides students with a series of planned learning experiences to help students understand the nature of the writing process. Process writing as ‘a classroom activity incorporates the four basic writing stages – planning, drafting (writing), revising (redrafting) and editing and three other stages externally imposed on students by the teacher, namely, responding (sharing), evaluating and post writing’ (Seow, 2002, p. 316).

In the planning stage, students are encouraged to write through activities designed to stimulate thoughts and generate ideas such as brainstorming, semantic mapping, clustering and rapid free writing (Seow, 2002). Once students have gathered sufficient ideas, they make a first attempt at writing the first draft. At this drafting stage, the writers “focus on the fluency of writing and are not preoccupied with grammatical accuracy or the neatness of the draft” (Seow, 2002, p. 317).

Between drafting and revising will be the externally imposed stage of responding which can take the form of a teacher’s quick initial reactions to students’ drafts either orally or in writing or a response from peer either in pairs or in small groups. There is to be no evaluation of the writing but the teacher and peer will offer suggestions and questions to help improve the writing.

Students will then embark on the revising stage of the process writing. When students revise, they review their writing based on the feedback offered by the teacher or peer in the responding stage. In revising, they check how effectively they have communicated their meanings to readers and in the process improve the content and organization of ideas. The students can then write an improved second draft for the editing stage of the writing process.

Goodwin and Thomson (2006) offer this useful summary of the tasks and objectives for the drafting stages (p. 32):

Stage	Tasks	Objectives
Before drafting	Gather all <i>relevant</i> information (index cards, notes etc.). Produce an overview of all topics required (e.g. spider plan, mindmap, list).	Getting ideas Selecting words
Drafting	Group ideas and topics together (e.g. using coloured highlighters). Take each topic separately. Write a list of relevant points, using short sentences.	Basic paragraph Structure Basic sentences
Discuss draft	Read and discuss with your tutor or another student, for <i>content</i> and. Mark structure comments in pencil.	Content and <i>structure</i>
Second draft	Make second draft, incorporating comments.	Content, structure and grammar

In the editing stage, students will find and correct problems with grammar, style, word choice and usage, and punctuation.

The last two stages involve the teacher evaluating the students' writing and conducting the post writing which "constitutes any classroom activity that the teacher and students can do with the completed pieces of writing" (Seow, 1999, p. 319).

According to Graham and Perin (2007a, 2007b), exceptional writing teachers set up a predictable writing routine where students are expected to plan, draft, revise, edit, and share what they write or they treat writing as a process and they expect students to engage in the same processes as skilled writers.

Applying the Process Writing Approach to help Dyslexic Students

Since the process writing approach helps students in enhancing their writing skills, mainstream teachers can apply the following steps for the various stages of process writing (drawn from Department for Education and Skills (2004); Edinburgh Napier University (2012); Goodwin & Thomson (2006); National Centre for Learning Disabilities Editorial Team (n.d.); Richards (1999); Silbert & Silbert (2012); University of Leicester (n.d.)) to help both non dyslexic and dyslexic students in the writing process. Using the process writing model allows for differentiation and timely feedback to meet the specific needs of dyslexic students at the various stages.

Both Richards (1999) and Creative Mind Academy (n.d.) advocate separating the writing into stages and then teaching students the stages of the writing process (brainstorming, drafting, editing, and proofreading, etc.). Creative Mind Academy (n.d.) even suggests grading these stages even on some 'one-sitting' written exercises, so that points are awarded on a short essay for brainstorming and a rough draft, as well as the final product. POWER acronym has been suggested by Richards (1999) and Creative Mind Academy (n.d.) to represent the process writing approach:

- **P** - plan your paper (step 1)
- **O** - organize your thoughts and ideas (steps 2 and 3)
- **W** - write your draft (step 4)
- **E** - edit your work (steps 5, 6, and 7)
- **R** - revise your work, producing a final draft (step 8)

Planning stage:

- Since one of the most difficult things for a dyslexic is getting their initial thoughts down on paper or getting started as they struggle with expressing their ideas, in terms of the planning stage, teachers are to encourage students to outline their thoughts to get the main ideas down on paper without having to struggle with the details of spelling, punctuation (Richards, 1999). To free writers to compose without constraint, use taperecorders, computers, writing frames and other scaffolding techniques (Department for Education and Skills, 2004, p. 17)
- Have the students use visual graphic organizers such as a mind map where that the main idea is placed in a circle in the center of the page and supporting facts are written on lines coming out of the main circle, similar to the arms of a spider or spokes on a wheel. (Richards, 1999)
- Have students write just one key word or phrase for each paragraph, and then going back later to fill in the details as part of planning. (Creative Mind Academy, n.d.)

Drafting stage:

- Tell students to write the first draft where the focus should be on getting their ideas on paper. They are not to worry about making spelling or grammar errors.
- Look at examples of essays and break them down into their different parts (introduction, main body, and conclusion). Teach students to use these structures for their essay.
- Teach students to divide ideas into small sections and to develop topic sentences to put at the head of each section (Goodwin & Thomson, 2006).
- Teach students to write short numbered sentences to begin with, each covering one point. Teach students to add further examples and illustrations of the point he/she is making. Ideas can be joined by using link words such as ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘however’.

Editing stage:

- Encourage proofreading three times: once for content and organisation; once for grammar, expression, sentence structure, etc.; and once for spelling. Proofread each other’s work but ensure that there is no risk of humiliation (Department for Education and Skills, 2004, p. 17).
- Teachers can use Goodwin and Thomson’s (2006) list of characteristics of handwriting and writing to diagnose dyslexic students’ specific writing problems and address them in individual conferencing.
- Help students create a checklist for editing work — proper spelling, neatness, grammar, syntax, clear progression of ideas, etc
- Teach learners how to edit their work. Though punctuation and capitalization problems can be very difficult to improve, teach self-monitoring for accuracy on this dimension. Minimize penalties for these errors (Department of Social Services, n.d.).
- Since spelling is one of the key areas where dyslexics have most difficulty and not every dyslexic produces the same type or pattern of spelling errors because of their management of phonetic sequencing and the degree of their dyslexic difficulty (Edinburgh Napier University), teachers can analyse the types and patterns of spelling errors and remind dyslexic students to edit for the spelling errors they have a tendency to make.
- Develop skills in use of spell checking. Develop a list of particularly troublesome words, especially those that are frequently used. Focus on distinctions that spell checkers miss, e.g., heterographic homophones, like “hear-here,” “there-their,” “whether-weather,” etc (Department of Social Services, n.d.).
- Encourage the student to utilise a rich vocabulary over one that is easily spelled. Have the student mark words that can be replaced with better alternatives, then, help the student ensure that the spelling of those new words is accurate.

Evaluating stage – feedback:

- Provide clear, constructive feedback on the quality of work, explaining both the strengths and weaknesses of the essay and commenting on the structure as well as the information that is included (National Centre for Learning Disabilities Editorial Team, n.d.).
- Let students understand why they have gained or lost marks and if spelling, punctuation and grammar are considered an essential part of the brief, it is important to let them know this in advance (University of Leicester, n.d.).

- Give prompt, legible and detailed feedback as dyslexic students need encouragement on what they have achieved and explicit information about how they can improve their work (University of Leicester).
- Identify the type (what kinds) of errors that have been made in the work, particularly and deal with them in remedial sessions.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the challenges in writing faced by dyslexic students and has offered the possibility of using the process writing approach to help both mainstream teachers and teachers specialising in the teaching of dyslexic students to understand the nature of the writing process. In using the process writing model as a classroom teaching activity, teachers can diagnose the writing problems and offer individualized help to dyslexic students through the various stages of the writing process: generating of ideas to overcome the problem dyslexic students have in starting the writing process; encouraging students to write the first draft by focusing on fluency of writing without being constrained by spelling, grammar and punctuation problems; responding to students' writing by giving suggestions on how to improve content and organisation of ideas and offering help for spelling, punctuation, grammar and syntax in the editing stage.

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