Research Digest

Writing Instruction for Adult Education Learners

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Writing is a critical skill that is considered important for employment, further education, civic participation, health, and personal fulfillment. For example, a substantial percent of nearly all jobs that non-college graduates possess require some type of writing. Workers are increasingly required to use their writing skills for memos, reports, and emails and may find their ability to move into well-paying jobs or enroll in technical training programs limited by their inadequate writing skills (Gillespie, 2001). Adults who lack these skills have limited opportunities to acquire them (National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008). Despite the importance of writing, there is little research on the writing knowledge, skills, and strategies of adult education learners or research on instruction designed for their needs.

This digest provides a brief review of the research in this area. We begin with general information about the writing process, and proceed to what is known about adult learners. Evidence-based writing practice centers around strategy instruction, and therefore our digest emphasizes strategy instruction. We end with practical guidance and implications for instructors.
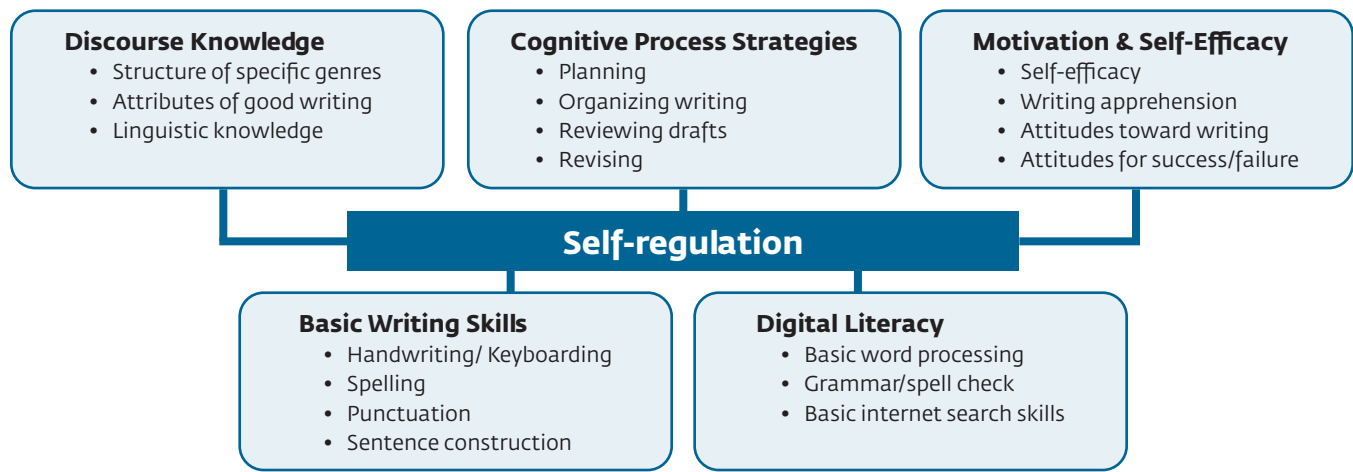
Theoretical and Empirical Foundation

Figure 1 depicts the demanding and complex nature of writing, an activity that requires a wide range of skills, strategies, and knowledge.

Discourse Knowledge

Proficient writers have considerable knowledge about the purposes, text structures, and linguistic features of common genres (e.g., comparison, narrative, argumentative) that they use while generating and organizing content during writing (Hayes, 1996; Hayes & Flower, 1980). In comparison, struggling writers have limited knowledge of discourse information (Englert & Thomas, 1987). Additionally, proficient writers have considerable knowledge of a wide range of attributes of effective writing that they use to revise and edit their writing (MacArthur et al., 2012; 2016). In contrast, struggling writers have limited knowledge of the revision process, often focusing on lower-order surface features (e.g., spelling and punctuation) rather than revising the content and organization of their writing (Graham et al., 1993). Research on strategy instruction in K-12 settings has shown that students can learn multiple text structures and how to use them when planning and revising

FIGURE 1: Model of the components and processes of writing

(National Research Council, 2012. Adapted and reproduced with permission from the National Academy of Sciences, courtesy of the National Academies Press.)

Discourse Knowledge
- Structure of specific genres
- Attributes of good writing
- Linguistic knowledge

Cognitive Process Strategies
- Planning
- Organizing writing
- Reviewing drafts
- Revising

Motivation & Self-Efficacy
- Self-efficacy
- Writing apprehension
- Attitudes toward writing
- Attitudes for success/failure

Self-regulation

Basic Writing Skills
- Handwriting/ Keyboarding
- Spelling
- Punctuation
- Sentence construction

Digital Literacy
- Basic word processing
- Grammar/spell check
- Basic internet search skills

text. Most importantly, such instruction has been shown to enhance writing quality (Graham, 2006) and reading comprehension (e.g., Meyer & Poon, 2001).

Cognitive Process Strategies

Proficient writers have a repertoire of cognitive strategies for planning and revising text that they use together with discourse knowledge to achieve their writing goals (e.g., Hayes, 1996). When planning, they engage in rhetorical analysis of the audience and purpose (for whom and why am I writing?) and generate content using a variety of strategies such as brainstorming, outlining, drafting, and evaluating. Younger and less skilled writers engage in less planning, often focusing only on content generation. Skilled writers are also able to evaluate what they have written and revise text to meet their goals. When revising, they keep their goals and audience in mind and revise to improve meaning, organization, and language. More and less proficient writers also differ dramatically in the amount and type of revision, with less skilled writers often limiting changes to minor or surface level edits. Research with grade school and college level students

shows that teaching students planning and revision strategies has large effects on writing quality across ages and grades (e.g., Graham & Perin, 2007; MacArthur, et al., 2015).

Motivation and Self-Efficacy

Writing challenges the motivational resources of both novice and expert writers. Many are apprehensive of writing, lack motivation, and have negative reactions when asked to write. This might be particularly true for adult learners who have faced years of difficulty. One important influence on individual motivation is self-efficacy beliefs about one's ability to successfully complete writing tasks. Individuals with higher self-efficacy are more willing to participate, work harder, persist longer, and have less adverse responses to difficulty than those who doubt their abilities (Pajares & Valiante, 2006). Self-efficacy is also correlated with writing achievement at all age levels, including college learners (MacArthur et al., 2015). Fortunately, self-efficacy can be influenced instructionally, and research shows it increases when students are provided with process strategies that guide them in tackling tasks (e.g., Graham & MacArthur, 1988). When students

learn writing strategies, learn to evaluate their writing, and see progress, their self-efficacy and self-satisfaction increases. Students are taught that they can be successful if they use effective strategies, and conversely to explain failure as due to inadequate strategy use.

Basic Writing Skills

Issues of grammar and writing conventions are critical to any discussion of struggling writers. When writers are not fluent in basic writing skills it can interfere with the quality of text generation. Transcription skills, including handwriting/ typing, spelling, and punctuation, have a significant impact on writing quality for young writers and older struggling writers. Sentence production, including grammatical errors and control over complex sentence structures, has been studied with basic college writers (e.g., Smith et al., 2006). Given that adults come from diverse backgrounds with varied language skills, improving basic writing skills for those who struggle is particularly important.

Digital Literacy

The Committee on Learning Sciences (2012) includes proficiency in writing in electronic environments as a key outcome, arguing that the use of computers for writing has become nearly universal in all aspects of life. Adults need basic technology skills for accessing information, producing text, and communicating online. This includes knowing how to use word processing, editing, and internet searching tools. Unfortunately, low digital literacy skills are prevalent in 41% of adults without a high school diploma (OECD, 2013). Research supports the positive effects of tools such as spell checking on grade 1-12 student writing, particularly for struggling writers (MacArthur, 2013; Morphy & Graham, 2012).

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is required for coordinating the different aspects of writing. Several types of self-regulation strategies have been studied with regard to writing, including self-monitoring, self-instructions, goal setting, self-reinforcement, and management of time and environment. In a meta-analysis of writing strategy instruction research, Graham (2006) found larger effect sizes for instruction following the Self-Regulated Strategy Development model (Harris & Graham 1996) than for approaches with less explicit focus on self-regulation.

Strategy Instruction for Adult Learners

Based on the theoretical and empirical foundations described above, we offer practitioners some guidance for developing writing instruction for adult learners.

Writing Strategies

Whereas there is a large body of research with elementary and secondary students (Graham, et al., 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007) demonstrating the effectiveness of strategy instruction for improving writing quality, there is far less research with adult learners. In two studies (Berry & Mason, 2010; MacArthur & Lembo, 2009), strong positive effects of self-regulated strategy instruction (SRSI) with adults preparing for the high-school equivalency exam were noted. More recent research on SRSI with basic college writers showed very large effects on writing quality, as well as positive effects on self-efficacy (MacArthur et al., 2015; MacArthur et al., 2022). Therefore, the core ideas of SRSI to teach writing strategies using methods such as explanation and think-aloud modeling, collaborative practice, self-and peer-evaluation,

and gradual release of responsibility to learners to facilitate independence appear to be useful for adult learners. Adult learners similar to grade school children and basic college writers will need explicit instruction on writing strategies.

Self-Regulation Strategies

In research with college students with learning disabilities, Butler et al. (2000) found that SRSI enhanced students' metacognitive knowledge, perceptions of task-specific efficacy, attributional patterns, strategic approaches to tasks, and performance on academic tasks. Overall, strategies should be designed to encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning by setting goals, choosing strategies, managing their efforts, and reflecting on their progress. These self-regulation strategies are important because adults are typically expected to regulate their time and effort to accomplish academic and professional tasks. For adult learners, general self-regulation strategies may be especially vital, because they may have already previously been exposed to writing strategies without learning how to use them independently.

Instructional Processes

Although teachers should provide explicit explanations of writing strategies, much of the instructional and learning effort should be devoted to scaffolding learners' attempts to use strategies and helping them to understand the value and purpose of using strategies. First, adult learners would benefit when they are taught strategies using authentic writing tasks such that they are meaningful to them and have greater generalization to other tasks and settings. Second, teachers should provide explicit explanations and modeling of strategies using think-aloud methods, which are necessary to demonstrate processes that are otherwise invisible. Third, teachers can provide scaffolding through teacher-learner collaboration and guided practice. It is important that teachers monitor learner understanding and provide feedback to learners on how well they are using the strategy and on their writing performance. Practice should continue until learners demonstrate independent use of the strategy. Finally, teachers can build motivation by helping learners see how the strategy improves their performance and success.

Implications for Practice

As mentioned previously, proficient writers have considerable knowledge about the purposes, text structures, and linguistic features of common genres. We suggest focusing on argumentative writing because it is the genre required for the writing portion of high school equivalency exams. Learners should be taught strategies that use knowledge about the purposes and structural elements of argumentative writing to guide their planning, drafting, and evaluating/revising processes. For example, since arguments are intended to persuade, a planning strategy could involve brainstorming reasons and evidence on both sides and developing an organized plan with position, reasons and evidence, counterarguments and rebuttals, and a conclusion. Revision strategies could include teaching learners to use a rubric focused on the elements of writing an argumentative essay to evaluate their essays and provide suggestions for improvement. Based on the success of SRSI, effective instructional practice should include an emphasis on self-regulation designed to support learners in coordinating their use of strategies and in generalizing their learning to other academic writing tasks. Finally, because both adult learners and teachers have time

and accessibility constraints, any instruction designed to support the academic attainment of adult learners and assist instructors could leverage digital tools and online technology.

What we have presented here is only suggestive. The extant literature provides us all with an opportunity to explore what works best for adult learners to be successful writers.

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