

Visual Imagery and Structure Words: Accelerating Number of Words and Number of Descriptive Words Written During Free Writing

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We investigated what effects teaching structure words and visual imagery have on the total number of correct and incorrect words written and the total number of correct and incorrect descriptive words written during free story writing. Four elementary-aged students with specific learning disabilities requiring remedial instruction in free writing served as participants. Our investigation began with the assessment of students' writing performance with a different story starter each session; then we randomly alternated the instructional conditions of: (a) different story starters, (b) same story starters, and (c) the same story starters with structure words and visual imagery instruction. The last phase of this investigation withdrew the instruction on structure words and the instruction for the use of visual imagery. Our data showed improved free writing performances from the four students during the alternating instructional conditions and the withdrawal condition.

Persons who write well often achieve success in technological cultures. For example, writing text that readers understand is a tool skill for many tasks in business and the military (e.g., corresponding with organizational hierarchies, clients, constituents), for personal communication (e.g., notes, letters), for personal skill development (e.g., e-mail), and for general entertainment (Graham, 1992; Mosenthal, Tamor, & Walm-sley, 1983). Technological cultures clearly link writing to successful academic, intellectual, social, personal, and occupational activities, and believe that writing is a critical functional life skill.

The news media and trade publications (e.g., *AFT-Chrysler Report on Kids, Parents, and Reading*) report declining performances in the quality and effectiveness of teachers' writing instruction and of students' written products. For example, over 500 teachers interviewed by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) said that more than 50% of the student population are inadequate writers, and that only about 15% of the student population write well (Soule', 1995). Many school psychologists find writing difficulties so pervasive among students even without disabilities, that many times they have difficulty

differentiating between students with disabilities and those without (Stein, Isaacson, & Dixon, 1994).

Parents, teachers, and education administrators share these popular media concerns. In response, many instructional programs recently increased the duration of school time used for writing and the number of written assignments (Graham & Harris, 1988a; 1988b; Mosenthal, et al., 1983; Soule', 1995). Even some state governments (e.g., Ohio) now require students to pass an examination in writing before receiving a high school graduation diploma.

These developments have implications for students with specific learning disabilities who often write less polished, less expansive, and less coherent texts than their normally achieving peers (Graham, Schwartz, & MacArthur, 1993; Montague & Leavell, 1994). Aubry (1995) reports that students with writing difficulties often write and rewrite with little understanding of their achievement. Graham, Harris, MacArthur, and Schwartz (1991) suggest that these writing difficulties may result from problems with basic text production, limited knowledge about writing, and limited skills in planning and editing the text.

In addition, several authors (e.g., Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Gregg & Anthony, 1989; Graham et al., 1991) suggest that students with specific learning disabilities experience writing difficulties because writing requires attention to such a large range of skills and processes.

Recognizing the importance for instruction and research in the content area of writing, we taught four students with specific learning disabilities how to use structure words and visual imagery for planning their free writing, and assessed the effects of this instruction on the total number of correct and incorrect words written and the total number of correct and incorrect descriptive words written during free story writing. We emphasized the importance of effective instructional methods, and a demonstration of instruction for developing fluent writing.

Method

Participants and Setting

Four elementary students assigned to an instructional resource room for students with learning disabilities participated in this study. The fourth-grade students, Victor and Marquita were 11 years old at the start of this study, and Tccaro and Andy, the fifth-grade students, were 12 years old. Victor, Marquita, and Tccaro participated in the free lunch program at their school. Andy paid the full lunch price. All four students received special education instruction in language arts and math, and were mainstreamed in the regular classroom for instruction in social studies, science, and health. Moreover, Victor, Marquita, and Tccaro received special education instruction in reading, but Andy was mainstreamed for reading instruction. Criteria for the selection of the participants included: (a) deficits in language arts, including free writing skills, (b) basic sound associations for spelling, (c) writing a complete sentence, and (d) using more than one character in free writing. In addition to free writing completed for this study, the students also wrote in a journal everyday and completed other weekly writing assignments (e.g., book reports, story starters, free choice writing, written reading assignments). These assignments included a written retell of the story and a written statement expressing the main idea of the story.

The study took place in the participants' regular classroom--an elementary multilevel grade resource room located in an urban area within a large city school district. No other students assigned to the resource room were excluded from their normal school instruction or activities because of this study.

Definition of Performances

Number of correct and incorrect words. We defined the total number of words written as the number of words written during a 10-minute counting period that formed a composition of coherent thought, and defined words written legibly and used in proper syntax within the phrase or sentence correct. For example, we scored the sentence, "My dog was hungry" as four correct words, but conversely counted, "I go dog is the door" as six incorrect words. When the teacher or student could decipher misspelled words (e.g., enuff), these words were scored as correct. Words the teacher or student could not decipher were scored as incorrect. Students could also use beginning sounds and a line to abbreviate words they did not know how to spell (e.g., blizzard abbreviated as bl ____ or blz ____). The students, however, needed to tell the teacher what word each abbreviation indicated for an abbreviation to count as a correct word, and we counted abbreviations incorrect if the students failed to say the unknown words. The teacher (the first author) counted the number of correct and incorrect words and tallied the number at the end of each line of each student's written text, and entered the total sum of written words on data sheets.

Number of incorrect and correct descriptive words. Descriptive words included adjectives, adverbs, and metaphors. We counted these descriptive words correct when students used them in a sentence with correct contextual meaning. For example, "My dog is very large" had a correct count of two descriptive words (i.e., very, large). We counted descriptive words incorrect when the student used them in a sentence without contextual meaning. For example, "The boys fuzzy big down the road" was counted as two incorrect descriptive words (i.e., fuzzy, big). Repeated descriptive words counted as one correct response. For example, "My dog is very happy"; "I threw him a ball"; "He was (very)

excited"; "I am (very) glad he caught the ball"; had a correct count of four (i.e., very, happy, excited, glad). We accepted misspellings and abbreviations of descriptive words and counted them correct or incorrect as described above. The teacher underlined correct descriptive words on the students' written product with a blue line.

The teacher counted the number of correct and incorrect descriptive words, tallied the number at the end of each line of the student's text, and recorded the sum of all the lines on a data sheet. Frequency was displayed as count per minute on the Standard Celeration Chart.

Assessment for Accuracy of Measurement

Before scoring each writing sample, the teacher made one photocopy of the students' original 10-minute writing samples, then scored the original sample. A second observer verified the accuracy of the teacher's measurement by counting and recording total number of correct and incorrect words written and the total number of correct and incorrect descriptive words written in the photocopy of the writing samples. Before the study, the teacher instructed the independent observer on the procedures used to mark, total, and record student performances on the data summary sheet. During instruction, the observer watched as the teacher explained the counting and recording procedures using a student's written product. They discussed occurrences of correct and incorrect words throughout this instructional process. Following that activity, the observer independently counted and recorded three student written products and compared those counts to the teachers' independent counts. The teacher and observer identified and discussed disagreements in their counting until achieving an accurate measurement. The teacher and observer practiced these counting and recording procedures until they could achieve 95% agreement on the independent counts.

During the study, the independent observer scored four samples from all four students' free writing samples, two days out of four days. The independent observer randomly selected the samples to assess 50% of the students' written products for accuracy. These assessments for accuracy of measurement occurred twice a week.

Twenty-four out of a possible of 48 sessions were checked by the observer.

To ensure random selection, we represented each of the four days in the experimental week by a card numbered with a 1, 2, 3 or 4. After shuffling the cards, the observer selected two cards. These two cards represented the two days that the observer checked for the accuracy of measurement. The observer recorded the data on a data summary sheet. We compared the counts of the teacher and observer and recalculated all discrepancies after a re-review of the written products. We corrected any incorrect counts and recorded the corrected frequency on the data sheet.

The observer and teacher achieved complete agreement concerning the total number of correct and incorrect words written and the total number of correct and incorrect descriptive words written on all 24 sessions checked. Although there were, on occasion, small disagreements on the word counts, the observer and teacher in these cases re-examined the true value (i.e., the student's original writing) to derive accurate counts.

Procedural Integrity

We used 15 of the total 48 sessions to assess procedural integrity. Using a procedural checklist, an independent observer made random observations to assess the integrity of the delivery of our instructional procedures. The observer watched the teacher and students during the free writing activities and used a checklist to check off each instructional procedure that the teacher used correctly as defined in the Procedure section of this article. The total number of check marks was divided by the total number of possible check marks, and that result multiplied by 100. Overall agreement ranged from 79% to 100%, with an average agreement of 91%.

Procedures for the Design and Conditions of the Study

Experimental design. We alternated the independent instructional conditions of our investigation using an alternating treatment design (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 1987). We began by assessing the students' writing performances with a different story starter each session; then we randomly alternated the instructional conditions of: (a) different story starters, (b) same story starters, and (c) the same story starters with

structure words and visual imagery instruction (e.g., Mon.--same story starter, Tues.--different story starter, Wed.--different story starter with structure words and visual imagery instruction, Thurs.--different story starter). The last phase of this investigation involved the withdrawal of the instruction on structure words and the instruction for the use of visual imagery.

Developing Story Starters. The teacher listed possible discussion topics for story starters on the chalk board and gave an example story starter (e.g., "One day as I was walking down the street, I heard..."). The four students then verbally suggested story starters using the topic areas previously listed. The teacher wrote these story starters on chart paper, showed the paper to the students, and the students orally read the story starters. After the oral reading, the teacher wrote all story starters on separate slips of paper and placed the slips of paper in a jar. Students randomly drew story starters from the jar during all phases of our investigation.

Different story starter. Before each session, the teacher reminded the students that their writing would not count toward their class grade, that their writing would help her (i.e., the teacher) to learn different methods of instruction. During each session, students took turns randomly drawing a new story starter from the jar, and the teacher wrote that story starter on the chalkboard. The students orally read the story starter together, then wrote it on their papers. Students had three minutes to think about what they wanted to write. The teacher emphasized that the students could abbreviate difficult words. The teacher then said, "pencil up, begin," starting the 10-minute counting period. When the timer sounded, students completed their last word and put their pencils down.

Same story starter. The same story starter condition used procedures identical to the *different story starter* phase except that the teacher assigned the same story starter for each writing session. Each student continued writing with a given story starter four days a week until he or she wrote 200 or more words during the 10-minute counting periods. When a student reached the instructional aim, she or he began with a new story starter.

Same story starter with structure words and visual imagery. On the first day of this condition, one student selected a story starter from the jar. The teacher wrote the story starter on the chart paper. All students then read the story starter orally, wrote it on their paper as they did in the *different story starter* phase and put down their pencils for the beginning of structure words and visual imagery instruction. The teacher randomly selected and introduced four structure words each writing session (e.g., who, what, where, when, shape, color, size, movement, mood, texture, smell, and perspective). As a group, the students closed their eyes to visualize their story characters and events as applied to that day's structure words. Using a randomized round robin style, each student described the structure words that resulted from his or her own visual imagery. The teacher wrote the structure words in four columns on a piece of paper, with carbon underneath as the students said them, and taped a copy between each set of two students. The students orally read all the words in the four categories in unison, closed their eyes and visualized for three minutes the relationships between structure words, the events, and characters for their story. Students wrote a story from the selected story starter during a 10-minute counting period using the same procedures as the *different story starter* phase but with four new structure words each subsequent day. The teacher reproduced the structure words previously used on paper as response prompts for individual students as they completed that day's free writing assessment. The structure word papers remained taped to the table to prompt students with spelling and to cue them to that day's structure words.

Withdrawal of structure words and visual imagery. This condition continued to use the procedures described above except we withdrew the instruction on structure words, the written response prompts, and the use of visual imagery.

Results

Individual Standard Celeration Charts for Marquita, Victor, Andy, Tccaro display the number of correct words written per minute and the number of correct and incorrect descriptive words and

descriptive phrases written per minute by the students during 10-minute sessions of free writing. The students wrote very few incorrect words over the course of this investigation; therefore, we did not show the "incorrect" data points on their charts (i.e., Tccaro wrote 6 incorrect words during one session, Victor wrote 1 incorrect word during two sessions, and Andy and Marquita wrote no incorrect words). Our instructional aim ranged from 20 to 25 words written per minute for the students' free writing based on Albrecht's (1981) research with children's creative writing. We counted the number of descriptive words and descriptive phrases written in four different 150 word passages, randomly selected from four published story books written at the fifth-grade reading level, and found that these authors (Brancato, 1977; Kerr, 1972; Sachs, 1968; St. George, 1980) used a total of 15 to 21 descriptive words and descriptive phrases in these passages. We extended this outcome to suggest an instructional aim of writing in context 1.5 to 2 descriptive words or phrases per minute for our students.

Phase One: A Different Story Starter

Each Session

Number of total words. Tccaro, Victor and Marquita decelerated their frequency of words written, Andy showed no celeration, and most often they all wrote between 5 and 10 words per minute. Some small session-to-session frequency bounce occurred but bounce began to diverge in the performances of Tccard, Victor and Marquita.

Descriptive words and phrases. Tccaro and Marquita produced a celeration of $\times 1.0$, and Andy and Victor decelerated their frequency of writing descriptive words or phrases. These four students typically wrote less than .6 descriptive words and phrases per minute, but had large session-to-session bounce, with some bounces multiplying by $\times 2$, $\times 3$, and $\times 4$. No student made more than one incorrect response during this baseline phase.

Phase Two: Alternating Different Story Starter, Same Story Starter, and Same Story Starter with Structure Words and Visual Imagery

Number of total words. The performances of Victor and Tccaro jumped up in frequencies, and

celerations turned up, but their celerations of total words written was $\times 1.0$. We changed story starters accompanying the *Same Story Starter* and *Same Story Starter with Structure Words and Visual Imagery* conditions for Victor and Tccaro. This instructional change corresponded with no jumps in performances but acceleration turn ups of $\times 1.2$ for both. The performances of Andy and Marquita resulted in no jumps in frequencies when introduced to the alternating conditions, but produced turned ups of small accelerations, both $\times 1.1$.

Descriptive words and phrases. Marquita showed a frequency jump up and a celeration turn up in the number of descriptive words written-per-minute with the onset of the alternating conditions. When we introduced the new story starters during the alternating conditions, Marquita's acceleration of written descriptive words turned down. She also produced more incorrect uses of descriptive words during the alternating conditions than during the baseline phase.

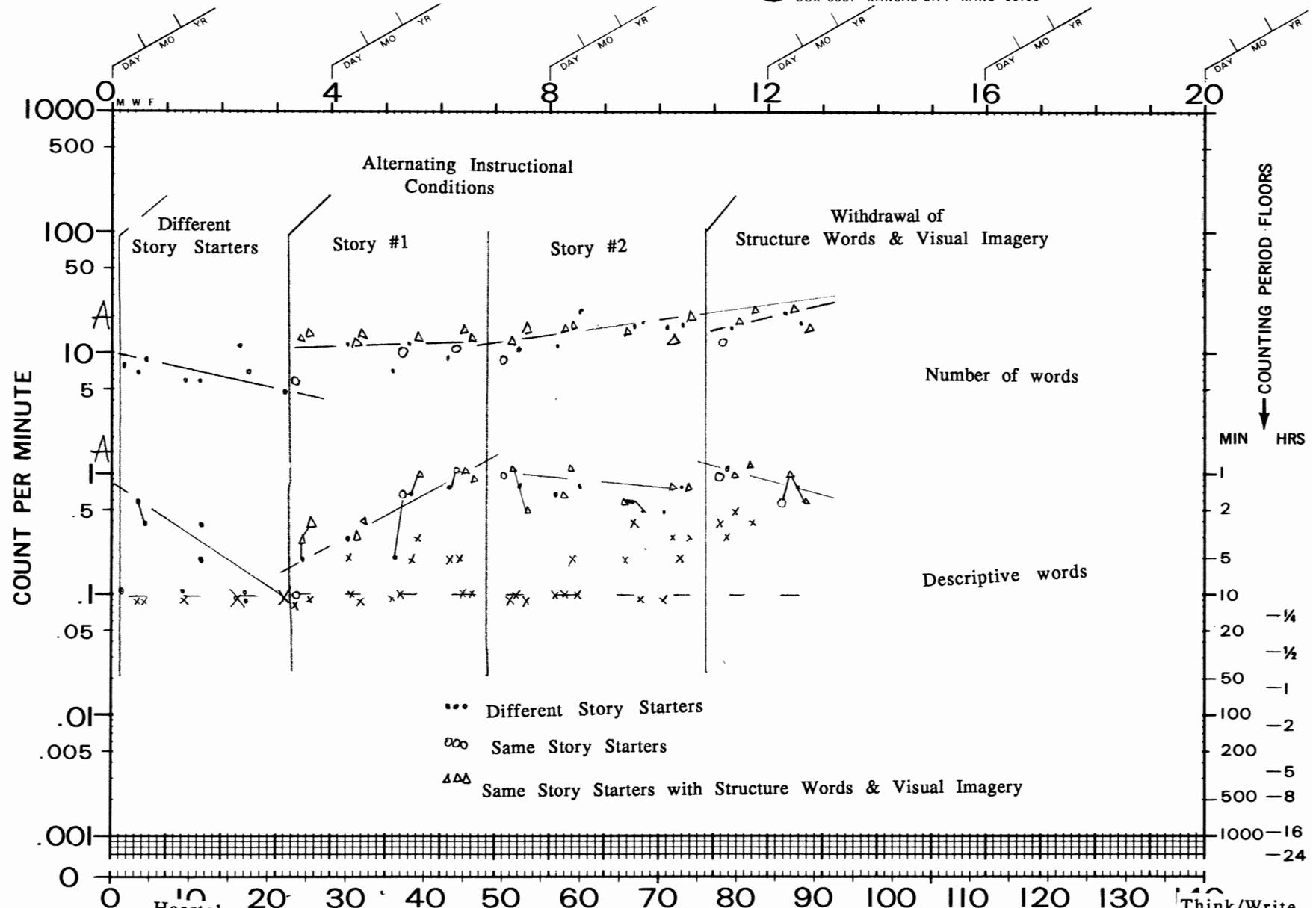
Victor's use of descriptive words produced a celeration turn up with the onset of the alternating conditions and a celeration turn down with the new story starters during the alternating conditions.

Phase Three: Alternating Different Story Starter, Same Story Starter, and Same Story Starter with withdrawal of Structure Words and Visual Imagery.

Number of total words. Andy and Victor each had eight sessions under these alternating conditions and showed no important changes in performances, celerations, or session-to-session bounce. Withdrawing the instruction on structure words and the use of visual imagery apparently did not influence the stability of free writing. Marquita and Tccaro had five and four sessions respectively under these alternation conditions, too few data points for a good projection of future performance, but the limited data showed outcomes similar to the accomplishments of both Victor and Andy.

Descriptive words and phrases. Victor produced a jump up in frequency, accompanied by a turn down in celeration. Andy had no jump in frequency but did turn down in celeration. Again, the few data points for Marquita and Tccaro limit

CALENDAR WEEKS



*** Different Story Starters
 ooo Same Story Starters
 ▲▲▲ Same Story Starters with Structure Words & Visual Imagery

18

SUPERVISOR		ADVISER		MANAGER		BEHAVIOR		AGE	LABEL	COUNTED
		Haertel	Seevers	Cooper	Spaulding	Victor	11	4th grade	SLD	Think/Write words in context
		Ohio St. Univ.			Spaulding	Spaulding	Spaulding/Cooper			

DEPOSITOR

Ohio St. Univ.

AGENCY

TIMER

COUNTER

CHARTER



DAILY BEHAVIOR CHART (DCM-9EIN)
8 CYCLE - 140 DAYS (20 WKS.)
BEHAVIOR RESEARCH CO.
BOX 3381 - KANSAS CITY, KANS. 66103

CALENDAR WEEKS

27 2 194
DAY MO YR

27 3 194
DAY MO YR

24 4 194
DAY MO YR

22 5 194
DAY MO YR

DAY MO YR

DAY MO YR

1000 500 100 50 10 5 1 0.5 0.1 0.05 0.01 0.005 0.001 0

M W F 4 8 12 16 20

Alternating Instructional Conditions

Different Story Starters

Withdrawal of Structure Words & Visual Imagery

Number of Words

Descriptive Words

COUNTING PERIOD FLOORS

MIN HRS

1 2 5 10 20 50 100 200 500 1000 16 24

61
COUNT PER MINUTE

- Different Story Starters
- Same Story Starters
- △△△ Same story starters with structure words and visual imagery

Haertel
Seevers
Cooper

Spaulding

SUCCESSIVE CALENDAR DAYS

Andy

5th Grade
SLD

Think/Write
words in
context

SUPERVISOR

ADVISER

MANAGER

BEHAVIOR

AGE

LABEL

COUNTED

Ohio State Univ.

Spaulding

Spaulding

Spaulding/Cooper

DEPOSITOR

AGENCY

TIMER

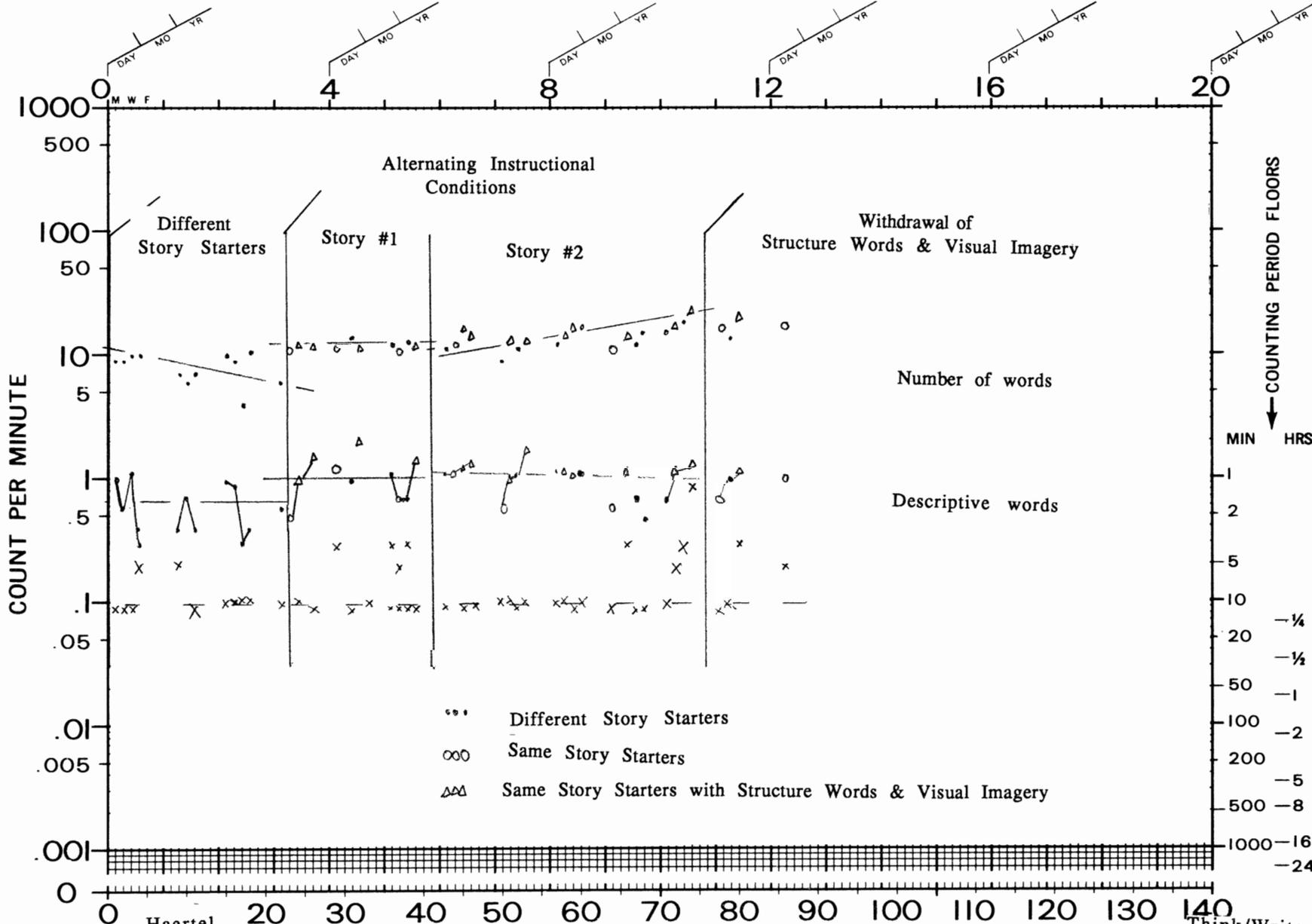
COUNTER

CHARTER



DAILY BEHAVIOR CHART (DCM-9EN)
6 CYCLE - 140 DAYS (20 WKS)
BEHAVIOR RESEARCH CO
BOX 3351 - KANSAS CITY KANS 66103

CALENDAR WEEKS



21

COUNTING PERIOD FLOORS
MIN
HRS

Think/Write
5th grade
SLD
words in
context

SUPERVISOR		Haertel	MANAGER		Tccaro	12	5th grade	Think/Write
DEPOSITOR		Seevers	Spaulding	COUNTER	Spaulding	AGE	SLD	words in
AGENCY		Cooper	Spaulding	CHARTER	Spaulding/Cooper	LABEL	context	COUNTED
OHIO ST. UNIV.								

description of their results, but apparently they demonstrated no jumps or changes in celerations of number of descriptive words written.

Discussion

Two fourth-grade students and two fifth-grade students with specific learning disabilities served as participants for our inquiry into the effects of instruction using different story starters, same story starters, and same story starters with structure words and visual imagery. Before starting data collection, we anticipated that the students would produce personal best performances and learning during instruction that used structure words and visual imagery. These participants, however, improved their free writing under all three alternating instructional conditions.

Tccaro, Marquita, and Victor met the instructional aim of 200 to 250 for total words written during a 10-minute counting period (20 to 25 words written per minute) following the introduction of the alternating instructional conditions—different story starter, same story starter, and same story starter with structure words and visual imagery. Andy achieved a performance high of 17 total words per minute, but usually wrote between 5 and 6 words per minute below our performance standard. The acceleration of words written by Tccaro, Marquita, and Victor ranged from $x1.1$ to 1.2 , even though they doubled their performance frequencies ($x2$) over the course of this analysis. These individual accomplishments highlight the continued need for identifying not only instructional procedures to improve free writing, but instructional procedures that result in achieving performance standards in fewer instructional sessions.

Tccaro, Marquita, and Andy met the instructional aim of 15 to 20 descriptive words or phrases per minute during a 10-minute counting period (1.5 to 2 descriptive words written per minute) following the introduction of the alternating instructional conditions. Victor performed close to the performance standard, at times writing 1.1 descriptive words per minute.

The free writing performances of these students produced similar celerations and session-by-session frequency bounce. Also, no consistent outlier frequencies correlated with any of the alternating instructional conditions. Our observations, however, cause us to believe that the improvement in students' writing during the different story starters and the same story starter conditions improved because of the instruction that used structure words and visual imagery. We speculate that these positive instructional effects possibly transferred to the different story starters and the same story starters conditions, but we did not demonstrate instructional control over the possible transfer of effect. Future research will need to address this speculation.

We removed the instruction on structure words, visual imagery, and the written prompt sheet to end our analysis. The session-to-session bounce and frequency level of the descriptive words used by the four students in context writing continued as before when we gave instruction and response prompts for structure words. Importantly, the free writing performances of the students maintained without this intervention.

We gave a teacher of students with specific learning disabilities three undated and unmarked samples from the collection of each student's free writing and asked her to rank them 1 through 3; one indicated the best of the three papers, two indicated the next best and three indicated the paper with the least amount of writing development.

She ranked the May 18 papers of Andy and Marquita first, the April 27 papers second, and the March 2 paper third. These rankings provide the teacher's independent perceptions that Andy and Marquita improved in free writing over the three months of this investigation. The teacher said Marquita's first and second ranked papers showed a similar level of skill, but noted variations in the amount of descriptive language used in the May 18 paper. She ranked the April 27 papers of Tccaro and Victor first, the May 18 papers second, and the March 2, papers third. The teacher said she had difficulty identifying important differences between the papers ranked first and second. She also noted that Victor's April 27 paper had clearer story content.

Even though the students improved their free writing, we experienced several management problems during this inquiry. For example, special announcements, assemblies, community and special class changes frequently disrupted free writing instruction. Our four participants came from three different homeroom classes, and therefore, often experienced schedule conflicts between homeroom activities and the free writing instruction. Whenever these management issues interrupted our counting periods, we rescheduled those counting periods, usually on Fridays.

The other students in the classroom wrote in journals during the free writing sessions for the four participants. Sometimes these classroom students finished their writing before the end of the counting periods for our four participants, and toward the end of the school year, the non-participant students became distracting. These few distractions possibly reduced the total number of words the students wrote during their 10-minute counting periods.

For an accomplishment critique, we asked the students to tell us about their feelings about the free writing sessions. Three of the students reported that they liked having their writing timed very much, and one did not. For the instruction of structure words, three of the students indicated they liked it, and one student only somewhat liked it. As for the use of visual imagery, one student liked it, two liked it a little, and one student did not like using visual imagery. All four students strongly supported the teacher using a different story starter for each sample of free writing. They did not enjoy repeated free writing practice when we used the same story starter.

We continued by asking the students to tell us about their likes and dislikes during free writing. The students said they enjoyed trying to beat the clock and counting the number of words they wrote to see if they achieved a personal best performance. One student mentioned that he liked having extra individual attention at the writing table. Another student liked discovering interesting adjectives, especially new funny ones.

The students did not report many dislikes. Three of the four students mentioned they did not always want to stop when the timer went off, but sometimes they were stuck and wanted to stop before the end of the counting period. One stu-

dent said he did not like the noise in the room and in the hall. Another student said she still felt frustrated trying to spell words quickly.

We asked if they could change anything about the experiences with free writing, what they would like to change? One student wanted to have his own personal timer, instead of a timer for the group; two students wanted instructional time to illustrate parts of their stories; and another student wanted longer counting periods.

Finally, we asked the students to say if they believed their free writing experience helped them to write other topics or to write for other subject areas. One student said he now writes better stories, and the written reading comprehension tests seem easier because of his writing practice. One student who attends a mainstream classroom for reading instruction said he received an "A" on his biography report on Jackie Robinson, and that maybe all this writing helped him get an "A". Another student reported that his free writing instruction helped him learn to use better and longer words when writing in his poetry book.

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