

Investigating the Impact Poetry Instruction Has on Students' Writing

Diana Brannon, Ed.D.

Professor of Education

Elmhurst University

USA

Abstract

According to the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for writing, only 24 percent of eighth grade students in the United States perform at the proficient level for writing. The proficient level of writing includes students writing a text that is coherent, well structured, having appropriate connections and transitions, developed and effective ideas, relevant supporting details, effective voice, thoughtful word choice, and utilizing a variety of supporting details. A twelve-week study was conducted to measure the effectiveness of teaching poetry as a vehicle to improve fourth grade students' writing skills and ability to analyze their areas of growth and areas for improvement in writing. Mentor poetry texts were utilized to facilitate students' writing skills by providing a model for discussion and instruction related to advanced word choice, fluency, tone, voice, and conventions. After studying the assigned poem each week, students participated in a quick write to apply the skills studied and discussed. Overall, students significantly improved in all of the writing areas assessed. The classroom teacher also reported seeing improvements in students' writing, vocabulary, self-evaluation, and confidence.

Literature Review

Poetry is often one of the first types of text that young children are exposed to through nursery rhymes and songs (Manning, 2003) and should be an important part of the language arts curriculum beginning when students are very young (Rasinski, 2014). Poetry lends itself well to repeated readings which can be used to teach a variety of skills including rhyme and alliteration in addition to helping improve students' fluency (Parr & Campbell, 2006). Exposure to poetry at a young age also helps students develop phonemic awareness, phonics skills, and automaticity (Rasinski, 2014) as well as positively impacting vocabulary (Routman, 2000), comprehension (Rasinski, 2014), and critical thinking (Calo, 2011). It is also an effective tool for motivating striving readers and writers. Performing poetry aloud helps to inspire young writers (Fisher, 2005) and can motivate striving students because prose are often shorter, rhyming or repetitive, and humorous (Campbell, 2001) which many students find more accessible (Cullinan et al., 1995) and more enjoyable to read than traditional texts (Wiseman, 2007).

Poetry also provides an excellent model for fluency for daily read aloud because of its short, rhythmic nature (Rasinski & Padak, 2008; Rasinski et al., 2008), which also makes it a helpful tool to engage students in repeated readings of text designed to increase readers' fluency (Rasinski & Padak, 2008). It is often enjoyable for students to read due to the sounds, rhythm, and flow of the text which can aid in comprehension (Parr & Gampbell, 2006; Rasinskiet al., 2008). Finding enjoyable texts is especially important for striving readers who struggle with comprehension. Because of the condensed nature of poetry, readers are often able to tackle and comprehend advanced vocabulary (Sekeres & Gregg, 2007).

Benton (1990) argues that because reading poetry takes students less time than other types of texts, students are provided with additional time to digest the poem and make sense of advanced and abstract concepts that can benefit them while reading other types of texts. Therefore, researchers have found that including poetry in the curriculum to help support and increase students' comprehension and fluency skills can be beneficial (Sekeres & Gregg, 2007).

English Language Learners (ELLs) also benefit from listening to and reading poetry due to its concise and purposeful text (Kolk, 2022) which serves as a valuable tool for improving oral language and vocabulary skills (Hughes, 2007). Writing poetry is also an effective way to teach sentence structure, rules of grammar, vocabulary, and other essential skills to students who are learning the English language (Vardell, et. al. 2002). English Language Learners (ELLs) often benefit from reading aloud poetry because the text is less dense and linguistically diverse (Elster & Hanauer, 2002). The shorter text is often considered less intimidating for ELLs and allows opportunities for close reading and the study of vocabulary. The smaller number of words in many poetic forms helps to keep language learners from being overwhelmed (Saito, 2008). And, the interesting word choice provides an opportunity for close reading and rich vocabulary discussions.

Reading and writing poetry provides a wide variety of benefits for students; however, it is often overlooked by classroom teachers because many lack confidence in their ability to teach or incorporate poetry into the curriculum (Elster & Hanauer, 2002). Therefore, I designed and implemented a writing program called the Poetry Project for the upper elementary grades. The twelve-week program focused on improving students' writing skills and enjoyment of writing through reading poetry mentor texts and writing. The program was designed to answer the following two research questions:

- a. Does weekly explicit writing instruction utilizing poetry mentor texts impact students' writing?
- b. Can students be taught to accurately assess their writing skills utilizing a writing rubric?

Methodology

Participants

The study took place in a K-8 elementary school in the United States located in a Western suburb of Chicago, Illinois. The school had 538 students in grades K-8. Two classes of fourth-grade students participated in the study. Forty-four students including 23 girls and 21 boys between the ages of 9 and 10 years old were included. The overall diversity of the student body included 92% White, 6% Hispanic, and 3% Asian students. This reflected the population of the fourth-grade classes. There were four students identified as needing special services for academic support. Both fourth-grade Language Arts classes were taught by the same teacher at different times in the afternoon.

The Poetry Project took place on Friday afternoons during the Language Arts block. The Language Arts curriculum for the school included the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading Program and the Daily 5 literacy framework, which provides time daily for students to read to self, read to someone, listen to reading, word work, and work on writing. During the intervention, the fourth-grade Language Arts teacher taught the traditional Language Arts program Mondays through Thursdays, and I acted as a guest teacher on Friday afternoons for the three months that the program was conducted.

Research Design

This research study utilized a reflective inquiry method with a pre/post design. The study lasted for 14 weeks including one week prior to and one week after the 12-week intervention for data collection. Students provided a writing response entry based on a picture prompt prior to and after the intervention. The picture in the prompt used post-intervention was different than the picture used prior to the intervention. Both pre- and post-intervention, students were given the following directions along with the picture prompt:

Write about your photo with as much detail as you can. You are going to try to paint a picture with your words so that someone can imagine what your picture looks like without looking at it. Write about everything you see in your picture. Include information about your senses such as sights, sounds, textures, smells, and anything else you can think of. Also, include how you might feel if you were in that setting or if you were the person or animal pictured. Give as much detail as possible including descriptive phrases and sentences. Remember to use descriptive and elaborate adjectives and adverbs!

Students were also given a 4-point rubric before writing including the categories ideas, organization, sentence fluency, word choice, voice, sensory details, and details and figurative language. The rubric provided a description under each level (Basic, Developing, Proficient, and Excellent) including the criteria for scoring at each level. Students pre- and post-writing samples were scored by the students themselves, and myself utilizing this rubric. Students were given the rubric both for the writing sample collected prior to and after the program. The students had limited experience using rubrics for writing before participating in the program.

Materials

Each of the students who participated in the program was given a poetry binder to be used at school to support their writing and to provide resources for in-class activities. The binder included a copy of all of the mentor poems being studied, vivid verbs and adjective resources, samples of strong and weak writing samples for comparison, a thesaurus of commonly used words such as said, saw, and good, a copy of the Six Traits of Writing rubric used throughout the program, copies of the anchor charts used in class, and a resource defining and giving examples of poetry and figurative language elements studied during the program including imagery, personification, visualization, and similes.

Intervention

I visited two fourth-grade classrooms for 12 weeks to teach poetry and writing. Each 60- 75 minute session included a mini-lesson on the skill or strategy being addressed that week, a reading aloud of the mentor poem being studied, a close reading (study) of the mentor poem, a review of the rubric being used, a comparison of two writing samples to identify qualities of effective writing, a game-based application of the skill being learned, and a quick write applying the skill being learned that day. Mentor poetry texts were utilized to facilitate students' writing skills by providing a model and example for discussion and instruction. Mentor texts can help to significantly improve students' writing (Dollins, 2016), and facilitate students' willingness to take risks, try new things, and help improve students' writing skills by scaffolding students' understanding of word placement, sentence structure, and the use of literary devices such as simile, voice, and other skills required for good writing (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2012).

Instruction for each of the lessons followed a similar structure to provide consistency for students and to help maximize efficiency across the 12-week timeframe. Each lesson was designed to scaffold students' understanding through the use of the gradual release of responsibility model in which instruction is first explicitly modeled in a mini-lesson, then time for guided practice is provided (Pearson & Raphael 2003). At the end of each lesson students were provided an opportunity to apply the skill or strategy on their own. Mini-lessons that explicitly teach a specific skill, provide time for writing, and are followed by revision or application time have been found to be particularly effective with young writers (Beaglehole, 2014). The mini-lessons aligned with Ray's (2001) work which suggests that by providing students different strategies, you empower them with agency to use techniques that help them grow as writers. An outline of the weekly lessons is provided (see Table 1).

Table 1*Weekly Poetry Project Lesson Outline*

Mini-Lesson (10-15 mins)	Poem (5 mins)	Close Read / Activity (10 mins)	Rubric Review or Writing Sample (5-10 mins)	Game (10 mins)	QuickWrite (15 mins)
Ideas	The Voice	What makes a good writer	Ideas	Interesting Sentences	Phases
Organization	Mixed Up	Fluency	Organization	Magnetic Poetry	Phrases
Sentence fluency	Overnight	Alliteration	Sentence Fluency	Alliteration	Phrases
Word choice	Don't Say Said	Verbs	Word choice	Vivid verbs	Phrases
Word choice	Popcorn	Adjectives	Details	List poems	Sentences
Word choice	Perfect Cup Of Cocoa	Descriptions	Compare writings	Vague / strong words	Sentences
Word choice	Soccer	Phrases	Compare writings	Write phrases	Sentences
Voice	Hot Burning Days	Imagery	Voice	Guess the object	Sentences
Voice	The Ultimate Chocolate Chip Cookies	Sensory details	Sensory details	Sensory bags	Paragraph
Voice	Tiger	Similes	Figurative language	Write similes	Paragraph
Voice	Red Sings From Treetops	Personification	Review full rubric	Color chip poems	Paragraph
Review	Where the Sidewalk Ends		Review full rubric and compare writings	Photo poems	Paragraph

Results and Discussion

Students writing samples were collected the week before the program began and the week after the program was completed. Students were given a picture prompt and explicit instructions for writing both pre- and post-intervention. Students all received the same picture prompt; however, the picture provided at the pre-assessment differed from the post-assessment. Students had 60 minutes to write. However, many students finished early. Students' writing samples were evaluated using the Six Traits of Writing rubric that was taught and utilized throughout the program (see Table 2).

The anchor charts that had been used throughout the program were removed and students were not allowed to use their poetry binders during the post-assessment to ensure that the conditions were the same at both pre- and post-test.

Table 2*Six Traits Writing Rubric*

	Beginning (1)	Developing (2)	Proficient (3)	Excellent (4)
Ideas	My writing does not reflect the main idea or topic	My writing is on topic, but it is unclear.	My writing is clear and the main idea is developed.	My writing is clear, focused, and very well developed.
Organization	My writing seems random.	My writing is unorganized and includes few transitions.	My writing is logically organized with clear transitions.	My writing has many transitions that help make my writing interesting.
Sentence Fluency	I did not write complete sentences.	My sentences were short and did not include variety.	I used complete sentences of a variety of lengths.	I used a variety sentence lengths and different types of sentences (. / !)
Word Choice	I used boring word choices.	I used ordinary words, but described the picture correctly.	I used some interesting verbs, adverbs, and / or adjectives.	I used specific powerful words, interesting phrases, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives.
Voice	My writing sample is boring.	My writing is detailed but just relates to what is seen.	My writing is interesting.	My writing comes alive to engage the reader.
Sensory Detail	I did not use details.	I used details that appeal to one of the 5 senses.	I used details that appeal to two or three of the 5 senses.	I used details to appeal to at least four of the 5 senses.
Details & Figurative Language	I wrote about only one thing in the picture.	I wrote about a couple of things in the picture.	I wrote about a variety of things in the picture and used an example of figurative language.	I gave extensive detail about a variety of things & used examples of figurative language.

Overall, students significantly ($p < .001$) improved in all of the writing traits assessed when comparing my means for the pre-program writing prompt assessment to the post-assessment writing (see Table 3). At the beginning of the program students' strongest traits of writing were sentence fluency (2.50) and organization (2.0). However, overall, all areas would qualify for the developing category on the Six Traits of Writing rubric (see Table 2), which is a score of 2. Students scored the highest post-intervention on ideas (3.48) and details (3.45). Voice was the lowest scored trait at both the beginning (1.89) and end of the study (2.64). This is not surprising due to the difficulty of beginning to learn how to show voice in writing (Peha & Lester, 2016). Students overall improved one level on most of the categories of the rubric including ideas, organization, word choice, sensory details, and details & figurative language. In these areas, a majority of the students scored in the proficient range, which is a score of 3, post-intervention. There was a smaller improvement in the areas of sentence fluency and voice. Students scored well on sentence fluency at the beginning of the study (2.50). So, it is not surprising that the improvement was not as great.

Table 3

Pre- and Post-Intervention Teacher Writing Scores Per Trait:

	<u>Pre Mean</u>	<u>Post Mean</u>	<u>Difference</u>
Ideas	1.98	3.48*	1.50
Organization	2.00	3.16*	1.16
Sentence fluency	2.50	3.00*	0.50
Word choice	1.98	3.11*	1.13
Voice	1.89	2.64*	0.75
Sensory details	1.93	3.09*	1.16
<u>Details & figurative language</u>	<u>1.75</u>	<u>3.45*</u>	<u>1.70</u>

* $p < .001$

Students tended to be able to accurately interpret their performance utilizing the Six Traits rubric at the beginning of the program as seen in Table 4. As a whole, students' self-evaluation scores were very close to my scoring of their work for the pre-program writing assessment. Students ranked their best skills overall as Organization (2.66) and Sentence Fluency (2.45). I also rated their best skills overall skills at the start of the program as Sentence Fluency (2.50) and Organization (2.0). We also agreed that Voice was the area they needed most work on.

By the end of the program there was a significant improvement in students' writing as reported in Table 3 and can be seen also in Table 4. At the end of the program students rated their strongest skills as Ideas (3.75), Details (3.70), and Sentence Fluency (3.52). Although there was a greater variance between some of the students' self-evaluation scores and my evaluation, we agreed that both Ideas (3.48) and Details (3.45) were their strongest traits. We also agreed that voice continued to be the lowest scoring trait. It is interesting to note that there was a greater variance between my scoring and the students' post-program. There were only three traits that our scores were significantly different before the program began (organization, word choice, and details & figurative language). However, after the program was completed, four areas for self-evaluation compared to my evaluation were significantly different (ideas, sentence fluency, sensory details, and details & figurative language) leading to the conclusion that students may have overinflated their scores a bit at the post-test due to the significant improvement they saw in their writing.

Table 4*Comparison Between Teacher and Student Pre-Post Intervention Writing Scores Per Trait*

	Pre-Program		Post-Program	
	Student	Teacher	Student	Teacher
Ideas	2.02	1.98	3.75	3.48*
Organization	2.66	2.00*	3.23	3.16
Sentence Fluency	2.45	2.50	3.52	3.00*
Word Choice	1.73	1.97*	3.27	3.11
Voice	1.73	1.89	2.72	2.64
Sensory Details	2.09	1.93	3.30	3.10*
Details & Figurative Language	2.18	1.75*	3.70	3.45*

*p < .05

Conclusions

The Poetry Project did seem to positively impact both students' perception of themselves as writers and their ability to write. This is supported by comments made by the Language Arts teacher. She not only noticed an increase in students' interest in writing, but also an improvement in the quality of their writing, word usage, oral reading fluency, and expression. The fourth-grade Language Arts teacher commented:

The primary benefit that I have observed with regard to the students' writing abilities is the expansion of their vocabulary usage in writing. Other benefits include writing more descriptive and creative sentences, including more details in their sentences, and forming longer sentences. They also learned to think about their writing more fully, and learned how to use a rubric to self-evaluate and improve their writing. I also saw increased confidence in students, and increased ability to use resources to find information to help them in their writing.

A post-intervention survey asked students: Has studying poetry helped make you a better writer? Why or why not? Forty-two of the 44 participants indicated that studying poetry had improved their writing. When asked about if and how the program impacted their writing, students' responses were very positive stating that the greatest impact was on their vocabularies, word usage, and their ability to paint pictures with their words. Many students indicated that being able to compare their writing samples with the rubrics helped improve their writing, others responded that studying the poems helped them get better at providing details, and word choice. Samples of students' responses to whether participation in the program helped make students better writers include:

“Yes because I compared my writing before the poetry program and it was really bad compared to after.”

“Yes. Now I use more interesting words and more detail.”

“I think it has made me a better writer by using words in different ways.”

“The rubric helped me know how I was doing.”

The findings of this study have an important impact on the teaching of writing. Teachers need to include mentor poetry texts regularly in their writing instruction. Teaching students how to use a writing rubric to assess their writing, utilizing mentor poems for examples, and providing explicit instruction on skills such as voice and sensory details can help students not only paint pictures with their words, but also help students be more engaged in the writing process and empower them to make their writing exciting!

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