Tools for Writing: Strategies to Help Students with Special Needs

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Abstract  
When I started this school year with my primary level special needs students, I knew right away that I had a problem: my students were very reluctant writers. The most I could get them to write, even with guidance, was a three word sentence. How could I teach my students to write correct sentences and eventually complete paragraphs? I found two strategies that I thought might benefit my students: Super Sentences and Storyboarding. I found these strategies did help my students in a number of ways. Not only did my students learn to write more complex sentences and complete paragraphs, but they also discovered that writing can be fun. My students now have the tools to be successful writers.

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Writing and Special Needs

Writing is a vehicle for expression. It enables people to share personal perspectives and opinions. In addition it gives students the opportunity to show their understanding of academic content (Gersten, Baker & Graham, 2001). There is substantial documentation to support the conclusion that students with disabilities write more poorly than students without disabilities (Englert & Mariage, 1991; Graham & Harris, 1997).

According to Hooper et al. (2002) there is a limited body of research on writing instruction for special needs populations. They suggested that this neglect has had a negative effect on special education. Authors of several studies that have been done (Gersten, Baker & Graham, 2001; Saddler and Asaro, 2007; Wong et al, 1994) conclude that explicit teaching of writing is very beneficial for students with learning disabilities. Not only are the students able to improve the quality of their writing, but they also gain more self confidence as writers.

I found two strategies that I thought might benefit my first and second graders. The first is called Super Sentences. This strategy was used by my cooperating teacher during my student teaching experience. The second strategy, which involves storyboarding (Harrington, 1994), I discovered when I was looking for more ideas on ways to improve writing. Would Super Sentences and Storyboarding move my students from their three words sentences to whole paragraphs by the end of the year?

My Class

I teach in a suburban public school district, adjacent to a large metropolitan city. The majority of families my school district serves are affluent and the median household income is $130,600 (www.city-data.com). The parents within my district take an active role in their children’s education. The district has been designated as excellent by the Ohio Department of Education in part because of its high test scores on state achievement tests (Ohio Department of Education).

During the 2007-2008 academic year, my class ranged in size from four to eight students who are in my room for 60-90 minutes every morning for Reading/ Language Arts. Of the eight students (six second graders and two first graders) who were in my class as of January 2008, six students are White, one Asian-American and one bi-racial. Five of these students are diagnosed with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD), one with a Cognitive Delay (CD), and two with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and SLD.
Phase One (September 2007 – December 2007): Super Sentences

When I was student teaching in a regular primary classroom my cooperating teacher did a lesson which she referred to as “Super Sentences.” Students took a short sentence like “We played” and added words and details to see how long they could make the sentence. This activity taught the children how to add details to make sentences more interesting and complete. As I was planning one night, I wondered if this strategy would be something that could help my special needs students. At this point, I had four students, only three of whom were developmentally ready to write sentences. If exposed to Super Sentences on a daily basis, would these three students’ sentence writing ability improve? Previous attempts at story writing had failed, even when I provided a graphic organizer, because the students were not able to get their thoughts down using complete sentences.

Written language is much more challenging than spoken language (Purcell-Gates, 1989), particularly for students with disabilities, because struggling readers are not exposed to the structure and form of complex sentences with the same frequency as their non-disabled classmates (Cudd & Roberts, 1994). The struggling readers I work with have difficulty decoding text, therefore making it difficult to comprehend and take in the structure and form of sentences. The majority of my students read word by word and lack fluency. They fail to notice how sentences are constructed.

The technique of Super Sentences is just another name for sentence expansion. When I attempted to research sentence expansion, I found only two studies related to this approach. DiStefano and Valencia (1980) found that syntactic complexity within a sentence had a negative impact of comprehension. The students in this study were not instructed in sentence expansion, they simply read more complex sentences about the same topic. DiStefano and Valencia defined sentence expansion as adding clauses, phrases, adjectives, modifiers to kernel sentences (subject-verb-object), creating a more complex sentence. Cudd and Roberts (1994) used sentence expansion in their third grade classrooms to see if it would help students write more complex sentences. They found sentence expansion to be very effective and motivational. They compared length of composition, vocabulary use and student attitudes at the beginning and the end of the school year. Students wrote more elaborate sentences, were more cognizant of vocabulary choice in their sentences and demonstrated more excitement about writing.

Writers can better manage the tasks of reading and writing if certain aspects of those processes are practiced regularly (Lawlor, 1983). Students begin to see themselves as writers when they are able to understand the elements of complex sentences and use them to add their own ideas to their work. Students gain confidence and motivation for writing as they practice what they have learned and exhibit control over their learning.
**Introducing the Super Sentence Routine**

I started off each class with a short sentence on the board. The students took turns adding words to the sentence to make it better. As we went through the activity, I talked to the students about the importance of writing interesting sentences and explained how the routine was designed to help them in their sentence writing. To measure progress, I kept anecdotal records and work samples to display student growth in my own classroom and asked classroom teachers to monitor writing in the regular classroom. I shared my findings with the students each day to build confidence and encourage persistence.

In my analysis I looked for how well students were able to extend short sentences into larger, more meaningful sentences (i.e., using more details in their sentence writing). I also evaluated student’s ability to carry over the concepts learned during Super Sentence time to everyday writing assignments, such as in-class journal writing, and responses to writing prompts.

We worked on Super Sentences for four weeks. My students were able to grasp the concept of a Super Sentence quickly and apply what they learned to writing assignments in my room and in regular classrooms. My students were well on their way to meeting and exceeding their IEP sentence writing goals. Table 1 displays the average number of words my students were able to write per sentence in September and December. I calculated average sentence length on three writing activities produced in September. In December I again calculated average sentence length on three work samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Average number of words per sentence as of 09/2007</th>
<th>Average number of words per sentence as of 12/2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MD</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GT</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VJ</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Phase Two (January 2008 – April 2008): Storyboarding**

My students were doing so well with sentence writing; I felt that the next step would be paragraph writing. At this point, I had six students, five of whom were ready to move beyond the sentence level. While searching through the professional literature I found a strategy that I thought would be beneficial for my students in an article by Suzanne Harrington (1994). Storyboarding involves drawing to represent scenes in a movie or
television show. In the article, Harrington recommends that teachers borrow storyboarding and use it as a prewriting strategy to help students write better stories. I saw this as the perfect strategy to get my students ready to write paragraphs.

John Bunch (1991) also recommended the use of storyboarding. He felt that what makes a storyboard so useful is that it involves three essential competencies: understanding, visualizing and writing. This exactly describes what my students need. They need to understand, visualize and then write. Harrington (1994) also noted that hesitant writers found this strategy motivational because it provided a way for them to write by using art as a means of expression.

Writing problems may result, in part, from memory deficits that are prevalent among special needs students (Gregg, Coleman, Davis & Chalk, 2007; Hooper et al. 2002; Oakhill, Hartt & Samols, 2005; Savage & Frederickson, 2006). There is substantial research evidence to support the notion that below average students experience short term memory and working memory delays (Savage & Frederickson, 2006). My students have good ideas but are likely to forget them before they can get them down on paper. Storyboarding provides students with a way to get their “thoughts” down before they disappear.

**Introducing Storyboards**

To introduce this new strategy to my students in January, we first read a book together and retold it as a storyboard on the chalkboard. The story we read was *Arthur’s Teacher Trouble* (Brown, 1989). Each student chose a different part of the story to retell. They drew the picture and wrote a sentence about it. To my surprise, the students went page by page and drew a picture for each page. What I actually wanted was three pictures, one for the beginning, one for the middle, and one for the end of the section. We spent several weeks reading and re-reading the book to retell the different parts of the story and to get them to summarize both in pictures and in words.

In February, the students felt comfortable with the process, so we moved to journal writing. I chose this form of writing because it is required in the regular classroom and because journals make writing more personal. I began by modeling how I would write about my weekend. I then asked my students to choose three things they did over the weekend and draw a picture of each of those events. They were required to draw three pictures. After they had completed their drawings, they were required to write at least
one sentence below each picture describing what they did. As we went along, I conferred with them about how to phrase the sentences so they flowed and made sense.

This process took two weeks per writing sample to complete. My students wrote about topics like “My Weekend” and “If I Were a Snowflake.” They also had opportunities to write a journal entry of their own choosing. The last piece of writing we did was a story. The students were allowed to choose the topic; I did not give them guidelines as to how many pictures they had to draw or how many sentences they had to write. The students were very excited about this piece of writing because they knew how to put a story together and they were able to write about an interest that they had. One student asked with joy and disbelief, “So we get to write about whatever we want? YAY!” Another student expressed her excitement by grabbing a pencil immediately with a big grin on her face.

Student progress was measured by tracking the number of pictures drawn and the number of sentences written. There was missing data for two students who were on vacation during the time we spent on one of the writing samples. Figure 1 shows the students’ progress during this time. The writing prompts were statements or topics that were given to the student to expand on in their writing. Only the students who had been participating from the beginning of storyboarding are represented below. Most students not only increased the number of pictures they drew but also increased the number of sentences they wrote.

Students were now excited about writing. One student would ask every day “Are we going to be writing today?” I would tell him yes and he would tell the others, “Hey guys, we get to write again today!” Other students asked to come back to work on their story during free time. I noticed their excitement the most when they were permitted to write their own stories (Prompt #5). Prompts # 1-4 had been journal writing. I felt that the students were able to move on to story writing because they experienced great success on Prompt #4 (“What I did over Spring Break”). It was at this point that my students realized that writing can be fun.
Figure 1
Student Growth across the Writing Samples

DP

GT

EB

CT

AM
I have included two examples of my students’ final stories; AM made the least growth and EB the most. These two examples are representative of all five students. They were able to take their writing to the next level by looking for misspelled words in their rough drafts, using transition words in their writing, and checking for correct punctuation.

**EB’s Story about Hannah Montana**

Hannah Montana is a singer and a TV star. She's also a songwriter. She has been on the radio too. She has a dad that's on her TV show too. She goes to school with her brother and a lot of friends. Her name is Lily, Oliver, and Jackson. Hannah Montana is one of my favorite singers.

**AM’s Story about SpongeBob SquarePants**

One day, SpongeBob and Patrick were in a jellyfish field. Then Patrick was stung by a jellyfish. Later that day, SpongeBob was stung by a jellyfish too. Then SpongeBob and Patrick became friends with SpongeBob and Patrick because when Squidward was stung by a jellyfish, he became nice.
Limitations

There are some limitations in this study. I had a very small number of participants due to the size of my special needs class. It should also be noted that these students were receiving additional instruction in their classrooms. That instruction might have strengthened their performance in my classroom. Because my sample size was so small, I was not able to have a control group to compare my students’ work. This study was conducted over a school year, so it is also possible that my students developed cognitively as we worked on these skills. Lastly, there is always the possibility that the students enhanced writing skills were due to increased motivation (because they were given choices as to writing topics). The fact that they took an active role in their learning may have been the motivation my students needed to be engaged and successful in their writing.

Next Steps

At the end of the 2007-2008 school year, I was in a meeting with the parents of one of my eight students. The student’s father shared an anecdote that really made me feel very encouraged. For a class assignment in the regular classroom, his son had to take home the class turtle and write a story about all the things they did together. He went on to tell me about how his son wanted him to take pictures, scene by scene. The pictures were uploaded into a computer and sequenced with my student taking the lead. One picture at a time, the proud writer added a sentence under each picture and composed a story. His father told me how surprised he was that his son was doing this and wondered where he got the idea. After I had explained Storyboarding, he understood. It was so wonderful to hear that what we had been doing in the classroom had had such a profound impact.

In the future I plan to spend more time each day on storyboarding and will continue it throughout the school year. I do need to focus on mechanics as well as content. My students continue to struggle with capitalization and punctuation. Hopefully, because of a new interest in writing, they will want to take the time to produce final versions of their stories that not only convey meaning but are also mechanically accurate.

I have informally shared my findings with a few colleagues but plan to discuss them at grade level meetings in my building next year. My hope is to give other teachers new ways to help special needs youngsters succeed in the regular classroom. Super Sentences and Storyboarding have opened the door to writing for my students and showed them that writing can be fun. They are now motivated to write; that alone will help them to be successful.
References


