

Using *Expressive Writing* and *Essentials for Writing* to Meet the Needs of Secondary Students: Both English Only and English Language Learners with Learning Disabilities

Almitra L. Berry

A student's written expression provides the teacher with the best exemplar of everything a student has learned in the English language arts. Writing showcases a student's level of mastery in the art of communication. Writing, particularly the technical writing called for in the Common Core State Standards and demanded by high-stakes assessments such as the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress), requires a high level of skill in four vital areas. Graham (1997) identified: (a) knowledge of writing and writing topics, (b) skills for producing and crafting text, (c) processes for energizing and motivating students to write with enthusiasm, and (d) directing thoughts and actions through strategies to achieve writing goals.

It is not unusual for students with learning disabilities (LD) to find writing a particularly challenging task. The same may be true of English language learners (ELLs) and is more profoundly the case with English language learners and long-term English language learners (L-TELLs) – English language learners who have been receiving English language support for seven or more years – who are also LD. Unfortunately, little conducted research informs educators on how to provide explicit, systematic instruction in the writing process for students at the secondary level. The little research published is topically broad, yet shallow (Graham & Perrin, 2007) and dated. The research on best practices for the instruction of writing to students with disabilities at the secondary level is even more limited. That on students with disabilities who are also English language learners is almost non-existent.

The purpose of this paper is to make the connection between the research and the practices found in two programs, *SRA Expressive Writing* (Engelmann & Silbert, 1983) and *SRA Essentials for Writing* (Engelmann & Grossen, 2010), as affects secondary students with disabilities, whether English-only (EO) or English language learners.

Both *SRA Expressive Writing* and *SRA Essentials for Writing* are Direct Instruction (note the uppercase “D,” uppercase “I”) programs. Direct Instruction is distinguished from other models of explicit, systematic instruction (often referred to as direct instruction) by its emphasis on curriculum design and instructional delivery. Direct Instruction as a method is based on the belief that every child can learn if placed into a program in his or her zone of proximal development and carefully taught one step at a time to high level of mastery in each lesson. Direct Instruction also teaches that every instructor has efficacy when provided proven programs and instructional delivery techniques.

The goal of direct instruction is to increase student achievement in the shortest time. Direct Instruction accelerates student learning by carefully controlling the features of instruction. Both *SRA Expressive Writing* and *SRA Essentials for Writing* lessons include Direct Instruction design elements. One, instruction is explicit and carefully sequenced. Instruction is teacher-delivered and includes appropriate teacher modeling of the skills and strategies students must learn and employ in their writing. Two, students receive appropriate guided practice with scaffolding to provide the assistance required before released to complete a task independently. Three, students have frequent opportunities to practice taught skills independently. Finally, students engage in repeated practice over time, so they have ample review and maintain high proficiency of learned skills.

Graham, Harris, MacArthur, and Schwartz (1991) found that students with LD have difficulty with the conventions of fluent writing and higher-level cognitive processes—tasks such as setting a purpose for writing, generating suitable content, organizing their writing, and revising their products. Students with LD trend toward redundancy (Walker, Shippen, Alberto, Houchins, & Cihak, 2005). Students with LD

may encounter greater difficulty in applying cognitive strategies necessary for success in writing (Troia, 2002).

English language learners typically struggle with writing and perform poorly on writing assessments (Panofsky et al., 2005). However, few studies address best practices on writing instruction with ELLs or L-TELLs.

SRA Expressive Writing and *SRA Essentials for Writing* address these challenges noted in the literature for students with LD. These intervention programs accelerate the written communication skills of secondary students who are significantly below level as identified by the Common Core State Standards. Both programs teach skills using a carefully designed scope and sequence based on massed and distributed practice (Marchand-Martella, Slocum, & Martella, 2004). Both programs explicitly teach the key components of the writing process: sentence writing, paragraph writing, drafting, revising, and editing for clarity. Both programs address grammar, usage, and mechanics. *Expressive Writing* focuses on beginning writing skills (See Table 1), whereas *Essentials for Writing* includes additional instruction in logic as the foundation for argument and essay writing (See Table 2).

Expressive Writing contains two levels, 1 and 2. Level 1 is designed for students who have not yet mastered foundational writing skills. Students who have not benefited from prior instruction because of language or reading deficits often place into this level. *Expressive Writing 1* students typically produce writing that indicates they do not understand basic sentence construction. They have little continuity in their writing. They make frequent errors in grammar and mechanics. *Expressive Writing 1* consists of 55 lessons, five of which serve as in-program mastery assessments.

Expressive Writing 2 is designed for students who have completed level 1 or whose writing indicates they have a solid grasp of basic language patterns and sentence construction. These students can construct simple paragraphs with relatively few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics. Characteristics of their writing include issues with clarity, more complex punctuation (such as quotation marks), and a lack of sentence variety. *Expressive Writing 2* consists of 60 lessons, which includes 10 preprogram lessons for students who need extra work on punctuation. Four of the regular lessons serve as in-program mastery assessments.

Table 1

Overview of Skills Presented in *Expressive Writing*

Basic Sentence Grammar	Write sentences beginning with a capital letter Use commas Use quotation marks Capitalize proper nouns Eliminating run-on sentences Subject-verb agreement
Sentence Writing	Sentence copying Write and correctly punctuate sentences Use introductory phrases Write compound sentences
Paragraph and story writing	Paragraph conventions Use varied sentence types Reporting on pictures
Editing	Edit for punctuation Edit for tense agreement Edit for run-on sentences Edit for pronoun usage

Essentials for Writing is appropriate for students who have completed *Expressive Writing 2* or who pass the in-program placement test. Students must be able to read at a minimum Lexile of 645. Unlike the *Expressive Writing* program, *Essentials for Writing* is designed to meet the requirements of high school graduation and high-stakes assessments such as exit, or end-of-course, examinations at the high school

level. This program build competencies required of high-school writers and aligns nicely with the requirements of the Common Core State Standards not only in the domain of writing but also in speaking and listening as well. The 95 lesson program permits placement into a 15-lesson preprogram or at lesson 16. Eleven mastery assessments occur within the program. Higher-performing students may place at lesson 16 and complete the course in a semester's time. This is not recommended for students identified as LD, ELL with LD, or L-TELL. These special classifications of students perform better with a one-year course of study to allow adequate supervised practice and remediation when necessary to achieve a high level of post-program maintenance.

Studies

Study 1: Walker, Shippen, Alberto, Houchins, and Cihak

Walker et al. (2004) investigated the effects of *Expressive Writing* in high school students with learning disabilities using a single-subject design method. The Walker study took place in a large urban-district public high school in the southeastern United States. Nine percent of students in the district qualified for special education services. Thirty-three percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Forty-six percent of the students were African American/Black, 39% were Caucasian, 12% were Hispanic, and 2% were Asian.

Study participants were three high school students identified as LD. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 16 years with intelligence quotients (IQ) ranging from 92 to 107, within or above the normal range. Participants had deficit achievement in written expression based on their performance on the Diagnostic Achievement Battery. Participants received services in a special education setting for at least one 90-minute daily period. All phases of the study occurred in a special education classroom. Participants met the placement criteria for *Expressive Writing 1*.

Walker et al. used *Expressive Writing 1* as the independent variable. Two dependent variables were (a) writing fluency on narrative writing assignments as assessed by the number of correct word sequences (CWS) (Crawford, 2001) written and (b) posttest scores on the spontaneous writing scales of the TOWL-3 (Hammil & Larson, 1996). The study used a multiple-probe design across participants. Researchers took maintenance probes on each participant two, four, and six weeks after the completion of *Expressive Writing 1*.

Table 2

Overview of Skills Presented in *Essentials for Writing*

Basic Sentence Grammar

- Use commas in a series, for sentence combining, for an introductory prepositional phrase
- Use correct verb tense
- Subject-verb agreement
- Eliminating run-on sentences

Logic

- Contradictions
- Evidence and deductions
- Writing conclusions
- Writing missing evidence
- Identifying insufficient evidence

Organize Topics

- Classification
- Writing on topics

Retell

- Writing based on oral accounts
- Writing based on notetaking

Write Critically

- Critiquing persuasive statements
- Write persuasive arguments
- Write position papers
- Debate a topic

Respond to Literature

- Answer questions about narrative text
- Write a response to a study question
- Write an interpretation citing textual evidence
- Write a story with a parallel moral

Each student's number of CWS increased in a nonvariable upward pattern with little overlap across baseline and intervention phases. Analysis demonstrated a functional relationship between the *Expressive Writing* program and the number of CWS for each participant. Each participant's scores on the TOWL-3 indicated an improvement in writing skills. The improvement was sufficient to demonstrate the generalization of writing skills from the narrative writing taught in *Expressive Writing 1* to standardized assessment.

Social validity measures were generally positive with all participants indicating a self-perceived improvement in writing post-program. Two of the three participants enjoyed *Expressive Writing*. Two of the three participants indicated they would recommend the program for students the next year. All three students expressed a belief they would remember what they learned in *Expressive Writing 1*.

Study 2: Walker, Shippen, Houchins, and Cihak

Walker, Shippen, Houchins, and Cihak (2007) investigated the effectiveness of *Expressive Writing* in acquiring and maintaining writing skills of high school students with LD. This study replicated and extended *Study 1* (above). The study used a single-subject design method. The study took place in a large urban-district public high school in the southeastern United States. Nine percent of students in the district qualified for special education services. Thirty-three percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Forty-six percent of the students were African American/Black, 39% were Caucasian, 12% were Hispanic, and 2% were Asian.

Study participants were three high school students identified as LD. Participants ranged in age from 15 years, 3 months to 15 years, 9 months at the beginning of the study; all were in Grade 9. Participants' intelligence quotients (IQ) ranged from 92 to 102, within or above the normal range. Participants had deficit achievement in written expression noted in their IEPs and received services in a special education setting. All phases of the study took place in a special education classroom. Participants met the placement criteria for *Expressive Writing 1*.

Walker et al. used *Expressive Writing 1* as the independent variable. Researchers identified three dependent variables. Writing fluency on narrative writing assignments as assessed by the number of correct word sequences (CWS) (Crawford, 2001) written was one. Error analysis to assess types of mistakes made on CWS using Standard English, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling was the second. Posttest scores on the spontaneous writing scales of the TOWL-3 was the third. The study used a multiple-probe design across participants. Researchers took maintenance on each participant two, four, and six weeks after the completion of *Expressive Writing 1*.

Each student's number of CWS increased in a nonvariable upward pattern. Analysis indicated a functional relationship between the *Expressive Writing 1* program and the number of CWS for each participant. Each participant's scores on the TOWL-3 indicated an improvement in writing skills by nearly one-third of a standard deviation. The improvement was sufficient to demonstrate the generalization of writing skills from the narrative writing taught in *Expressive Writing 1* to standardized assessment. No trends were found during the analysis of Standard English usage, punctuation, and capitalization errors.

Social validity measures were generally positive with all participants indicating a self-perceived improvement in writing post-program. All participants enjoyed *Expressive Writing*. All participants indicated they would recommend the program for students the next year. All participants expressed a belief they would remember what they learned in *Expressive Writing 1*.

Study 3: Viel-Ruma, Houchins, Jolivette, Fredrick, and Gama

Viel-Ruma et al. (2010) investigated the effects of *Expressive Writing 1* in high school students who were either EO or ELL with LD using a single-subject design. The Viel-Ruma study was conducted in three public high schools near a major urban center in the southeastern United States.

Study participants were six high school students identified as LD. Three of the participants were EO; three were native Spanish-speaking ELLs originally from Mexico. Participants ranged in grade from 9 through 11 with intelligence quotients (IQ) ranging from 88 to 111, within or above the normal range. All participants had deficit achievement in written expression based on their performance on the TOWL-3. All participants received services in a special education setting for at least one daily period. All phases of the study took place in a special education classroom. All participants met the placement criteria for *Expressive Writing 1*.

Viel-Ruma et al. used an accelerated implementation of *Expressive Writing 1* as the independent variable, teaching only the odd-numbered lessons, reducing the program from 50 lessons with 5 mastery tests to 25 lessons with 3 mastery tests. Three dependent variables were (a) writing fluency on narrative writing assignments as assessed by the number of correct word sequences (CWS) (Crawford, 2001) written, (b) length of text on the same timed-writing sample used to assess CWS, and (c) posttest scores on the spontaneous writing scales of the TOWL-3. The study used a multiple-probe across-participants design. Researchers took maintenance probes on each participant at two and four weeks after the completion of *Expressive Writing 1*.

Each participant's number of CWS increased during intervention over their baseline performance. However, increases lacked immediacy, and the slopes were relatively low. All students showed increases in the length of their writing samples from the beginning to the end of the intervention phase. Five of the six participants' scores on the TOWL-3 indicated an improvement in writing skills. The improvement was sufficient to recategorize three of the students into higher-ranked instructional groups, for example, from "poor" to "below average" or "very poor" to "poor" or "very poor" to "average." The trends for ELLs were similar to those of EOs in this study.

Social validity measures were mixed. Several of the participants indicated a self-perceived improvement in writing post-program. None of the participants indicated they would recommend the program for the next year. Authors note that the improved performance of the students provides social validity of the program despite the participants' feelings. Teachers expressed a positive attitude about the program.

Discussion

The three studies examined only *Expressive Writing 1* and its efficacy with high school students with LD. No studies have extended to *Expressive Writing 2*. Even with the limited implementation, students showed gains in general writing skills as measured by the TOWL-3. The continuation of instruction through *Expressive Writing 2* and *Essentials for Writing* potentially increases students' general achievement and maintenance of gains over a longer term.

The abbreviated implementation of *Expressive Writing 1* in the Viel-Ruma et al. (2010) study is not recommended by the publisher as an effective method for secondary students whose skills are so dramatically below grade level.

One social validity concern was the nature of the illustrations in *Expressive Writing 1*. It is important to note that authors originally designed *Expressive Writing* for elementary students; thus the nature of the illustrations may not appeal to secondary students. This does not diminish the validity of the instruction but rather is an issue to be addressed by the teacher in such a way as to diminish the matter of the

aesthetic and focus student attention to the skills under development. At the lower levels, the reporting on pictures is skill development appropriate for a number of reasons. The illustrations make the generation of a story easier than relying purely on imagination, particularly when students may lack the schema for a topic (Berry, 2011). The picture(s) provide the teacher with a referent for student writing. The generation of sentences and stories in daily lessons facilitates later imaginative writing as students are routinely building and activating schema. The use of word banks linked to the illustrations for each lessons decrease spelling problems.

Essentials for Writing is a new copyright addressing some of the concerns expressed in the research examined herein. *Essentials for Writing* has not yet been studied with the same degree of scrutiny as has *Expressive Writing*. In pre-publication field tests and post-publication implementation, the program has evidence of increasing the passage rate on high school exit examinations in California and reclassification of ELLs and L-TELLs in Guam and Samoa. The program uses outline diagrams, a form of graphic organizer, as found in *Reasoning and Writing* (Engelmann & Grossen, 2001) and validated in several studies (Grossen, 2004; Keel & Anderson, 2002; Roberts, 1997).

About the Author

Almitra L. Berry, Ed.D. is a nationally recognized speaker, author, and consultant on the topic of culturally and linguistically diverse learners at-risk. Her research focuses on academic achievement in majority-minority, high-poverty, large, urban school districts. Dr. Berry authored the book Effecting Change: Intervention for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners and several journal articles. Dr. Berry is a graduate of the University of California, Davis holding a B.A. in political science/public administration. She holds a M.Ed. in curriculum and instruction, and an Ed.D. in educational leadership with a specialization in curriculum and instruction. She was credentialed in California for both single and multiple subjects, as a language development specialist (LDS), and with a bilingual/cross-cultural language acquisition and development (CLAD/BCLAD) for Spanish language instruction. Dr. Berry has taught, trained, and supervised reading/language arts implementations (regular, intervention, bilingual/dual immersion, and special education) throughout the United States. She has presented at scores of state, national, and international conferences on the topics of leadership, curriculum reform, and meeting the needs of students at-risk.

References

- Berry, A. (2011). *Effecting change: Intervention for culturally and linguistically diverse learners*. Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Education.
- Crawford, D. (2001). *Making IEPs easy: Using curriculum-based progress monitoring measures*. Eau Claire, WI: Otter Creek Institute.
- Engelmann, S., & Grossen, B. (2010). *SRA Essentials for Writing*. Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill.
- Engelmann, S. & Silbert, J. (1983). *SRA Expressive Writing*. Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill.
- Graham, S. (1997). Executive control in the revising of students with learning and writing difficulties. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89(2), 223-234. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.89.2.223
- Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). A meta-analysis of writing instruction for adolescent students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(3), 445-476. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.99.3.445
- Grossen, B. (2004). Success of a direct instruction model at a secondary level school with high-risk students. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 20(2), 161-178. doi:10.1080/10573560490262091
- Hammil, D., & Larson, S. (1996). *Test of written language, 3rd ed.* Austin, TX: PRO-ED.
- Keel, M., & Anderson, D. (2002) Using reasoning and writing to teach writing skills to participants with learning disabilities and behavioral disorders. *Journal of Direct Instruction*, 2(1), 48 – 55.
- Marchand-Martella, N.E., Slocum, T.A., & Martella, R.C. (2004). *Introduction to direct instruction*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Panofsky, C., Pacheco, M. Smith, S., Santos, J., Fogelman, C., Harrington, M., & Kenney, E. (2005). *Approaches to writing instruction for adolescent English language learners: A discussion of recent research and practice literature in relation to nationwide standards on writing*. Retrieved August 5, 2012, from <http://www.alliance.brown.edu>
- Roberts, C. (1997). The effectiveness of the reasoning and writing program with participants with specific learning disabilities. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Georgia State University.
- Stein, M., & Dixon, R. C. (1994). Effective writing instruction for diverse learners. *School Psychology Review*, 23(3), 392.
- Troia, G. A. (2002). Teaching writing strategies to children with disabilities: Setting generalization as the goal. *Exceptionality*, 10(4), 249-269.
- Viel-Ruma, K., Houchins, D. E., Jolivet, K., Fredrick, L. D., & Gama, R. (2010). Direct instruction in written expression: The effects on English speakers and English language learners with disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice (Blackwell Publishing Limited)*, 25(2), 97-108. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5826.2010.00307.x
- Walker, B., Shippen, M. E., Alberto, P., Houchins, D. E., & Cihak, D. F. (2005). Using the expressive writing program to improve the writing skills of high school students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice (Blackwell Publishing Limited)*, 20(3), 175-183. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5826.2005.00131.x