

Troia, Gary A. (Ed.) (2009). *Instruction and Assessment for Struggling Writers: Evidence-Based Practices*. New York: The Guilford Press.

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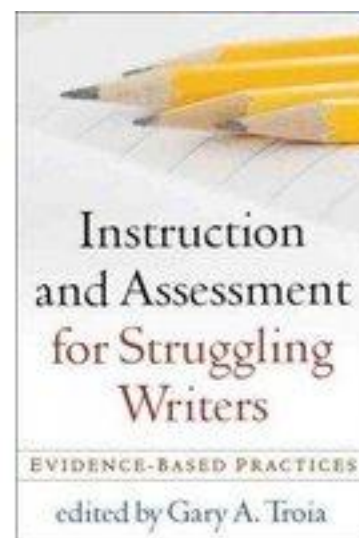
Writing competence is critical for success in school and work. It is a basic aspect of schooling enabling students to synthesize information from multiple sources and develop essential life skills. A 2006 study by organizational researchers found writing skills were critical in business, but sorely lacking among new job entrants with high school, community college, and four year college degrees (Hansen, 2006). Reforms in education continue to neglect the importance of writing competence, placing most of the attention on reading as the source for literacy development and academic content knowledge. But this lack of attention on writing is call for concern as two-thirds of paid workers in large U.S. organizations now have jobs that require writing (Hansen, 2006).

Gary Troia is an Associate Professor of special education at Michigan State University. His research interests include the connections between oral language and literacy in typical and atypical learners and the development of metacognition and metalinguistic awareness.



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The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges was formed in 2002 to draw attention to the discipline of writing and provide needed publications on writing instruction and research. Gary Troia's (2009) well-timed book, *Instruction and Assessment for Struggling Writers*, extends the knowledge base on writing instruction by examining the distinct issues that impact students with learning disabilities, language impairments, and those who are English language learners. This unique volume is based on the idea that writing instruction and assessment for struggling writers is most effective when there is recognition and integration of different levels of language knowledge within word, sentence and discourse. In organized succession, the contributors of the book provide evidence-based approaches and recommended practices for writing instruction, which makes it an invaluable resource for K-12 educators, scholars, teacher educators and college students.



Troia's book is divided into five sections. The first part provides a general theoretical framework of the writing instruction used today. It succinctly explains how writing is affected by cognitive, developmental, social, and motivational factors. In Chapter 1, Berninger, Garcia and Abbott discuss the paradigm shifts in writing theory and practice of the past three decades. They show how writing develops through the use of different genres such as storytelling, narrative, journal writing, poetry, and expository writing, which are interconnected to reading, listening, and speaking language systems. The authors stress that effective writing instruction involves teacher knowledge of different language phases, knowledge of the issues that mediate response times in instruction, suitable instruction time, and evidence-based instruction strategies. They present a theory of spelling development based on phonology, orthography, and morphology to show that each contribute equally to improved spelling skills. Writing instruction is shown to include multiple writing processes particularly as it progresses in levels of competence. The chapter ends with a notable discussion on writing disabilities and writing development.

In Chapter 2, Klassen and Welton examine issues of self-efficacy and procrastination to better understand writing motivation among students with learning disabilities (LD). The authors define and contrast terms and determine that students with LD

overestimate their writing efficacy in task performance possibly because they are unaware of their actual abilities and the requirements of certain writing tasks. The authors contend that the lack of self-perception among students with LD affects their ability to manage academic activities. They refer to empirical studies to illuminate the mismatch between self-efficacy and writing competence. For example, in one study, students with LD were clearly shown to overestimate their writing abilities, and another study used quantitative data to show that students with LD had higher levels of procrastination based on self-efficacy measures. The chapter finishes with practical recommendations on writing instruction for students with LD and ways to improve protocol for future research.

The second section of the book examines current approaches to classroom writing instruction for good and poor writers. In Chapter 3, Troia, Lin, Monroe and Cohen explain how solid writing instruction in general classrooms benefit at-risk children and those with disabilities. They insist that professionals working with struggling writers must thoroughly grasp evidence-based instruction to collaborate with peers in establishing and implementing best standard practices in writing programs. Namely, teachers must understand the needs of struggling writers and alter their instruction accordingly. The authors debate the conditions of writing programs and the competing issues that impact classroom writing instruction and learning today. They refer to a study about a writing instruction workshop for teachers who receive continual professional training to show that writing improves for all elementary school students. In the study, good and struggling writers from six classrooms in an urban impoverished school district are given norm-referenced tests, experimental motivational scales evaluations and writing tasks to assess their progress in narrative and persuasive writing. No student benefited from writing instruction when literacy skills were held constant, but a look at student writing portfolios for the year showed that good writers outperformed poor writers in writing fluency. All students progressed in their motivation toward writing, however, struggling writers from marginalized families in low income districts benefited less from the workshop instruction because it neglected writing conventions, self-regulation issues, and the diverse needs of students.

In Chapter 4, Shanahan illustrates the connection between reading and writing and the importance of policy in managing the disciplines. He relies on evidence-based research to show that mutual contribution of reading and writing instruction improves writing quality. The author explains the unique and shared attributes of reading and writing and how they alter through instruction to provide teachers with opportunities to instruct diverse groups of student writers. In Chapter 5, Englert, Okolo, and Mariage provide readers with efficient writing tools and strategies in learning and communication genres to surpass narrative structures. These writing methods are proven to help student writers function within different subject areas. Here, instruction includes explicit teaching of text structures to illuminate how information varies in organization. Students are encouraged to rely on graphic tools, writing strategies, cognitive preparation, and audiences to develop their critical reading and writing abilities. The author uses inquiry activities to demonstrate that writing strategies applied in social studies and science classrooms improve student subject content knowledge and writing performance.

Section 3 explores technology and other instructional methods used for struggling student writers. The authors implement student needs assessments and adjust their teaching and technological use accordingly. They provide practical advice on the value and limits of their methodologies. For example, in Chapter 6, Graham, Olinghouse, and Harris review experiential empirical and qualitative research on instruction for students with LD. Within a prevention and remediation framework, they conclude that all students benefit from written instruction in general classrooms, however students with LD may benefit more in specific writing areas such as composition length or text structure. The author's are conscious that their reviews are narrowed in scope because many of the writing processes and materials have not been subject to scientific review.

In Chapter 7, Nelson, Roth, and Van Meter evaluate the similarities and differences between students with LD and those with language impairments. They believe that instruction and intervention should include phases in language that start at word, sentence, and discourse; collaborative effort between teachers, specialists, and clinicians; and cultural and linguistic instructive practices. The authors rely on their own work with struggling

writers with language disorders to show how the students use narrative and expository text, in graphic organizers and text frames that generate genres, to improve the use of rhetorical structures. They reveal their strategies which enable students to combine sentences and increase use of complicated morphological and syntactic patterns in writing. The combination of orthography and morphology is also illustrated to improve spelling and the use of larger words among poor writers with spoken language problems.

Graves and Rueda investigate teaching composition among non-native English writers in Chapter 8. They use a socio-cultural perspective to look at how student traits, social relations, and cultural organizations impact teaching and learning. The authors annex writing interventions that attend to individual needs. They apply cognitive strategy and process writing instruction for English learners to better understand their background knowledge and motivation. They offer ways to improve social interactions through flexible group practice, dialogue, self efficacy and peer membership. In addition, they explain how organizations within families, schools, and communities can be relied on to help advance writing competence and cushion negative influences that may stifle growth.

Computer technology support for struggling writers is examined by MacAuthur in Chapter 9. There are few empirical studies in this area so the author relies on studies of the average learner. He reviews the research literature on word processing, transcription tools, (e.g. speech recognition, speech synthesis, and word prediction), and tools to support preparation and edit work (e.g. procedural prompts, interactive graphic organizers, and automated scores), and surmises that computers and the Internet are innovative ways for students to develop text. However, MacAuthur warns that writing success requires expert instruction and carefully chosen technology that is modeled and practiced because it does not benefit all students.

The fourth section of the book focuses on spelling and its dissimilarities from written instruction. Students find spelling the most challenging aspect of writing and many teachers have problems teaching it as a structured discipline. The authors identify the spelling problems among struggling student writers' and offer practical ways to improve their competence. Moats

explains why students with language and learning disabilities struggle to spell and maintains that competent spelling requires the synthesis of multiple language systems, motor abilities, attention, and self-regulation. She uses instructional content as record for spelling competence and recommends that multi-sensory teaching and instructional changes are made for struggling spellers. Moats rejects the notion that English spelling is variable by discussing the history of words and its roots in English orthography.

Low and Sigel assess the debate between literacy learning and transfer for English learners based on the linguistic-interdependence and script-dependence hypothesis in Chapter 11. They test which theory best reflects the spelling performance of native English, Persian, and Chinese speakers in the third grade who try to spell real and fake English words. They find that students with Chinese as their first language are equally capable as other students to spell real words, however, they yield less phonetically credible spellings for fake words. The authors suggest that Chinese and English students make visual word form less useful when spelling new words. They surmise that linguistic-interdependence and script-dependence theories are legitimate.

The last section of the volume addresses the problem with writing assessments and the lack of empirical research in this area. Gearhart provides a historical summary of writing portfolios and assessments and explains their utility for students with special needs and English language learners. She finds portfolios useful to evaluate and advance learning and review writing instruction processes even though no experimental studies have shown its value as part of successful writing instruction. The relevance of portfolios is difficult to establish because there are varied ways to produce and assess them and it is hard to resolve whether their contents are independent and representative samples of student writing. Gearhart recommends that portfolios augment other forms of assessment to triangulate data sources.

In Chapter 13 Benson and Campbell review the research on curriculum-based measures (CBM) for writing. CBM is separate from other types of written language measurement because it uses easy writing performance assessments to inform instruction and progress monitoring. However, from their review of the

research on CBM they suggest writing measures increase in complexity to yield valid findings, particularly when writing samples are from older students. Their focus is on measures that include correct spelling and word sequences, and correct minus-incorrect word sequences because they indicate progress over the school year and beyond. The authors recommend regular use of CBM to monitor progress in writing and help teachers adjust their instruction accordingly.

Scott debates linguistic measures of written text at lexical, sentential and discourse levels in the last chapter of the book. She uses representative expository writing samples from preadolescent and adolescent students with language and learning disabilities and finds lexical measures do not reflect the developmental differences within age groups and abilities. In addition, clausal density measures and morphosyntactic error rates appear insufficient to mark developmental differences or standards among learners, while certain features of written subordinate clauses help achieve these objectives. When it comes to discourse measures, the text length seems to meet measure requirements. Scott maintains that performance measures are affected by different writing genres, but that current research on measures has not examined the connections between measures or their impact on instruction and intervention.

In short, *Instruction and Assessment for Struggling Writers* focuses on the needs of students with learning disabilities, language impairments, and those who are English language learners making it an excellent book which shows that writing instruction and assessment can and should attend to the different levels of language knowledge among struggling writers. The strength of Troia's edited volume is in its theoretical review of writing instruction that is applied to evidence-based instructional strategies. By using the best available research evidence, the authors make practical recommendations on writing instruction and research essential for today's K-12 educators, scholars, teacher educators, and students.

Reference

Hansen, K. (2009). *Writing skills more important than ever on the job*. Retrieved May 10, 2009, from www.quintcareers.com/writing_skills_on_job.html

About the Reviewer

Sandria Officer is a PhD graduate from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on the dynamic relationships between disability, health, education and employment.

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