Chapter 7

Teaching Writing to Low Socio–Economic Students with Learning Disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder

David Rago
National University, USA

ABSTRACT

Writing well is conditioned on having a cognitive system that performs executive functions well. Executive functions include organizing, planning, goal-setting, self-monitoring, and self-assessing. Unfortunately, people with learning disabilities (LD) and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) do not perform these executive functions well; therefore, they do not write at a proficient level. In addition, students from low socio-economic status (SES) also do not perform these executive functions well; therefore, they do not write at a proficient level. The ecobiodevelopmental (EBD) framework is the structure for this chapter. Within this framework, the writing traits of students with LD and ASD are described, as is the impact poverty has on students’ cognitive learning systems. Different ways to teach writing are presented at the end of the chapter. These different writing strategies are shown to support the cognitive learning systems and executive functioning of low SES students who have LD and/or ASD.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers need to know evidence-based practices for teaching students how to write because students need to know how to write well. Writing is a skill that brings with it academic, social, and economic opportunities (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Writing supports students’ academic development in the areas of reading fluency, reading comprehension, and spelling (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Writing also has many social and personal benefits. People feel better when they write. Writing has been shown to decrease painful symptoms associated with fibromyalgia and cancer. It also relieves symptoms associated with depression. Studies have also revealed that peoples’ relationships are enhanced by writing positive

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notes to each other. In addition, people who write well and are motivated to write will encounter better economic opportunities than those people who do not have proficient writing skills and who do not show an interest in writing. Employers in the 21st century expect employees to be able to communicate and express complex ideas in writing. Students who learn how to do this while in school will have more opportunities for employment and economic success. Unfortunately, students with Learning Disabilities (LD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) demonstrate specific writing traits that make it difficult for them to write at a proficient level and to enjoy writing. Students with LD and ASD who come from low socio-economic status (SES) have the added challenge of having to overcome the effects poverty has on a person’s cognitive development in order to learn how to write at a proficient level. Students’ writing proficiency levels may be determined by how close they are to meeting specific assessment criteria that identifies levels of proficiency. The criteria for proficiency is unique to the specific assessment.

Students who live in poverty have a higher dropout rate when compared to students who do not live in poverty. Approximately 60% of students who attend school in districts that are recognized nationally as having the highest student poverty rate will graduate from high school. These schools are in districts considered “the 800 rural districts” (Johnson, Strange, & Madden, 2010, p. 3) and they are located in 15 states in the south and southwestern regions of the country. This means that almost 40% of students attending school in these rural districts will leave school before graduating. In addition, 4.7% of ninth graders and who were identified as being from the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) dropped out of high school before reaching the eleventh grade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Although there was an overall decline in the dropout rates for students from low-income families from the mid-1970s through 2012 (Stark & Noel, 2015), students from low-income families had a 5.9% dropout rate in 2012 compared to the 1.3% rate of their peers from high-income families (Stark & Noel, 2015). Students who leave school before graduating have a greater chance of being incarcerated, working in low-paying jobs, and contributing less economically to society (Stark & Noel, 2015).

Teachers can support all students in inclusive educational settings when they know the latest evidence-based teaching practices and know how to implement them. This chapter will explain why students need to know how to write at a proficient level. It will also describe the writing traits of students who have a learning disability and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder and how these two conditions impact students’ cognitive functioning in such a way that writing is a struggle for them. In addition, the information in this chapter will show that students who have one or both of these conditions and are growing up in poverty have cognitive systems that are further impacted in a way that makes writing proficiently a more difficult challenge to overcome. The chapter concludes with a description of different evidence-based writing strategies. They are strategies that can be used with Special Education students in inclusive settings. They are strategies that teachers can use to help students with LD, ASD, and who come from low socio-economic backgrounds reach proficient levels in writing.

WHY WRITING IS IMPORTANT

Writing improves students’ reading and content learning. Studies show that when students write about a book they have read, whether that book is a work of fiction or a science or history book, their comprehension of the information in the book is enhanced (Graham & Hebert, 2010). In addition, short, ungraded, free-writing assignments may improve a student’s factual and conceptual knowledge (Drabick, Weisberg, Paul, & Bubier, 2007). Not only does students’ comprehension improve, but also does the
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