

Strategies & Self-Regulation in ESL Writing: Using Self-Regulated Strategy Development in an African Seminary

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Self-Regulatory Strategy Development (SRSD) is an interactive instructional method used to teach writing through the use of strategies and self-regulation (Harris, Graham, Friedlander, & Laud, 2013). Using SRSD, the researcher implemented a 6-week essay writing unit in an ESL university classroom in Cameroon, West Africa. The author collected and analyzed data in the form of writing samples, student and teacher assessments, and student self-reflections. The findings demonstrate the effectiveness of SRSD within this setting, from a quantitative perspective (rubric-based assessments) and a qualitative perspective (student self-reflections). A discussion on the findings and implications for future use of SRSD are included.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a valuable and essential tool for all students across all subjects. At the university level, writing demands are significant. Students convey their knowledge and understanding through writing, especially expository writing. The process of writing is quite complex. Skilled writing involves knowledge of writing genres and formats, problem solving skills, and self-regulation (Harris, Graham, Friedlander, & Laud, 2013).

Academic English writing can present difficulties for students with a non-English speaking background. Students must master content knowledge as well as procedural knowledge necessary for writing, all in a language where they might still be struggling with grammar and vocabulary (Wong & Storey, 2006). This is true, not only within the United States, but around the world in areas where people from diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds are attending westernized English-based institutions (Li & Vandermensbrughe, 2011; Pappamihel, Nishimata, & Mihai, 2008; Pessoa, Miller, & Kaufer, 2014; Wang & Bakken, 2004; Weaver & Jackson, 2011). This project was designed specifically to offer writing intervention, in the form of Self-Regulated Strategy Development, to ESL students in Cameroon struggling to meet university academic writing requirements.

Purpose of the Project

This action research project took place in a theological seminary located in the West African nation of Cameroon, boasting over 270 living languages. English, as one of the country's two official languages, is the academic language of the institution, though it is not the primary or often secondary language of the majority of citizens. Academic writing is required in all content classes at this institution, and each instructor has his or her own requirements and specifications for written assignments. In teaching "English Grammar and Composition" to first year Bachelor of Arts students, my goal is to prepare them to write well in their content classes and provide students with an effective writing strategy that can be easily reproduced and adjusted for a variety of writing situations and assignments.

Self-Regulatory Strategy Development (SRSD) is an instructional approach designed to teach task-specific writing strategies using self-regulatory procedures. Through teacher modeling, scaffolding, and allowing independent practice, students learn to organize, write and revise their work through memorization and implementation of writing strategies as well as self-regulatory strategies. Using flexible and recursive instructional procedures, teachers help students learn, maintain, and repeat effective writing skills (Graham & Harris, 1999; Harris & Graham, 1993).

In this project, students were introduced to a mnemonic strategy (POWER + TREE) to remember the steps of the writing process and the organization of a persuasive essay, based on POW+TREE, a common SRSD strategy. POW stands for Pick my idea, Organize my notes, and Write and say more. During the organization of notes, the mnemonic TREE is used, representing Topic sentence, Reasons: 3 or more, Explanation for each reason, Ending (Mason, Harris, & Graham, 2011). Within this instructional unit, two additional steps were added, creating POWER (Pick a topic, Organize, Write, Edit, and Revise). Also adjust slightly was the T in TREE. In this unit it stood for Topic, which is a broader concept than Topic sentence, and could therefore include more features of an introduction, such as introduction of the topic, background information, definition of terms, and the topic sentence. Within this unit, TREE stood for Topic, Reasons, Explain, and Ending.

This action research was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of SRSD on the academic writing abilities of students within this class. If academic writing skills increase, as expected, I will have a flexible teaching tool to supplement the curriculum and provide students with strategies for many writing purposes. The question driving this research was: If Self-Regulated Strategy Development is taught, what will happen to the academic writing abilities of the students?

Framework of the Project

Academic writing can be a challenge for all students, and can be especially difficult for students with a Non-English Speaking Background. Many students not only lack grammatical and lexical knowledge, but can also have little experience with English academic texts (Ewert, 2011). Effective ESL university writing programs often include some or all of the following: Academic English and text structure instruction, process writing, self-regulation, and task-specific strategy instruction.

Academic writing has a particular style, rhetorical convention, and structure that is dependent on the arrangement and organization of ideas, use of specific language and vocabulary, understanding of genres, and the ability to use evidence to support main ideas and details. Explicit instruction in style and structure is important as it provides the framework for effective academic writing (Li & Vandermensbrugge, 2011; Pessoa et al., 2014; Weaver & Jackson, 2011). Students should be exposed to and instructed in various expository text structures, in order to recognize basic components, including introductions, conclusions, and placement of main ideas and details (Bluestein, 2010; Montelongo et al., 2010). Students need practice interacting with various structures, noting interrelationships between ideas, in order to then apply that knowledge to their writing (Reynolds & Perin, 2009).

Students struggling with writing often lack necessary information about the writing process (Harris, Graham, Mason & Saddler, 2002). When students learn to write, it is essential that they learn to plan and organize before writing, and after writing, they should revise and edit. (Li & Vandermensbrugge, 2011; Pappamihel et al., 2008) Reviewing and revising one's writing and/or having an outside observer help has been found to be helpful for ESL students (Pessoa et al., 2014; Weaver & Jackson, 2011). "Skilled

revision involves critically reading one's writing and comparing it to a representation of intended text, noting discrepancies, and making changes so the existing text becomes more in line with the ideal text" (De La Paz & Sherman, 2013, p. 129). This requires an emphasis on the text as a whole, consideration of rhetorical features, fluency, clarity, and text development and organization, rather than an emphasis on surface features, like spelling, mechanics, and word choice (De La Paz & Sherman, 2013; Ewert, 2011; Moussu, 2013).

Metacognition and self-regulation also contribute positively to writing performance. Using quality teacher feedback and self and peer assessments, students can learn about themselves, increase self-efficacy, and become more motivated (Lam, 2015). Writing lends itself to self-regulation because writing is an intentional activity with many parts and processes. Self-regulation offers routines and "building blocks" for the writing process, and offers the writer opportunities for fine-tuning in the process (Graham & Harris, 2000). It allows students to be autonomous in their writing by assisting students in remembering and maintaining writing strategies and transferring those strategies to various situations (Harris & Graham, 1999; Lam 2015; MacArthur, Philippakos, & Ianetta, 2014).

Skilled writers have a stock of strategies at their disposal for managing the writing process, such as task analysis, organization of content in specific genres, and revising for ideas (Graham & Harris, 2016; MacArthur et al., 2014). These strategies are not visible actions; so teaching them explicitly makes them tangible and understandable (Graham, Harris, & MacArthur, 2006). Task-specific strategies are useful as they can be duplicated in independent writing, so it is important to teach students not only how to use them, but when to use them (Wong & Storey, 2006).

Self-Regulated Strategy Development

Self-Regulated Strategy Development was developed to address affective, behavioral and cognitive needs of students and provide powerful interventions for students tackling writing challenges (Harris & Graham, 1999). It is a teaching method involving explicit, interactive and scaffolded instruction to teach specific planning, writing and revising strategies, including various memorized mnemonics to remember the writing process, and how to apply these strategies across writing genres (Graham et al., 2006; Harris et al, 2013; Mason, Harris, & Graham, 2011).

The key components of Self-Regulated Strategy Development are self-regulation and strategy instruction. SRSD instruction generally flows in the same order starting with developing background knowledge and explicit text structure instruction, interactive discussion of strategies, teacher modeling of self-regulation and writing strategies, memorization of strategies, followed by guided practice, or scaffolding, in order to move the student toward independent practice, and eventually maintenance (De La Paz & Sherman, 2013; Graham et al, 2006; Harris et al, 2013; Guzel-Ozmen, 2009; Lienemann & Reid, 2008; Mason et al., 2009; Santangelo, Harris & Graham, 2008). Taking student needs into account, these steps can be rearranged and repeated as necessary (Harris et al, 2013).

SRSD has been effective in students with LD and ESL, and organizes instruction in such a way as to reduce the demands on working memory, by teaching small steps and utilizing guided practice (De La Paz & Sherman, 2013; Lienemann & Reid, 2008; Sexton, Harris, & Graham, 1998). SRSD has shown effectiveness in writing performance with students of all ages and various writing levels, from elementary to university (Graham & Harris, 1999; Harris & Graham, 1999; MacArthur et al, 2014; Santangelo et al, 2008). Students successfully moved from teacher modeling to independent practice, and they used self-regulating strategies in their writing process (Guzel-Ozmen, 2009; Lienemann & Reid, 2008; Mason et al., 2011).

METHODOLOGY

As practical action research, this project was designed to focus on one specific issue (persuasive academic writing) in one specific classroom (English Grammar and Composition, BA year 1). The objective was to determine if SRSD could be used effectively to improve writing skills. Quantitative and

qualitative data were collected in the form of student essays, student and teacher assessments, and student self-reflections.

Setting and Participants

Cameroon is officially a bilingual country divided into two sections linguistically, Anglophone and Francophone. The government school system uses English and French for instructional purposes. However there are over 270 distinct languages in Cameroon, including Cameroonian Pidgin English. These are the primary languages spoken in homes and communities. The seminary is located in the Anglophone area of Cameroon, and English is the language used for all professional purposes. The seminary is a theological institution with Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts and Divinity programs. Students come from many ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, but almost all are from Cameroon with some students from neighboring Nigeria and Congo. Ages range from 19 to 46, and the vast majority of students are male.

As the researcher, I include my own demographic information only because it differs from the class and school demographics. I am an American white female with eleven years teaching experience. I have taught expatriate and national students in primary and secondary institutions, as well as worked with mother tongue literacy programs for five years in Cameroon.

The English Grammar and Composition class in which this action research took place consisted of 25 male and 4 female students, totalling 29 students. All students were Cameroonian in nationality, and hailed from the Anglophone region of Cameroon. 9 students (7 male, 2 female) were selected as a sample size of the larger group for data collection, using systematic sampling.

PROCEDURES

This action research took place in six weeks over an eight-week period of time during the second semester. The class met three hours per week in two sessions, lasting 1 hour and 2 hours respectively. The unit followed the 6 steps of SRSD, which are development of knowledge, discussion, modeling, memorization, and independent performance, repeating and reordering steps as necessary. Quantitative data, in the form of student essays and rubric-based student and teacher assessments, as well as qualitative data, in the form of student self-reflections, were gathered throughout the unit.

Prior to the Instructional Unit

Students were provided folders and asked to keep all their work from this unit in order to review it, evaluate it, and observe their growth in the writing process. Students completed the Initial Self-Reflection (Appendix A) answering questions about how they view themselves as writers, steps they take when writing, and their goals for writing. These were collected and analyzed thematically, and the results are discussed in the Data Analysis section.

Students were asked to write a 5-paragraph persuasive essay on education. The topic could be education in general or a specific aspect of education. There was no time limit, though all students completed the essay within the scheduled 2-hour class period. This and all essays throughout the unit were scored using a 4-point rubric (Appendix B), assessing five traits of effective writing: ideas, organization, word choice, fluency, and conventions.

These two pre-assessments provided a baseline writing score, an understanding of students' beliefs and goals, and information for guiding instruction. In the self-reflections, many students viewed themselves as unskilled writers lacking strategies for completing writing assignments, and many considered organization a weakness. In the student essays, many students included the basic structure of a 5-paragraph essay. However, many lacked effective style and necessary elements, including clear topic sentences, sufficient supporting details, and conclusions. All this encouraged me that SRSD, and POWER+TREE specifically, still aligned with goal of this research project, to provide students with strategies to write effectively for academic purposes.

SRSD Instructional Unit

Self-Regulatory Strategy Development generally follows 6 stages of instruction: develop and activate background knowledge, discuss the strategy, model the strategy, memorize the strategy, support the strategy, independent performance (Graham et al., 2006; Harris et al., 2002; Harris et al., 2013; Mason et al. 2011). When discussing strategies, this includes both writing strategies, such as TREE, and self-regulatory strategies, such as POWER. The stages do not necessarily go in order, and steps can be repeated as necessary throughout the unit. In this project, memorization of the strategies was encouraged and supported throughout the unit through repetition, but was not an explicit instructional stage.

POWER and TREE were exhibited on posters that hung in the classroom through the entire unit. The POWER poster simply displayed the mnemonic (Pick a topic, organize, write, edit, and revise). The TREE poster included more elements than the simple mnemonic (Appendix C).

Develop and activate background knowledge.

The first two sessions were dedicated to looking at good persuasive essays and discussing what made them good. After a brief overview of TREE, students were given three examples of persuasive essays. As a class, we read through each essay finding and marking the key parts, as shown on the poster, including the introduction, conclusion, reasons, and explanations of each reason.

I explained self-regulation, and we discussed its importance, including self-assessment. We discussed the fact that if they learn to assess their own writing, they could assess their future writing, finding what is good and what needs to be adjusted. Students were assigned to assess their initial essay for effectiveness. Using a checklist (Appendix C), students read through their essays looking for each TREE component, and completed the “Student” section of the checklist. Then I completed the “Teacher” portion of the checklist, looking for the same components. I then assessed their essay using a 4-point rubric (Appendix D), which provided a baseline quantitative score.

Discuss it.

In the third classroom session, the use of strategies was explained in more depth. First, POWER and TREE were reviewed and then explained in more detail. The class discussed why using strategies such as these could be useful in their writing. Not only would they help in this class, but once learned and mastered, students could apply these strategies to other pieces of writing. We discussed how writing strategies and self-regulation, like the self-regulating they practiced in the previous session, would aid them in future assignments when they lack time to have their writing proofread in the writing lab, and can edit and revise their own work.

Model it (POW + TREE)

I explained that I would demonstrate the POW, using TREE for organization. Since self-regulation is often an unseen cognitive process, I explained that I would demonstrate self-instructions, monitoring, and reinforcement by saying my thoughts aloud. Enthusiasm is important throughout SRSD, especially in this stage (Harris et al., 2002), so I demonstrated with energy and movement.

Using a subject familiar to all students, the topic was formed, “Why one should attend this seminary”. Applying a pre-writing activity, I wrote every idea I had about the topic. Then, explaining my thoughts, I grouped similar ideas together, and discussed the decision making process of sorting reasons and details to explain those reasons, as well as explaining which reasons were important and supportable. Then, using TREE, I organized the paragraphs, and then wrote the essay. Using self-speak, I explained writing decisions such as word choice, sentence fluency, sentence variety, grammar, and organization.

Support it (POW + TREE)

Collaboratively, the class worked through each POW step to write on a new topic, the importance of tithing. Students offered input, and all ideas were accepted when writing our initial ideas. When deciding how to group ideas, students again offered ideas and most decisions were agreed upon by everyone. We narrowed down the three most important reasons to tithe: Tithing is a command, tithing brings blessings,

the early church tithed. When we were uncertain about the order in which to list our 3 reasons, students voted. We organized the TREE outline together. When writing the essay, everyone offered input, and the class discussed differing ideas. Most of the writing was student generated, but as the instructor, I did offer suggestions and ask guiding questions.

Independent performance (POW + TREE)

Students then independently wrote a new essay, using the strategies. Choosing from three topics, the importance of prayer, baptism, or worship (topics familiar to theology students), students had one week to complete the assignment, which included a pre-writing activity, a completed TREE outline, and a complete essay.

Discuss and model it (POWER + TREE)

The final two steps of POWER were discussed and modeled in the next session. The purpose and importance of revision were explained first, followed by a discussion of particular areas to be revised, specifically, Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, and Sentence Fluency. For each area, I modeled one or two examples and the thought process behind changing them. When discussing editing, I reviewed common grammatical mistakes and how to fix them. This included comma placement, pronoun clarity, pronoun-antecedent agreement, subject-verb agreement, verb tense, and apostrophe placement. The idea of reading one's writing out loud was especially stressed, so that one is able to see and to hear their work. Students were introduced to editing and revising checklists (Appendix E) adapted from their textbook, "Writers INC", by Sebranek, Kemper, & Meyer (2006).

Support it (POWER + TREE)

After reading together a 5-paragraph persuasive essay in need of proofreading, the class collaboratively practiced editing and revising. We used the editing and revising checklists to assess the work and make changes.

Independent performance (POWER + TREE)

After students completed their first independent essay (Essay 2) and brought it to class, they then were given the opportunity to independently practice editing and revising their work. Using the checklists previously modeled and supported, students spread out, read their work aloud, and made adjustments to their work. They then rewrote their essay and submitted a final draft.

Students then completed two more persuasive essays independently, using POWER + TREE. I supported students as necessary, and provided short lessons on specific difficulties that presented themselves in student writing, such as subject-verb agreement, verb tense, run-on sentences, and sentence fluency. For their fifth and final assessment (post-assessment), students submitted a complete and independently written persuasive essay from a list of education themed topics.

Self-Regulation

A key component of SRSD is self-regulation, as evidenced in the name itself. POWER + TREE are self-regulatory in nature as they offer a memorized order to the writing process to help students self-monitor. In this project, additional self-regulatory processes were added, including self-assessment and self-reflection.

Self-assessment

At two points in this project, students were asked to assess their own work. They reviewed their initial essay, looking for specific organization parts of TREE. After seeing their first and second essay scored on the 4-point rubric, students were asked to use the rubric to evaluate their third essay using the same rubric. Students then compared their assessment to my assessment in the third self-reflection.

Self-reflection

Students completed a total of four self-reflections (Appendix A), each evaluating different aspects of the writing and self-regulatory processes. This provided students with opportunities to reflect on their learning and growth and consider how they can improve. It also gave me insight as to how SRSD was working and if adjustments needed to be made. And finally, it provided qualitative data on the effectiveness of SRSD within this setting.

DATA ANALYSIS

Twenty-nine students participated in the SRSD unit. Using systematic sampling, 9 students were selected for qualitative and quantitative analysis. Every 3rd student from the alphabetical class list was selected, and for the purposes of this paper have been translated to letters A – I.

Each of the five student essays was assessed using a 4-point rubric (Appendix B). Final essays scores for all essays are compared in Table 1. Pre- and post-assessment rubrics, organized by separate writing traits (ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions) and total score were compared to determine the effectiveness of SRSD within this classroom (Table 2).

Self-reflections did not correspond with assessments; they were analyzed separately. Self-reflections concerned students' views of themselves as writers from the beginning of the unit to the end and students' views on particular aspects of SRSD. These were studied and crosschecked, taking note of recurring words and phrases, and used to identify significant themes.

FINDINGS

After using SRSD as an instructional method, this class demonstrated improvement in writing essays. Table 1 shows the total essay scores for all 5 of the essays independently written in this unit, including the pre-assessment and the post assessment, demonstrating overall improvement for most students. Self-reflections also indicate that students felt they improved in writing through the unit.

Writing Abilities

Writing abilities of students were assessed in the following 5 categories: *Ideas*, *Organization*, *Word Choice*, *Sentence Fluency*, and *Conventions*. Comparing the pre-assessment to the post assessment in Table 2, total scores increased in all but one student. Some students made slight increases, while others recorded large improvements in their writing scores.

Quite notable was Student A, increasing from 26 total points in the pre-assessment to 40 total points in the post-assessment, a perfect score. Also notable was Student G, with the lowest overall score of 23 in the pre-assessment, who increased his score to 36 in the post-assessment. The scores of Student D, which decreased from a total 30 points to a total of 28 points, demonstrate that not all students showed improvement in their writing abilities after the SRSD unit. However, in looking at student D's performance on the third essay, one can see that this student showed improvement in previous essays (Table 1), but not in the final essay.

Ideas

It is not surprising that the trait of *Ideas*, the presentation of a clear topic with strong support, had the largest average combined score increase of all the traits, 1.9 points. Using SRSD, and specifically TREE, the idea of a clear topic is part of the repeated mnemonic, and was emphasized throughout the unit.

The first subsection of *Ideas* on the rubric was "Clear, focused topic & topic sentence." Pre-assessment scores indicated that students earned an average of 3.1 in this area, which was a high number to begin with. That number increased to an average of 3.8 in the post-assessment, with all but one in the sample receiving 4 points, the highest possible score.

The second subsection, "Each paragraph supports the main ideas with strong, relevant details," had the lowest overall score in the pre-assessment, with a 1.7 average. This increased to 3 in the post-

assessment, which (along with a word choice subsection) was the largest variation in a single subsection, an increase of 1.2 points.

Organization

In addition to *Ideas*, another highly emphasized aspect of SRSD is *Organization*. Not only is the process of writing organized through POWER, but also there is a specific structure (TREE) for a 5-paragraph essay that students learn and practice. The combined subsections increased a total of 1.8 points from pre-assessment to post-assessment.

Both subsections of “Clear pattern of organization” and “Effective introduction and conclusion” made significant gains overall. Seven of the nine sample students received a score of 4 in “clear pattern of organization”. The post-assessment average score in this area was higher than “Effective introduction and conclusion,” (3.6 compared to 3.4), but “Effective introduction and conclusion” had a higher overall average increase (1 point compared to .8 points).

Word Choice

While not an over-emphasized writing trait within SRSD, significant improvement was made in this *Word Choice*, especially in the subsection “Precise language and carefully chosen words, avoiding repetition and redundancy.” This, along with the previously mentioned *Ideas*, had the highest gain in a single subsection, averaging 2.5 in the pre-assessment and 3.7 in the post-assessment. The subsection “Appropriate level of formality” increased a slight .3 points. However, that was the highest possible gain this category could make, as this was one of two categories in which all sample students received 4 points in the post-assessment.

Sentence Fluency

The first subsection of *Sentence Fluency* is “Complete and clear sentences that flow smoothly.” This area showed improvement overall shifting from an average of 3 to an average of 3.6. Also in *Sentence Fluency* was the subsection “Varied sentence structures and lengths.” This subsection had a perfect average of 4 in pre-assessment and the same in post-assessment.

Conventions

This category was divided into “Punctuation and Mechanics (Spelling and capital letters)” and “Grammar”. These topics are not explicitly taught through Self-Regulatory Strategy Development, but were covered during the unit through mini-lessons on specific concerns that arose. The first category had very little gain, .2 points overall; and the second category had moderate gain of .7 points.

Self-Assessment

When students were asked to assess their work, it was met with almost universal disapproval. Most students complained that they could not do it, as they were submitting the essay because they thought it was their best work. However, students did complete the assessments (Table 3), and did not simply mark 4 in every category; and their total scores were not far from the teacher assessed total scores. The largest difference between student and teacher assessment was 3 points, and five differed by only 1 point. But in looking at the subsections, not all students recognized the specific strengths and weaknesses of their writing, as seen in the discrepancies between student and teacher assessment.

Students with lower overall scores (C, G, and F) had more room for variation in their scoring. While they recognized that their essay was weak in some areas and strong in others, those areas did not necessarily align with the areas that the teacher evaluated as weak and strong. Student G with the lowest total score differs from the teacher in 6 of the 10 categories. And for student F, the categories of *Ideas* and *Organization* are notable, as they underestimated *ideas* (3 and 1 compared to 4 and 2), and overestimated the subsection on introduction and conclusion with a perfect score of 4, while the teacher gave only a 2.

Students with the highest overall scores (A, E, and H) tended to assess their work with a more similar evaluation as the teacher's assessment. Student A scored their work with 4 for every category but conventions, which received two 3's. The teacher gave the same assessment with one exception, a 3 in *Sentence Fluency*. Student H only differed by 1 point from the teacher in 2 sections, grading their paper more harshly in *Sentence Fluency* and *Conventions*.

After comparing their self-assessments to teacher assessments, students reflected on the experience, considering what differed and why. The following statements were made in Self-Reflection 3, in answer to the question, "What can you do in the future to assess your work well?"

Student B: "In the future I should not focus more on marks but on that which is of help to me. I think I will learn from the assessment of the teacher to improve."

Student C: "Check my punctuations, tenses, grammar, etc."

Student E: "I need to check it for ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions. These guide pages I think will help me do a better assessment."

Student F: "I will have to read the essay over to see some weaknesses in grammar, support of each point, effective conclusion and introduction so as to assess it well."

Student I: "The most important thing is to reread my work after writing before editing the work. Also someone can also read my work before I can make the final copy."

Self-Reflections

Self-reflections provide insight into the unseen aspects of the writing process. Through self-reflection, students consider their learning, management, and writing ability. In studying self-reflections 1, 2, and 4, four significant themes emerged.

Self-Efficacy

The theme of self-efficacy understandably developed because students were asked in each of these reflections to consider themselves as writers. They considered their strengths and weaknesses, and without prompting, some considered their attitudes toward writing. The initial self-reflection had a wide variety of answers to the question, "How do you consider yourself as a writer?" They were almost all negative comments, such as "I find difficulties with...", "I face challenges," and, "I know that I am not a good writer."

By the end of the unit, however, these same students who wrote poorly of themselves had adjusted their answer to positive. One student simply changed his answer from "fair" to "good", and another wrote in her final reflection, "I feel very good and more confident when I write now more than ever before." Two students in the initial reflection discussed their willingness to try and desire to improve. By the end, they considered themselves "better" and "improved". Student C considered his specific writing skills and listed his difficulties in the first reflection, but by the final reflection, he wrote, "I am very sure that I have improved my writing skills as compared to the time I was yet to come here." Student I had the largest shift in self-efficacy, with his original response of "...not a good writer," changing to, "I consider myself a good writer because the way I organize my work has greatly improved. The ideas that I have I can really express it out now based on POWER and the TREE method."

Organization

In self-reflection 2, students considered the positive and negative characteristics of the writing unit, as well as specific aspects in which they had improved. Organization was the most common response. One student said, "I was so disorganized but now I have improved in the area of organization," and another wrote, "It has improved in my style of presenting my work and organizing it." Organization was implied in other comments like, "It has helped me in that I now know the importance of outline and how to link up my ideas." Many students also listed organization as a helpful part of the POWER and TREE strategy. Student D, whose overall score decreased in the post-assessment, wrote in the final self-reflection that her strength was to, "Organize work or ideas well."

Self-evaluation

Another commonly mentioned helpful quality of POWER + TREE was evaluating one's own work. "We have learnt in this course to write and self-evaluate the work," said one student. Though students audibly complained about editing and revising their work prior to doing it, their reflections show that they found it helpful. It appeared that the idea of checking over one's work was a new concept to some students, like the student who now knows, "I can check my work for coherence, flow, and so on," and another who said he was able to "do some proper check out which I never did before." One student remarked, "It has caused me to know that I always need to edit and revise my work after writing," and yet another appreciated, "critical checking helps me realize errors."

Content over conventions

There is a marked difference in the way students discuss writing in the first reflection and the last. When discussing specific parts of the writing process, most references in the initial reflection relate to surface features of writing, such as grammar, punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary. Much fewer references are made to writing as a whole and as a process. In the final reflection, though, references to conventions decrease, while many comments are made such as, "have good ideas to be developed," "develop the body of my writing," "bring good ideas and organize them effectively," and, "organize the materials and develop them with good facts and examples." A majority of students now viewed writing as more than words put together following grammar and spelling rules, but a multi-step process involving ideas, organization, fluency, word choice, and conventions.

DISCUSSION

The research question of this action research project was: If Self-Regulated Strategy Development is taught, what will happen to the academic writing abilities of the students? Teacher assessments, student self-assessments, and student self-reflections demonstrate the effectiveness of SRSD within this context, specifically in the increase in writing scores and the positive feedback from students.

In examining the specific areas of growth in writing, there are some interesting trends. While it was noted that *Ideas* is specifically addressed throughout this unit, it is also worthy to note that the *Ideas* subsection, "Each paragraph supports the main idea with strong, relevant details" had the lowest overall score of any subsection, so it had the most room for improvement. Yet it still had the lowest overall average score on the final assessment. However, the scores improved, and I believe with more practice, could increase even more.

While the idea of paragraphs supporting the topic through strong details was emphasized repeatedly, *Word Choice* was not as frequently mentioned. It was therefore surprising that the *Word Choice* subsection, "Precise language and carefully chosen words, avoiding repetition and redundancy," had such a large increase. In assessing essays, I wrote many notes that simply said, "Word choice," indicating notes and assessments might not have only been read, but possibly affected students' writing.

Within *Sentence Fluency*, "Varied sentence structures and lengths," was not really a factor in this unit. Students had no problem with sentence variety at the beginning of the unit, nor did they have a problem at the end. The main issues with sentence fluency were with incomplete sentences and run-on sentences. Therefore, I included mini-lessons on these issues, and it appears to have helped.

The majority of the mini-lessons throughout the unit were on conventions, mostly in commas, quotation marks, verb tense, and subject-verb agreement. However, *Conventions* did not improve as much as other sections. Mechanics specifically had very little growth. Students continued to struggle with comma and quotation mark use, but they especially struggled with spelling. We did not discuss spelling in the lessons, and I simply marked their spelling mistakes in their papers. We discussed and practiced verb usage multiple times in the unit, but it did not appear to have a large impact on scores.

It was clear from the beginning of this unit that self-assessment was unusual and uncomfortable for students. This involved critical analysis, a didactic component possibly lacking in a government school

system that values rote memorization. Many reacted negatively to any activity involving the evaluation of their own work, including editing, revising, and self-assessing. However, as we have seen from their self-reflections, the activity was valuable. The largest increase in total scores from one essay to the next occurs between the Pre-assessment and Essay 2, in which they first edit and revise.

In self-assessing Essay 3, students seemed to be aware of how well they scored overall. Students receiving lower marks from the teacher also scored themselves lower, and students receiving higher marks from the teacher scored themselves higher. Struggling writers however, were not able to always pinpoint where their writing was lacking or excelling. If struggling writers could recognize specifically where they need improvement, it might help them improve. This might be an area for further research.

IMPLICATIONS

This action research has demonstrated that SRSD is a valuable teaching strategy in this setting. It provides students with strategies, structures, and self-regulatory processes to guide their writing. It was not difficult to implement, and the lessons were interesting enough to hold students' attention. The mnemonics made it easy for students to remember and reproduce the strategies.

A large amount of practice is crucial to this teaching strategy. Students need opportunities to try what they've learned, evaluate what they've learned, and try again. There is still room for improvement, so it would be good, if time provides, to even offer one or maybe two more opportunities to practice these skills. In addition to practice, students received feedback. Each time students submitted an essay, I assessed them and returned them quickly, giving students feedback that could inform their next assignment.

In thinking about their writing, students shifted from focusing on surface features to content as a whole, but that doesn't mean they forgot about conventions or that they no longer had problems with conventions. They still mentioned their need to improve in the areas of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and vocabulary, and the data affirms that.

The unit has already demonstrated value in many ways. It has provided a self-regulatory writing strategy that can be applied to other writing. When the class continued to the next writing unit, article and book reviews, students were already aware that any writing assignment is a process and we used POWER to guide our work. The unit also demonstrated that self-evaluation is crucial to the writing process. Students have continued to evaluate their work, but with much more ease than at the beginning of the unit. It might be helpful in the future to incorporate peer editing and revision to the unit.

LIMITATIONS

This action research took place in 6-weeks within an 8-week period in one "English Grammar and Composition" class at the BA level in a theological seminary in Cameroon. There was no control group, and SRSD was not compared with other instructional methods. Therefore, it cannot be said SRSD was the only reason scores improved, or that scores improved more with SRSD than another teaching strategy. However, students did demonstrate growth. They wrote significantly better papers at the end of the unit compared to the beginning of the unit.

Within the class, nine students were chosen for data collection and analysis. It is therefore limited in its scope, and findings may not necessarily be applied to a wider context. Qualitative results, such as self-reflections, while informative to the teacher and students, also may not pertain to a larger population. Other limitations include time, schedule, attendance, and cultural values. The length of the unit was affected by the institutional schedule; administrative demands interrupted the class schedule the second and third weeks of instruction, therefore causing the 6-week unit to be taught in 8 weeks. Also, all classes were scheduled in the afternoon, some of them late in the afternoon. This affected motivation and engagement in class activities and lessons. Attendance and tardiness were also factors, as they affected instruction and completion of assignments.

When reviewing the self-reflection surveys, one must consider the high cultural value of respect for authority within this setting. Respect mandates that those in lower positions, i.e. students, show deference to those in higher positions, i.e. teachers. Criticism of authority is not allowed. Therefore, answers to direct questions about difficulties and struggles with the instructional approach might not be completely forthright.

Culture must also be considered when looking at the teacher-student dynamic. With an American female as the teacher of an almost exclusively male class, there are some considerations. Males tend to be those in positions of authority in Cameroon, although there are other women as teachers at this school. Also, I speak with an accent, so there could be communication issues. In addition, there are always cultural differences that people are unaware of that can affect how you interpret and evaluate a situation. However, having lived in Cameroon a total of five years, I am familiar with many cultural aspects, and I also adjust my speech to be understood; and having taught this same class the first semester, the students were familiar with me and we had a positive, respectful rapport.

As an action research project, the goal was to find a practical solution to a specific problem. This research, despite the limitations, has accomplished its goal. Teaching SRSD in this specific context has demonstrated value and efficacy in raising essay writing scores.

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