

Effects of paragraph-frame instruction on the argumentative writing performance of middle school students

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Abstract

This study explored students' use of paragraph-frames as a tool for improving the argumentative essay writing skills of middle school low achievers. A total of 21 eighth-grade students received paragraph-frames instruction over the course of 12 weeks from their Language Arts teacher. Students writing performance was measured on the English Language Arts Text-based Writing Rubrics Grades 6–11: Argumentation (Florida State Assessment). Analyses of the data revealed that students' overall writing performance increased significantly from pretest to posttest. Students also made significant gains across the pre- and posttest period in the following two domains of the Writing Rubrics Purpose, Focus and Organization and Evidence and Elaboration, but not in Conventions of Standard English.

Background

Traditionally, essay writing practices in K-12 classrooms relied heavily on students' life experiences and their personal opinions. Current standards require students to engage in analytical writing i.e., students have to read and comprehend a given stimulus and then write an essay based on evidence provided by the given stimulus. Students in today's classrooms are thus expected to proficiently produce evidenced-based literary, argumentative and informative essays (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). There is little current literature that documents effective writing instruction that scaffolds middle school students' essay writing, based on a given stimulus. Additionally, no studies have been found that documents the use of paragraph frames to scaffold middle school low achieving students' essay writing, based on a given stimulus.

Methods

- The sample consisted of 21 eighth-grade students (8 boys and 13 girls).
- The English Language Arts Text-based Writing Rubrics Grades 6–11: Argumentation (FSA), were used to assess students writing skills in the following three domains:
 - Purpose, Focus, and Organization
 - Evidence and Elaboration, and
 - Conventions of Standard English

Data was collected before and after implementation of the paragraph frame instruction. Pretest data was collected in mid-October and posttest data in January.

Paragraph Frame Instruction

The Students received the paragraph frame instruction 3-5 days a week for 85 minutes over the course of 12 weeks. Every student had a writing folder where they housed the ELA- TBWR, handouts, notes, and writing samples (anchor papers). In addition, there was a folder with a teacher-created argumentative paragraph frame on each student's desk. The students used the frames to guide their writing. The teacher used a PowerPoint to model the specific parts of an argumentative essay and how to complete the paragraph frame. Using think-alouds, the teacher modeled what to do and how to do it and provided opportunities for guided practice with corrective feedback. The teacher and students together, also read three stimuli articles together and discussed the main ideas and supporting details while students would highlight, underline, or take notes.

Figure 1

Paragraph Frame for Argumentative Writing

- Paragraph #1 (Introduction):
Indent. Write a **Hook**. Write a **Connector Sentence**. Write a full **thesis statement** (restate the prompt) with two **reason ideas**.
- Paragraph # 2 (1st Body Paragraph):
Indent. Write a **topic sentence** (Transition word- *Initially*, restate the prompt + because + reason idea #1.) Write a **Filler Sentence**. Write a **cited and paraphrased textual evidence sentence** (*Source 1 mentions that ...*) Write your **Elaboration** to explain the text citation. (*In other words...*). **Opposing Argument** (*Some may argue that ...*). **Counter Claim** (*On the other hand, ...*). **Elaborative sentence(s)** (*To clarify...*). **Close out sentence with a justifier** (*It is clear that ...* Mention the thesis and reason idea # 1 in another way.)
- Paragraph # 3 (2nd Body Paragraph):
Indent. Write **topic sentence** (Transition word- *As a final point*, restate the prompt + because + reason idea #2.) Write a **Filler Sentence**. Write a **cited and paraphrased textual evidence sentence** (*According to Source 2, ...*) Write your **Elaboration** to explain the text citation (*This means...*). **Opposing Argument** (*Critics claim that ...*) **Counter Claim** (*On the contrary...*) **Elaborative sentence(s)**. (*In this case, ...*). **Close out sentence with a justifier** (*Without a doubt, ...*)
- Paragraph # 4 (Conclusion):
Indent. Transition word - *In conclusion*, **Restate the full thesis with the two reason ideas**. Ask a **thought-provoking question** about the topic. **Make a prediction** (*In the future.*)

Results

This research examined whether instruction with paragraph frames would enhance the argumentative writing skills of middle school students. The dependent variable in this study was argumentative writing achievement as measured by the ELA-TBWR. Paired sample-t-tests were conducted to examine change in students' scores across the 12-week intervention period. Findings indicate that students made significant progress in both the (1) Purpose, Focus and Organization and (2) Evidence and Elaboration domains, but not in Conventions of Standard English.

Figure 2

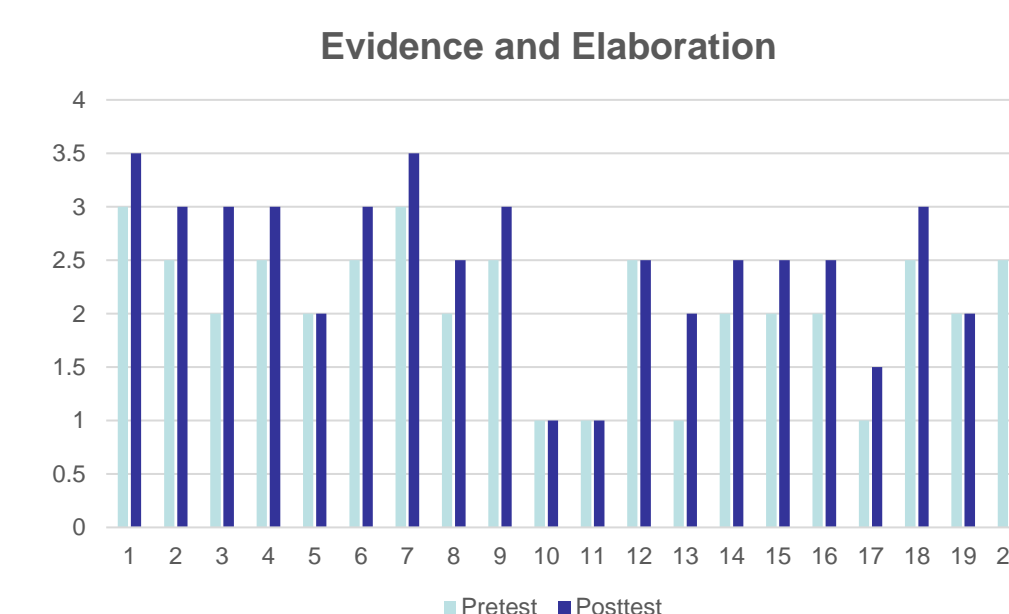


Figure 3

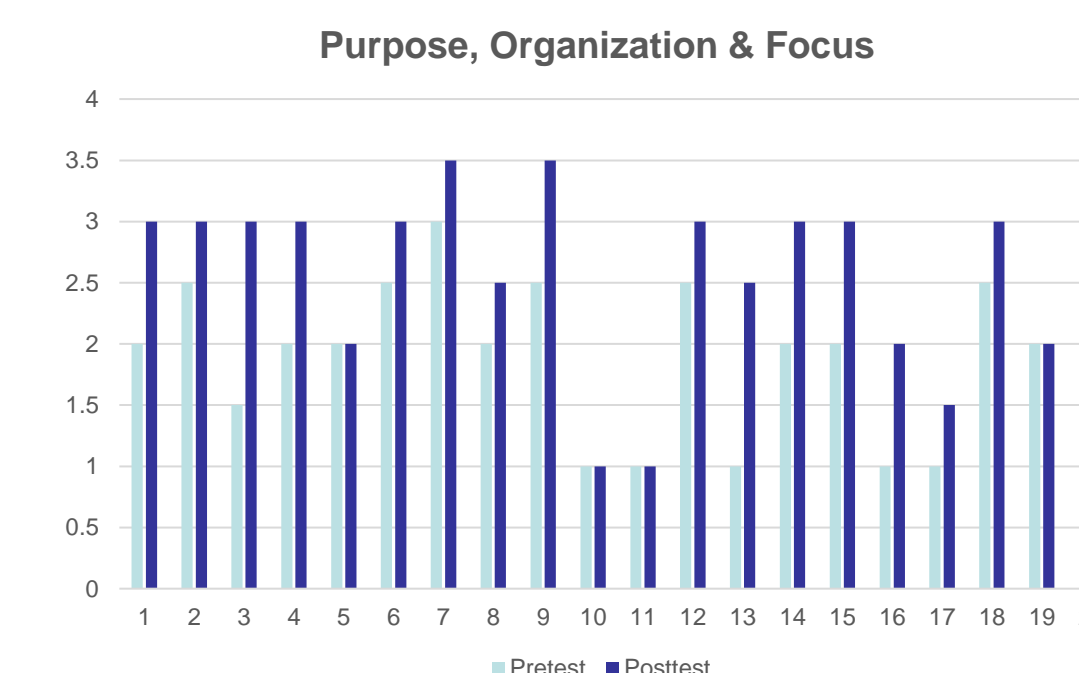
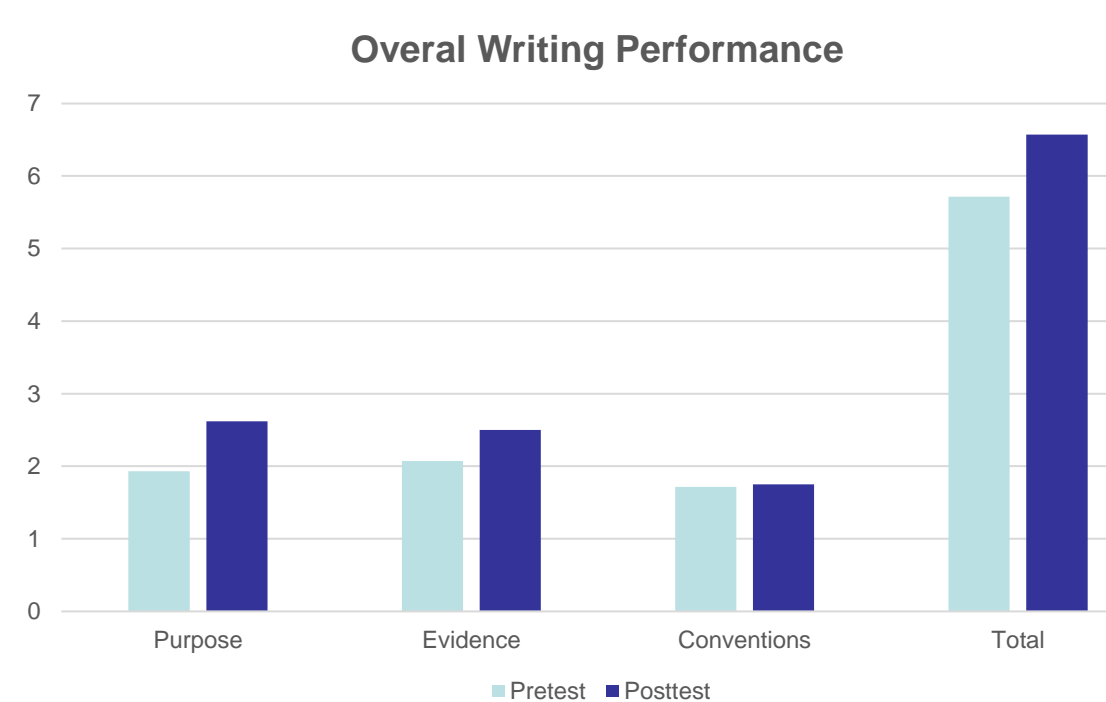


Figure 4



Conclusions

On the *Purpose, Focus, and Organization* domain, scores varied between 1 and 3.5 (M=2.62) which indicates that some of the students' responses were somewhat sustained within purpose, audience, and task but may have included loosely related or extraneous material and a claim with an inconsistent organizational structure while other students' responses were adequately sustained and generally focused within purpose, audience, and task and included a clear claim and distinct organizational structure with a sense of completeness.

On the *Evidence and Elaboration* domain, scores also varied between 1 and 3.5 (M=2.5) indicating that some students provided uneven, cursory support/evidence for the writer's claim that includes partial use of sources, facts, and details, while other students provided adequate support, citing evidence for the writer's claim that includes the use of sources, facts, and details.

No significant gains were made in the *Conventions of Standard English* domain (M= 1.76). The majority of the students in the study spoke a dialect or language other than Standard English in their everyday lives (i.e., African American English, Haitian Creole. or Spanish), an essential component of their identities. The students would need specific grammar instruction to help them meet the requirements of the revised standards. Godley, Carpenter, & Werner (2007) believe that literacy educators need to develop a grammar instructional approach that recognizes language variations and students' existing knowledge about language, to facilitate the reading and writing skills of students who speak a dialect other than Standard English.

Bibliography

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