The Use of Oral Storytelling in the Pre-Writing Stage

JESSICA MOSTOWSKI

Abstract

The writing process can be challenging for some students and can lead to frustration and work that is of lower quality. For educators, student frustration can be difficult to overcome. This study draws upon previous studies that investigate storytelling and oral communication in the pre-writing stage and make use of interviews, questionnaires, writing samples, and recordings of students who have been introduced to this intervention. The goal is to motivate students through the use of this strategy in order to produce higher quality work. The effects on the amount and quality of writing are examined.

Introduction

When I began working at my current school, it became apparent that teachers are faced with the challenge of motivating students to improve upon their literacy skills, especially in the area of writing. For some students, the writing process can be challenging and frustrating; potentially resulting in a final piece that is low in quality in comparison to mandated standards (Dunn & Finley, 2010; Thomas, 2010). Through my experiences as teacher and student, I have been a witness to the frustration of trying to write down thoughts on paper. When I ask my students what they want to write about, they often answer me with lengthy, detailed ideas orally; however, they struggle to write those very ideas on paper or on the computer.

As a beginning teacher, I wanted to learn more about this challenge: to learn how to motivate students to write and improve their writing. This led me to conduct research on storytelling and story writing. This paper examines the effects of oral storytelling with peers prior to writing on the amount and quality of writing in a grade four classroom. In the context of this research study, I define oral storytelling as the oral communication between students following the reading of a story where they talk about narratives that they would like to write.

This study investigates the following research questions:

1) How do oral storytelling and pre-writing discussion influence the quality of a final written text?
2) How do oral storytelling and pre-writing discussion affect reluctant writers’ attitudes towards the writing process?

Literature Review

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2008) in Canada explains that students in junior divisions (grades 4 to 6) draw upon their own experiences with various texts to “generate ideas, organize their thinking, and compose their writing pieces” (p. 10). In the pre-writing stage, an element of oral exchange among students and teacher must be present, as talking enables students to “plan and assess their ideas, apply their thinking, and experiment with the content of phrases, sentences, and paragraphs” (pp. 10-11). Talk between students is essential in the pre-writing stage because it is a form of rehearsal prior to writing that motivates writers and their desire to improve their writing (Campbell & Hlusek, 2010, p. 2). By talking to their peers,
students can make personal connections and lay the foundation for the writing. They also receive immediate feedback from their peers and become aware of the impact that their text has on others. This motivates students to continue to write (Graves, Tuyay, & Green, 2004, p. 91).

By first creating their story orally, students can build on depth and detail. They gain from hearing the ideas of other students, as explained by a student in Campbell and Hlusek’s (2010) research: “I get ideas when I listen to a story first. And when I tell my story to my friends, they say ‘You can add this…’ And when I listen to their stories, I get ideas for my story” (p. 3). It is the building of ideas orally that will help to construct a detailed, coherent, and creative story in written form.

Campbell and Hlusek (2009) discuss studies that have been conducted to support the use of writer’s workshop, which entails whole-class instruction, targeted teaching, and both independent writing time and peer or student-teacher conferencing (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). Both Campbell and Hlusek (2009) and Dunn and Finley (2010) extend this model as outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Models extending writers’ workshop to include oral storytelling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campbell and Hlusek, 2009</th>
<th>Dunn and Finley, 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extend writer’s workshop to include:</td>
<td>Extend writer’s workshop to include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• storytelling</td>
<td>• reading published books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• talking</td>
<td>• ask, reflect, text strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• oral rehearsal</td>
<td>• visual arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• sharing time</td>
<td>• drawing on story ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• art/drama during oral storytelling and discussion</td>
<td>• writing-assistance software</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These models incorporate “oral writing”, which is the process of speaking to others while planning and writing texts (Van Woerkum, 2007, p. 197). In this paper, I show how I incorporated the strategies into my grade four writing program.

Research Methods

Participants

The research involved six grade four students who volunteered to participate in the study and were identified by their teacher as reluctant writers. Reluctant writers, for the purpose of this research, refers to writers who have difficulty writing and/or need to be persuaded to write for a school assignment (both those that enjoy and dislike writing). The group was composed of three female students and three male students. Students had previous experience with writing narrative pieces in their homeroom class, as indicated by both the students and their homeroom teacher. The students and I met each day for a 40 minute period for ten consecutive school days. This cycle was repeated once again.

Teaching Intervention

Students were given a questionnaire and were interviewed. Each included open-ended questions, exploring students’ feelings and perceptions about writing and the writing process (see appendix A).
Next, students were taught several lessons on what constitutes a narrative piece and how to write a narrative. Narrative writing was modeled and shared. After explicitly teaching students about narrative writing, students were asked to produce a written narrative piece on a topic of their choice, which served as a basis of comparison for this study. Students were asked, through a conference, to describe how they felt about writing this narrative piece, what process they went through to produce this piece, and what strategies they thought helped and/or would help them to create a high quality, detailed piece.

The strategy of storytelling and oral discussion in the pre-writing stage was subsequently introduced to students for the first time. The first session involved reading a book that coincided with the topic for the narrative they were to write. Entitled, The Twins and the Time Machine (Rabley, 2008), the book described the imaginative adventures of two twins travelling through a time machine into different countries during various historical time periods. During this session, students were invited to brainstorm ideas and meet with their peers to discuss their ideas and storyline orally. To promote students’ creative process and help them cultivate the details of their story, I provided materials for drawing, for creating visual scenes, and for acting, as well as electronic devices. As they continued to develop and redevelop their story, while drawing on the input of their peers, I invited students to make notes, should they choose to, in order to recall their story.

The following is an outline of the structure of each subsequent 40 minute period:

- student-peer rehearsal (oral discussion, telling of stories, and/or building of ideas)
- sustained writing
- sharing time (development/redevelopment of ideas and stories)
- teacher-student conference (student explains what their written piece is about, writing progress, next steps)

After completing their second piece, students reflected upon the storytelling and writing process and compared their original piece to this piece, paying attention to quality, detail, and level of frustration or ease. This was done through a discussion period (see appendix B). I evaluated both pieces and provided feedback to the students. Subsequently, the second 10 day cycle began, following the same structure as the first cycle.

**Data Collection**

Throughout the study, data collection was ongoing, as students were asked to reflect on how they felt, the storytelling experience and their writing processes through questionnaires, interviews, and conferences. Students’ conversations were recorded. The recordings were transcribed to provide further data for analysis. Observational notes and discussion notes were made regarding students’ conversations and strategies employed by students throughout the oral storytelling process. Both pieces were examined to analyze the similarities and/or differences between the two narrative pieces.

**Data Analysis**

Once the 2 ten-day cycles were completed, I summarized what students said, creating categories that described the patterns of student responses. I analyzed the transcribed student conversations and questionnaires, in order to critique the effectiveness of storytelling and oral communication with peers and to determine if frustrations were dispelled. The two written narrative pieces were assessed using rubrics provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education (see appendix C). A mark was assigned to each piece and was part of an overall average calculated.
for the purpose of analysis. The quality and quantity of the pieces were analyzed. I not only evaluated grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and spelling, but also closely examined the development and detail of ideas and the narrative format. Moreover, I looked for evidence of an introduction, character development, setting, plot/conflict, story events, resolution, and dialogue. For the purpose of analysis, I allocated one point to each occurrence and tabulated this information. This allowed me to analyze any similarities and/or differences that existed between the pieces in relation to these elements.

**Findings**

**Quality of Writing**

The average mark of students’ work increased from 50.1% (an average of level 1 writing) on the initial narrative piece to 60% (an average of level 2 writing) on the narrative piece that involved storytelling and oral discussion (each piece of writing was given a mark out of 100% and was used to calculate the average). The quality of both written narrative pieces was low, in terms of development of ideas, development of story, story details, narrative structure and components, and vocabulary and sentence use, but I did see improvements in the second narrative. The quantity of the written work increased substantially from an average of 57.8 words per narrative piece in the initial work to 127.6 words per narrative piece in the second work. My results are summarized in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Length (# of Words)</th>
<th>Length (# of Sentences)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Narrative 1</td>
<td>Narrative 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 2</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 2</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While examining the initial narrative piece, it was evident that all of the students were struggling with grade-appropriate grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and spelling. Sentence formulation was below Ontario provincial expectations for grade 4 and the ideas that were written by students did not flow in a logical and structurally coherent manner. One student wrote,

[...]the storey of my Book is The kid in Romin Time. Hes a traned Robot Hoo has a wife shes a micr wav [microwave] Roc it knees tow heds. He went Home.

This student included setting and characters, but did not go on to explain a problem/conflict or a resolution. The storyline was very abrupt towards the end and most of the sentences did not connect to an overlying storyline. This was a similar trend that arose in the majority of students’ initial narrative pieces, as the story events tended to include details that did not correspond with the rest of the story. The students made use of random sentences that did not contribute to the overall storyline.
After reading *The Twins and the Time Machine* (Rabley, 2008) and going through the storytelling process, the above mentioned student’s second narrative piece was better developed. The storyline was detailed, ideas were expressed, and all of the elements of a narrative story were evident. One paragraph from the student’s story read:

[…] so they tried on some shoes [shoes] and found a button on one so they pressed it and it brought them to a deserted island where there are mooses [monkeys] in palm trees eating bananas and throwing Coconuts and crabs that pinch and big whales that will swallow you Hole but Jimmy found some drift wood and built a boat [built a boat] and sailed away…

This building-on of ideas within the story allowed the student to develop the character, plot, setting, problem, and resolution, most of which were lacking in the first written narrative. Similar trends were found when comparing all participating students’ written narratives. These two examples attest to the difference in the quality of student written work.

Moving from the first narrative to the second piece, students included more details around plot and storytelling techniques. In the first narrative piece, only one student included a plot/conflict in their story. This student did not end the story with a resolution of any sort. In the second narrative piece, three students included a plot/conflict in their story and two of these students tied in a resolution that gave closure to their story. Two students used sound effects, “BOOM!” “Gaaa!” in their second narrative piece, which brought a sense of excitement and emotion to the story. Moreover, four students included dialogue in their second narrative piece, even though they did not format it correctly. None of the students employed dialogue in their initial pieces.

Their writing processes changed, as they drew pictures and discussed their ideas prior to writing. All students participating in the study opted to write using paper and pencil as opposed to typing on the computer. Five students drew their ideas in the pre-writing stage and used these visual representations to tell their story to their peers. If they decided to change an aspect in their story, they also adjusted the image to correspond to their new storyline. Nobody chose to act or use other materials (clay, construction paper, white paper, scissors, glue gun/glue, felt, cardboard, markers, crayons, pastels, electronic devices). The students included ideas generated from reading the book, as well as from their peers. Students had discussions, changed their mind, reworked their ideas, discussed further with peers, continued their story, wrote down some of their thoughts to that point, went back and read them, changed ideas, drew more pictures, wrote something else down, and so forth. The process was not fixed, which allowed them to continually develop and redevelop their story throughout the entire writing cycle. One student explained: “I could think of an idea, write it down, go back to it. Before I would just write and edit at the end. But really I didn’t edit it because I do not like to mess up my work, what was already written.” The collected data indicates that prior to the implementation of this writing process, students did not focus on editing their work.

**Pre-Writing Discussion**

During pre-writing, rehearsal, and sharing time prior to writing the second narrative piece, all of the students’ discussions were highly developed and structured and students made use of all components of a narrative story. They all built upon each other’s ideas and looked to one another for support. One student suggested to another: “Perhaps the two twins could have animals. The animals could be posh and spoiled by the owners due to the fact that the owners are fancy and rich with a big pool. Oh and they have butlers and maids, but they treat them very
nicely.” In my observation notes, I wrote that the students considered the input of their peers and made a choice to apply it to their work or extend the suggestions, which affected the quality of their final written piece.

As shown in Figure 2, in their second narrative piece, it was evident that all students made personal connections not only to the book that was read, but also connections to one another and the story they were writing. Reading stories prior to writing, followed by discussion, not only accessed the prior knowledge of students and enabled them to make connections, but also contributed to their knowledge bank. Through the reading of a story, students had the potential to learn something new from the story. The storyline could have piqued their interest in a topic that they may have wanted to research further and write about, as well. Reading a story also gave them a focus to base their topic choice on and had the potential to increase the quality of their final written work.

**Figure 2: Characteristics of Students’ Second Narratives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Visuals</th>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Plot/Conflict</th>
<th>Story Events</th>
<th>Resolution</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male 1</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 2</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 3</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 2</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 3</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Students’ attitudes towards writing**

In the initial questionnaire and interview regarding previous writing experiences, perceptions about writing, and motivation, one male student indicated that he liked to write, two female students indicated that they liked to write sometimes, and one female and two male students indicated that they did not like to write at all. Out of all of these students, two males and two females found writing to be a difficult task, one male student found it to be an easy task, and one female student found it to be both easy and difficult at the same time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you like to write?</th>
<th>Do you feel that writing is a difficult or easy task?</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Writing is a difficult task</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Writing is an easy task</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Writing is both easy &amp; difficult</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When describing what they found difficult about writing, students explained that they do not like to write, they are not good at spelling, cannot remember words and information to write down, and that they do not like to edit and redo their work. Five of the students describe their past writing experiences and the writing process as “Not great,” or “Do not like it, it’s hard and
The students all agreed that they found writing easy when, as explained by one student: “[they] could write whatever [they] wanted to and when the topic is fun.” One student shared that he is “getting better at writing than in the past.”

A reoccurring trend was that students enjoyed writing when they got to do what they wanted and chose their own topic, as well as when they had the opportunity to write about something they knew about and had a personal connection. For example, one student explained:

I love to write about hockey because it is my favourite sport and the best sport in the whole wide world. I also play hockey and watch it on television. It’s easy for me to think of ideas to write and create a story about something to do with hockey. I can only write these types of stories at home, not at school […] because at school we have to write about boring topics so I hate school writing and I do bad in it.

Moreover, when asked what motivates them to write, the students’ responses ranged from “nothing motivates me, I hate writing” to “sometimes my teacher motivates me” to “writing about something interesting or when I have a good idea that I want to remember I might write it down.”

While students wrote their initial narrative piece, I observed frustration in everyone. They struggled to write the story from beginning to end. They were often distracted by other things around the room and kept stating that they “don’t know what to write, there is nothing interesting to write about.” One student, after writing a few words down, crumpled her paper into a ball and threw it in the garbage, yelling, “Writing sucks! Why do we have to do this all the time in school?” Four of the students sat in their seat quietly staring into space. I asked them what they were thinking about and all of them indicated that they were trying to think of something to write, but “could not think of ideas” and “if [they] did think of something, it was not worth putting down on paper.” Students were given five days to write this piece, but indicated that they were done on the second and third day.

When asked to describe their feelings and the process through which they went to write this piece, five of the students affirmed that they did not enjoy writing it, even though they could write about a topic of their choice. They “did not like to write no matter what in school.” One student enjoyed writing this piece because he wrote about a topic of interest. They all “began with an introduction, middle, and conclusion. [They] then looked at their work, but not really, it’s what we are supposed to do usually, but nobody does it.” I asked if they made modifications to their written work as they were writing; they all indicated that they did not change what they wrote once they wrote it down: “That would be like starting a whole new story and it would take too long.”

Once the storytelling process was introduced to students, I immediately noticed a difference in their attitude towards writing because they had references and connections from the book, were able to discuss ideas with peers, and developed their story orally first before writing it down. “Oh I really like what I just wrote.” This statement shows that their confidence levels increased as they became proud of their work and continually wanted to share it with their peers and with me. The rehearsal and sharing time contributed to student motivation to write as they had an audience to share with and were given immediate feedback to make use of. The students wanted to write down their ideas to remember and share them. Their conversations were extensive and detailed and they were interested in and excited about what they wanted to write about, as well as what their peers were writing. I heard students say to each other: “Listen to my story please. I really want to share my ideas so far with you,” and “I am really excited that I have
this great story to tell you.” It was also evident that students became part of the story as they made sounds out loud while writing.

In our final discussion about the two writing processes, the students all affirmed that they preferred writing after storytelling and orally telling stories with peers as opposed to just writing because it “helped [them] to think of ideas so that [they] can have something to write about.” One student said, “Sharing stories with my friends helps because I can say a story and my friend can add more. If I like my friend’s idea I can use it or change it and build more ideas.” Similarly, another student explained that “telling my story to my friends allows me to be proud of my work and makes me want to write because I know what I will write will be good.”

Conclusions

The oral storytelling and pre-writing discussion experience helped my grade 4 students to develop an appreciation for the writing process and to enjoy writing. This research attests to the effectiveness of the use of oral communication in various forms, including storytelling, particularly for reluctant writers. This experience can help educators support students, like the students in this study, who are faced with the task of making an important transition from oral to written. The process of oral storytelling and communication throughout the writing process provided students with the opportunity to develop and redevelop their ideas, while at the same time building a sense of confidence and authorship.

References


Author Biography
Jessica Mostowski currently teaches French as a Second Language to students in grades 1 to 6. At the same time, Jessica is working toward a Master of Education degree in Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning at OISE. She is passionate about language learning and literacy development. Some of Jessica’s research interests include multiliteracies, literacy education, and the use of technology in education.

Appendix A

Students are asked the following questions:

1. Do you like to write? (Yes, Sometimes, No)
2. Do you feel that writing is a difficult or easy task? (Writing is a difficult task, writing is an easy task, writing is both an easy and difficult task)
3. If you feel writing is a difficult task, what about it do you find difficult?
4. If you feel writing is an easy task, what about it do you find easy?
5. Thinking about your writing experiences in the past, how do you feel about writing and the writing process?
6. When do you enjoy writing (for what purpose), if applicable?
7. What do you enjoy writing about, if applicable?
8. When do you not enjoy writing (for what purpose), if applicable?
9. What do you not enjoy writing about, if applicable?
10. What motivates you to write?

Appendix B

Students are asked the following questions:

1. Do you like to write? (Yes, Sometimes, No)
2. Do you feel that writing is a difficult or easy task? (Writing is a difficult task, writing is an easy task, writing is both an easy and difficult task)
3. Think about your feelings and the process you went through when you wrote your initial story. Now, think about your feelings and the process you went through to write your final piece after storytelling and orally communicating before and during writing. Do you think that writing was easier, more difficult, or the same?
4. When we did not read a book prior to writing, was it easy or difficult to write?
5. Do you think your initial work or your final work was better in terms of quality?
6. Do you think your initial work or your final work was better in terms of quantity?
7. Does storytelling help you to write?
8. Does talking to others help you write?
9. Do you like to write after you have read or listened to a book being read?
10. Do you like to write when you have the chance to speak with others?
11. When writing a story in the future, would you choose to use storytelling?
12. When writing a story in the future, would you choose to talk with others throughout the writing process?

Students are asked to explain their answers. When necessary, I ask additional questions to extend upon student responses.

Appendix C

Rubrics based on Ontario Ministry of Education Language Arts Curriculum: