
# The Effect of Explicit Instruction with Writing Conventions Among Preservice Teachers

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**Abstract**

Preservice teachers require both personal knowledge and pedagogical understandings with written conventions. Concern with preservice teachers' inability to demonstrate proficiency with written conventions prompted this study. This study utilized a pretest/posttest design, and participants' were preservice teachers enrolled in a teacher education program. Participants completed five professor-created lessons aimed to develop personal knowledge with written conventions. Findings showed statistical significance regarding participants' personal knowledge after receiving explicit instruction with written conventions.

Writing conventions, also referred as grammar, was defined as "the set of rules that describes how words and groups of words can be arranged to form sentences in a particular language" (Cowan, 2008, p. 3). Cowan stressed that the ability to teach written conventions requires much more than fluency with the English language. Rather, teachers of written conventions require "conscious knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language" (p. 2).

Several researchers have shown the importance of teachers possessing a thorough understanding of written conventions in order to develop their students' knowledge and skills related to the proper use of written conventions (e.g., Hadjioannou & Hutchinson, 2010; Meyer, 2003), especially when teaching struggling learners (Moats, 1994). Borg (2001) asserted that teacher education programs must include multiple learning experiences aimed to advance and sustain preservice teachers' awareness of their knowledge of written conventions, as well as how this knowledge will affect their ability to teach written conventions. In this same manner, Myhill and Watson (2013) purported that knowledge about written conventions is not sufficient by itself. Preservice teachers must also possess pedagogical understandings regarding the instruction of written conventions.

The impetus for this study derived from a shared concern among faculty within a teacher education program: preservice teachers' lack of proficiency with use of conventions in their writings. Undergraduate students enrolled in this university's teacher education program complete 12 hours of English courses and nine hours of courses identified as writing intensive as part of their prescribed degree plan. These courses, in addition to the learning experiences within all other

required courses, should ideally build preservice teachers' proficiency with concepts related to proper use of written conventions. Of greater concern is the fact that these preservice teachers seek certification at the elementary level, as well as certification to work with English language learners. Therefore, these preservice teachers will eventually be teachers of written conventions to young students and nonnative English speakers.

Clearly, effective teachers of written conventions require both personal knowledge and pedagogical understandings related to instruction (Mather, Bos, & Babur, 2001; Moats, 1994; Myhill & Watson, 2013). Based on the aforementioned assertions of Borg (2001) and Myhill and Watson (2013), the researcher posited that learning written conventions through meaningful and relevant learning experiences was an important piece for preservice teachers enrolled in this teacher education program. With this in mind, this study sought to determine the effect of explicit instruction with written conventions embedded within the context of a language arts methods course on preservice teachers' personal knowledge.

## Methodology

Participants of this study consisted of 71 undergraduate students enrolled in a teacher education program at a public state university. All participants were classified as seniors and seeking elementary-level teaching certification, as well as certification for teaching English language learners. Participants were enrolled in their final semester of university coursework.

At the time of this study, all participants had successfully completed a minimum of 99 hours of undergraduate coursework, of which 12 hours were English courses (two freshman-level English courses and two sophomore-level English courses) and six hours were courses identified as writing intensive. Writing intensive courses were selected courses within a program of study at the university aimed to achieve two purposes: (1) to improve the personal writing ability of students, and (2) to improve the professional writing ability of students within their program of study. At the time of this study, all participants were enrolled in a third writing intensive course, which was related to the implementation of language arts instruction at the elementary and middle grade levels. The content of this course seemed highly appropriate to achieve the purpose of this study.

This study utilized a pretest/posttest design, with which data would be measured with a t Test to determine if statistical significance was present. The pretest was administered at the beginning of the semester, before any formal instruction took place. The posttest was administered during finals at the end of the semester.

Throughout the semester, participants completed five lessons, which were developed as learning modules and delivered through Blackboard, a Web-based learning management system. Each participant had individual access to the professor-created learning modules, and each learning module was accessible during a specified two-week window. Participants' activity within each learning module was accessed and tracked through administrative reports available in Blackboard.

The content of each learning module focused on a specific writing convention identified as part of the state-mandated English language arts curriculum for the elementary grades. The rationale behind this methodology was to ensure that participants were developing personal knowledge about specific writing conventions they would be expected to teach. The content of the five learning modules was as follows:

***Lesson 1 – Punctuation***
This learning module focused on the use of ending punctuation marks for sentences, commas, apostrophes, quotations marks, colon, and semicolon use.

***Lesson 2 – Spelling***
This learning module focused on common and advanced orthographic spelling patterns in English.

***Lesson 3 – Commonly Confused Words***
This learning module focused on proper use of commonly confused words, such as affect/effect.

***Lesson 4 – Parts of Speech and Sentence Structures***
This learning module focused on the various parts of speech and sentence structures (e.g., run-on sentences, sentence fragments).

***Lesson 5 – Capitalization***
This learning module focused on the written conventions associated with capitalization.

Each of the five learning modules followed a pattern aligned with the lesson cycle (shown in Figure 1), a lesson planning framework based upon best practices in teaching (McGregor, n.d.). As participants accessed a learning module, they were guided through the following sequential steps:

1. State Purpose and Focus: Participants were provided the objective for the learning module and interacted with a hook for engagement, such as a brief YouTube video clip.

2. Explanation of Content: Participants completed

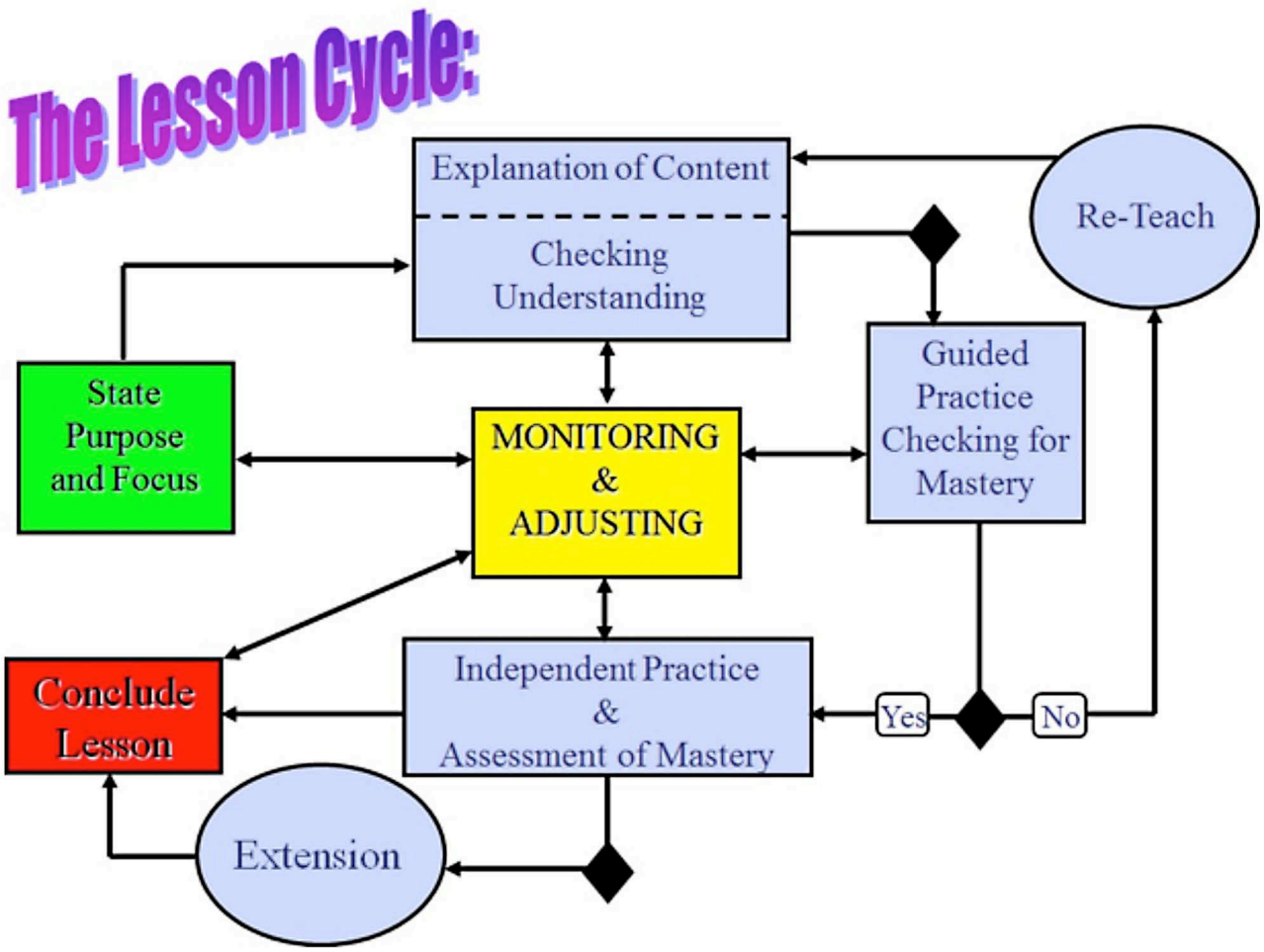


*Figure 1. Flowchart showing the instructional design of a lesson using the lesson cycle (McGregor, n.d.). The lesson cycle is highly structured and adapted from Madeline Hunter's (1994) Instructional Theory into Practice (ITIP) model. The ITIP model is a linear framework that involves teacher decision-making throughout the process. As shown in Figure 1, the lesson cycle shows the recursive process of instructional design.*

a professor-created task sheet and viewed a professor-created presentation. Task sheets and presentations focused on building participants' personal knowledge of the learning modules' content. While completing a task sheet, participants used valid and reliable references to gather information pertaining to the written conventions associated with the learning module, such as definitions and grammatical rules.

3. Guided Practice: Participants practiced applying knowledge and skills related to the content of the learning module through interactive games and quizzes accessible via the Internet.

4. Independent Practice: Participants completed a quiz within each learning module to demonstrate mastery of personal knowledge. Quizzes consisted of 20 questions in varied formats, including matching, multiple-choice, and fill-in-the-blank. Some of the quiz questions contained multiple responses; therefore, partial credit could be earned. Quizzes were timed, and participants were given a 30-minute window to complete the quiz associated with each learning module.

The format of the pretest and posttest was similar to the quizzes. The only difference was the pretest and posttest randomized questions related to all content: punctuation, spelling, commonly confused words, parts of speech and sentence structures, and capitalization.

## Results

Data for participants' performance on the quizzes, pretest, and posttest were entered into SPSS. Descriptive statistics were first analyzed to check for a normal distribution of data. One outlier was identified, and this datum was removed from further analyses. After removal of this outlier, the remaining data met all assumptions, and a Shapiro-Wilks test confirmed normality of data ($p > .05$).

**Summary of Quiz Performance**

| Measure | N | M | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lesson 1 | 70 | 90.45 | 17.96 |
| Lesson 2 | 70 | 90.35 | 10.26 |
| Lesson 3 | 70 | 90.92 | 9.95 |
| Lesson 4 | 70 | 93.94 | 9.33 |
| Lesson 5 | 70 | 91.00 | 20.38 |

*Table 1*

**Summary of Pretest and Posttest Performance**

| Measure | N | M | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pretest | 70 | 58.77 | 12.85 |
| Posttest | 70 | 70.21 | 11.95 |

*Table 2*

An initial analysis of data revealed high mean scores for each of the learning modules' quizzes (see Table 1). Further analyses were conducted using a paired samples t test to compare participants' performance with the pretest and posttest (see Table 2). The mean of the posttest (M = 70.21, SD = 11.95) was higher than the mean of the pretest (M = 58.77, SD = 12.85), $t(69) = -7.05$, $p = .00$, $d = .92$. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the pretest and posttest was -2.23 to -1.14. Therefore, the t test revealed a highly statistically significant difference between participants' pretest and posttest scores. Hence, the explicit instruction with written conventions had a significant effect on participants' personal knowledge with written conventions.

## Discussion

Faculty within a teacher education program shared a concern regarding preservice teachers' lack of proficiency with written conventions. The need for teachers to possess both personal knowledge and pedagogical understandings of written conventions is documented (Mather, Bos, & Babur, 2001; Moats, 1994; Myhill & Watson, 2013). Being that preservice teachers enrolled in this specific teacher education program were required to complete several courses that involve a great deal of writing, it seems reasonable to conclude that personal knowledge of written conventions was being developed. However, faculty noted that preservice teachers within this specific program were not able to consistently demonstrate application of personal knowledge with written conventions.

Although research exists that reported no statistically significant findings between explicit instruction with written conventions and students' writing (Petrosky, 1977), there is a body of research that showed instruction focused upon the improvement of students' writing was more effective than isolated skill-based instruction (e.g., Hillocks & Smith, 2003; Weaver, McNally, & Moerman, 2001). According to Feng and Powers (2005), the most optimal approach for instruction with written conventions involves crafting minilessons that are based upon errors present in students' writing. While error-based instruction with writing conventions is a meaningful and authentic instructional approach, Berger (2001) also emphasized the importance of a "scope and sequence that addresses many grammar conventions" and provides students with a "steady diet" of explicit instruction (p. 49).

Preservice teachers admitted to this teacher education program will eventually be certified to teach at the elementary level, as well as certified to teach English language learners. Consequently, it was imperative that preparation of these preservice teachers included development of both personal knowledge and pedagogical understandings of written conventions. At the time of this study, preservice teachers were enrolled in a course that covers content related to implementation of language arts instruction. Thus, with instruction already taking place that focused on pedagogical understandings, learning modules were created to focus upon development of personal knowledge simultaneously. As Patterson (2001) contended, instruction related to written conventions must be "a means through which students learn more about themselves, their texts, and the world around them" (p. 55).

Analyses of data showed that the explicit instruction with written conventions had a statistically significant effect on preservice teachers' personal knowledge of written conventions. This finding implies that a more concerted effort was needed to develop personal knowledge with written conventions among preservice teachers. However, this study took place in a senior-level course taken the semester before student teaching. Would preservice teachers be better served if this effort took place earlier in their educational program? Perhaps it would be more beneficial for preservice teachers to have time to sustain personal knowledge of written conventions while under the direction of faculty within the teacher education program. On the other hand, timing explicit instruction aimed towards personal development with written conventions to align with the delivery of content related to pedagogical understandings might be more meaningful. Further research would be needed to determine when delivery of explicit instruction with written conventions should take place with preservice teachers.

It should also be noted that much of the university coursework, such as the freshman and sophomore level English courses, preservice teachers completed are courses offered outside of the teacher education program. Therefore, university students from all other programs of study also enroll in these courses. It raises the question of concern with preservice teachers' use of written conventions unique to students enrolled in the teacher education program, or is the concern university-wide? With this in mind, the content of courses aimed at developing students' use of written conventions might also need to be examined and adapted to better meet students' needs.

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