

IMPROVING ORAL EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE THROUGH SCIENCE JOURNAL
WRITING

by

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STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this professional paper in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at Montana State University, I agree that the MSSE Program shall make it available to borrowers under rules of the program.

Jacob Thompson-Krug

July 2013

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ABSTRACT

In this investigation science journal writing was implemented with the purpose of improving student oral expressive language in small group discussion settings. Students wrote a response to a prompt in their journals and later discussed their answer with the group. Although students did not show much improvement in their overall writing and speaking ability, the special education students in the class showed an increase in speaking in the last three weeks of the treatment period. When surveyed, students felt more organized writing their thoughts down prior to speaking, and many preferred talking rather than writing. Understanding that students are eager to speak in class, yet feel more comfortable writing ideas down first, can provide educators with insight as to how to further develop speaking skills.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

I teach special education at Millard West High School in Omaha, Nebraska. The school is located in suburban West Omaha and has a population of 2,297 students, of whom 89.5% are Caucasian. Hispanic students represent 4.1% of the population and Asian students represent 3.1% of the population. Of the over 2,000 students in the school, African-American students represent only 1.3% of the population while students identified as being two or more races represent 1.6% of the population (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012). There were 23 high school students in my inclusion biology class. It consisted of 18 freshman and 5 sophomore students, 12 of who were males and 11 were females. The students had been introduced to the basic elements of biology and had studied biochemistry and microbiology when this study began. As a special education teacher in a co-taught general education biology class, it was my job to reach all learners by providing them with instruction that gave them the best opportunity to be successful. This included especially the ten students in my class with Individualized Education Programs (IEP), which outline specific learning strategies to meet the individual student's needs. An IEP document provides an opportunity for teachers, parents, school administrators, related services personnel, and sometimes students to collaborate in order to increase educational results for students with disabilities (United States Department of Education, 2000). The special education disability verification of the ten students in my biology class included speech language impairment (SLI), specific learning disability (SLD), and behavior disorder (BD) (Figure 1).

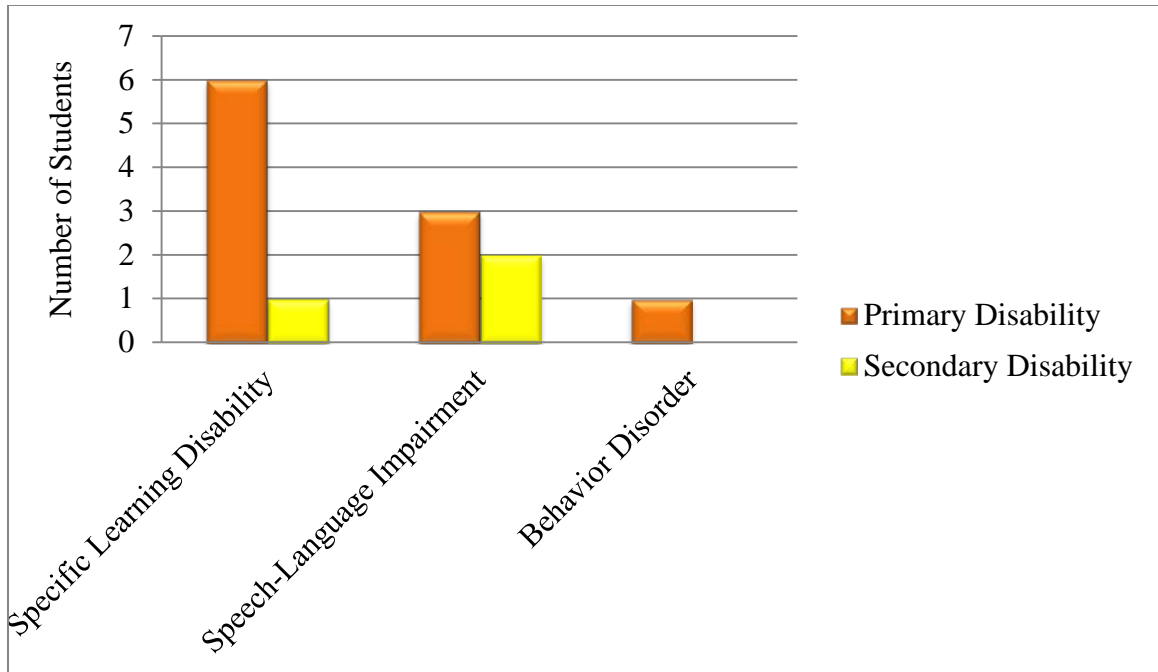


Figure 1. Student special education disability verification, ($N = 10$).

Taking into account the students' verification, the amount of support depended on the lesson and type of activity they were participating in on a particular day. Students in this inclusion class received one-on-one instruction as needed and participated in small group activities to help reinforce science concepts they had difficulty learning. The availability of having a science content teacher and a special education teacher allowed these students to effectively learn the same material as students in the other biology classes. It was my concern that students who struggled with language skills, including listening and speaking, would not be able to communicate their knowledge on an everyday basis, giving a teacher the impression they were not learning. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the improvement in expressive language skills through application of writing skills in biology class.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Language disorders are considered the invisible disability because the challenges encountered often overlap with those found in learning disabilities (Algozzine, O'Shea, Stoddard, & Crews, 1988). Language disorders, also referred to as language impairments, affect students in any grade level, but classroom teachers may have difficulty identifying that as one of the reasons a student struggles. Students with poor receptive and expressive language skills can experience awkward social interactions and situations since communication is such an involved and interactive process. Understanding why a student is struggling with basic academic learning skills can be frustrating for teachers and students as the root cause could be related to a language deficit. For example, when performing writing tasks, the limited output of ideas and details could be a sign that a student has a writing disability, but it could also be an indicator that a student has a language impairment (Starling, Munro, Togher, & Arciuli, 2011). A speech-language therapist can help determine the learning problem and work collaboratively with the classroom teacher on various effective teaching strategies depending on the language deficit (Joseph, 1997).

Language impairment can be defined as a severe difficulty with the comprehension and usage of an individual's first language without the primary cause being an intellectual impairment, neurological damage or sensory damage such as hearing loss as an example (Starling et al., 2011). Language impairment can affect listening comprehension, spoken and written language, and can be categorized into receptive and expressive language disorders. Students without age-appropriate language skills may display behaviors in class such as reluctance to speak, problems explaining details, and

word-finding difficulties (Patchall & Hand, 1993). These issues can also cause problems for students in regards to comprehending information from lectures and books, non-verbal communication and cues, and understanding abstract language and ideas (Patchall & Hand, 1993). Lacking these communication skills can make school a challenge but also may create obstacles in social situations. Students with a language impairment commonly misinterpret what they are hearing and strain to recognize the messages in conversation (Joseph, 1997). As result of these receptive language deficits, students may deliver inappropriate responses required to maintain and continue conversations. Expressive language is impeded as students toil to find the right words to get their message across due to a limited and repetitious vocabulary (Starling et al., 2011).

Students who show deficits in comprehension and cognitive processing in writing also demonstrate the greatest difficulty in developing content about which to write (Bulgren, Marquis, Lenz, Schumaker, & Deschler, 2009). This includes students with language impairments, especially in written language, who tend to structure their writing in shorter lengths, and include more mechanical and grammatical errors (Mason, Kubina Jr., & Taft, 2010). Adolescents who struggle with these basic academic skills face an even more challenging path than most during secondary education. Insufficient writing strategies and the inability to effectively express ideas negatively affects a students' capacity to make the most of educational opportunities that aid learning and stimulates critical thinking (Mason, et al., 2010). Having a language impairment already puts an individual at a disadvantage, but lacking basic academic learning skills makes it even more difficult to overcome the challenges that are faced. Teachers have reported that educating students how to learn, in addition to teaching content, is a significant part of

their role as educators (Bulgren et al., 2009). Developing learning strategies and skills helps students with written language and ultimately improves their expressive language.

Improving writing skills improves expressive language, especially oral expression. Although writing is more complex and requires formal teaching, written and oral expression occur on the same processing field within the language centers of the brain (Gaon, 2001). Allowing students to write responses related to a specific question over a ten minute time period can promote free expression as students explain, reflect, and elaborate on what they know (Mason, et al., 2010). By not emphasizing writing mechanics, students have a better opportunity to focus on freely expressing their thoughts and ideas, in a way similar to expressing themselves orally. According to a study by Gaon that included language-impaired students as well as their peers, individuals felt more confident writing because of the lack of pressure to orally express themselves, which correlated to higher quality responses. If the students can comfortably communicate through writing, then the routine thought process can be easily translated to oral communication.

Expressive writing is usually done informally with no fear of judgment from others, giving individuals an opportunity to focus on making connections as well as clarifying their thoughts (Keys, 1999). This type of writing approach would even allow students who lack confidence with their writing skills the chance to record their thoughts and ideas. According to Rivard and Straw (2000), writing assists in the structure of knowledge. Incorporating writing in science has promoted the use of short free-writes, journals, questions, various forms of creative writing, and brief summaries (Keys, 1999). As critical as writing and speaking are to making personal connections with science

content, using those two instructional strategies should enhance learning through the development of both skills (Rivard & Straw, 2000). Incorporating written language into science and pairing it with oral language can link ideas from long term memory with new ideas, including the generative process of verbal language representations (Keys, 1999).

Through the application of writing skills and written language, students can improve their expressive language. Language impairment as a whole can be difficult to pinpoint as the reason students are not performing at age-appropriate levels. Teachers can work with the speech-language therapist on strategies to increase the levels of written and expressive language. Although they are two different tasks, they both require similar processing skills. Because more formal teaching is necessary to become a better writer, writing strategies, such as quick, written responses to specific questions and topics, can be taught to improve communication. Through the development of increased expressive language, adolescents can use the skills they learned to successfully maneuver the secondary education environment, both academically and socially.

METHODOLOGY

Journals were used as writing and discussion tools throughout each week during the treatment period. Students responded to prompts during warm-up activities related to one of the learning objectives for the week. The entries were made once a week during a six-week treatment period that focused on opinions and ideas so students had an opportunity to express themselves. Writing conventions and original thoughts were discussed before each writing opportunity until students understood the expectations. Students were asked to reflect and discuss their journal response with me and a group of

three or four of their peers. They were able to reread their answer as they were given the prompt again, but students had to close their journal prior to the discussion. By closing their journals, students were required to use their language skills as opposed to reading skills, allowing me to compare what they wrote to what they could tell me. As students navigated the steps for their written responses, I encouraged them to use those same skills during discussion. Since students had their journals closed during the discussion, I asked them to reflect and follow the same thought patterns they used when writing. My observations of their verbal responses, along with their oral interaction with peers, were recorded in a journal. At the end of each week, when students turned in their journals, I compared their thoughts to the ideas they verbally shared in class that I had recorded.

As students shared, I took notes of their small group discussion in a journal and would later complete the Speaking Assessment Rubric (Appendix A). Collaboration with the speech-language therapist was necessary when developing an appropriate rubric that most accurately identified areas of progress and need. Students were asked to share their responses with the group as I proctored the discussion and wrote down what they said. Groups were mixed based on gender and ability level, and students stayed with those same two to three members throughout the treatment period during their discussions. To measure what students wrote, I also completed the Writing Assessment Rubric (Appendix B). The rubric was used to assess the journal entry that corresponded to the week in which the student's expressive language skills were measured over the same prompt. This allowed me to directly compare their expressive and writing scores on the speaking and writing rubrics.

The survey, I Need Your Help, was administered to focus on the areas of organization of thoughts, preference for speaking over writing, and speaking participation (Appendix C). Each item was standardized on a scale from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1). This Likert-style survey was completed three times during the treatment period. The Progress Check Interview Questionnaire was the last method of data collection and was completed as written responses by students at the same times as the surveys (Appendix D). The survey and interview questions were given before the treatment, at the beginning of Week Four, and at the conclusion of the final treatment week. Interviews conducted at the beginning of the treatment provided a baseline of data that were compared to the interviews during Week Four and Week Six to help determine improvement, as well as confidence, in regards to oral expression. The interviews during the middle of the treatment period measured any changes that had occurred at that point. The questions focused on the comfort levels of students which could help indicate the degree of confidence they had in writing and speaking. I also wanted to know how their attitudes towards those skills may have changed during the treatment. I conducted the interviews and assured students that their grades in the class were not reflective of their responses to the interview questions. Interviews, journal entries, and rubrics were used to help determine if written expression can improve verbal expression (Table 1).

Table 1
Data Triangulation Matrix

Objectives	Data Source 1	Data Source 2	Data Source 3	Data Source 4
<i>Primary Objective:</i> 1. Oral Expression	Teacher Observations	Journal Discussion Rubric	I Need Your Help Survey	Progress Check Interviews
<i>Secondary Objectives:</i> 2. Written Expression	Student Journal Entry	Journal Discussion Rubric	I Need Your Help Survey	Progress Check Interviews
3. Student Confidence in Expressive Skills	I Need Your Help Survey	Progress Check Interviews	Teacher Journal Observations	Journal Discussion Rubric

DATA AND ANALYSIS

The study, *Improving Oral Expressive Language through Science Journal Writing*, provided qualitative data before, during and after students participated in the six week treatment. The data were analyzed to focus on three areas: Comparison of Writing to Speaking Scores, Thought Organization Prior to Speaking, and Student Speaking and Writing Preferences. Understanding the impact writing had on a student's speaking allowed me to compare the difference between the two skills while learning about student perception. A Likert-style pre- and post-survey ($N = 22$) was administered at the beginning of the program, at the beginning of Week Four, and also at the conclusion of the program in Week Six, along with open-ended written response interview questions ($N = 22$). Five possible responses to each Likert-style survey item were standardized on a scale from *Strongly Agree* (5) to *Strongly Disagree* (1). Student journal writing and

speaking was scored on a 0-4 scale once a week during the treatment period in order to measure any change between the two scores, ($N = 23$).

To compare writing and speaking scores, students were assessed each week using a writing rubric and a speaking rubric. The data were divided to analyze the 12 general education students and the 11 students with an IEP. When the average writing scores were compared to average speaking scores, the only improvement made was in Week One. During that time the average score out of a 4.00 scale for general education students increased from 3.42 on their written responses to 3.5 on their spoken responses and 2.72 on written responses to 3.00 on spoken responses for special education students. General education students only averaged a score lower than Week One's 3.42 writing score during Week Five when the average score was 3.33 (Figure 2). Special education students never averaged a writing score lower than 2.72 from Week One during the whole treatment period. From Weeks Two through Six, neither the general education population nor the special education population on average had a speaking score higher than their writing score (Figure 3).

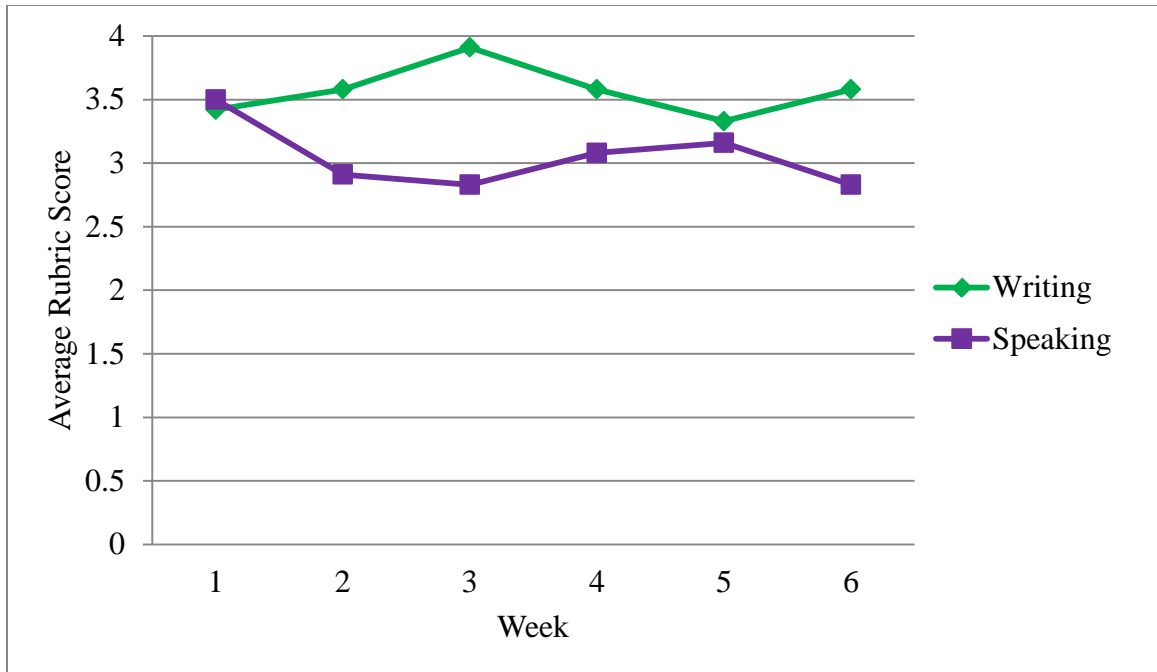


Figure 2. Average writing and speaking scores for general education students, ($N = 13$).

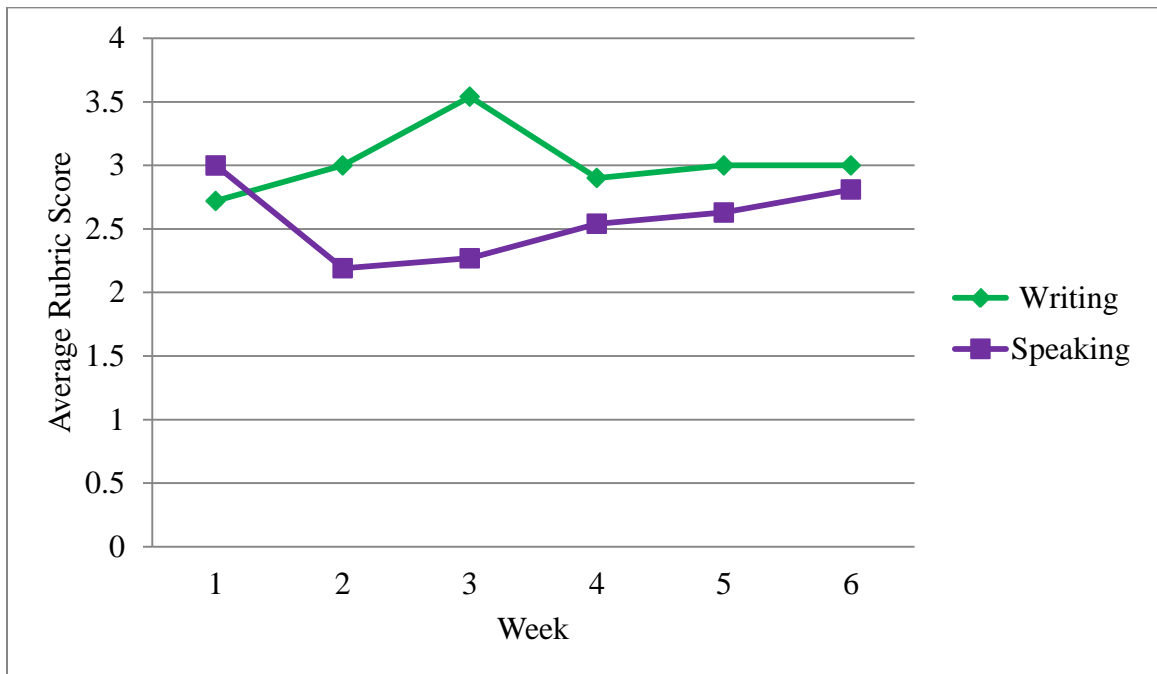


Figure 3. Average writing and speaking scores for special education students, ($N = 10$).

When calculating the difference by subtracting the writing score from the speaking score, the general education population and special education population both

showed improvement during the treatment period. During those six weeks, at least one special education student received a higher speaking score than writing score. The largest student increase occurred during Week One when 45% of the special education students had an improved difference in their score. The individuals in the general education program improved their percentage three times during the treatment period with the largest increase occurring during Week Six, with 17% individual improvement in their difference score. Special education students also showed the largest decrease when comparing the difference between their writing score and speaking score. While only 18% of those individuals had an improved difference score during Week One, 55% of special education students in the class scored worse on their speaking when compared to their writing during Weeks Two and Three. Weeks Three through Four resulted in more than 18% of the individuals performing worse on their difference score. General education students had their best difference scores during Week One with no declining scores. During Week Six, 55% of the general education students in the class had writing scores that dropped when compared to speaking scores (Figure 4).

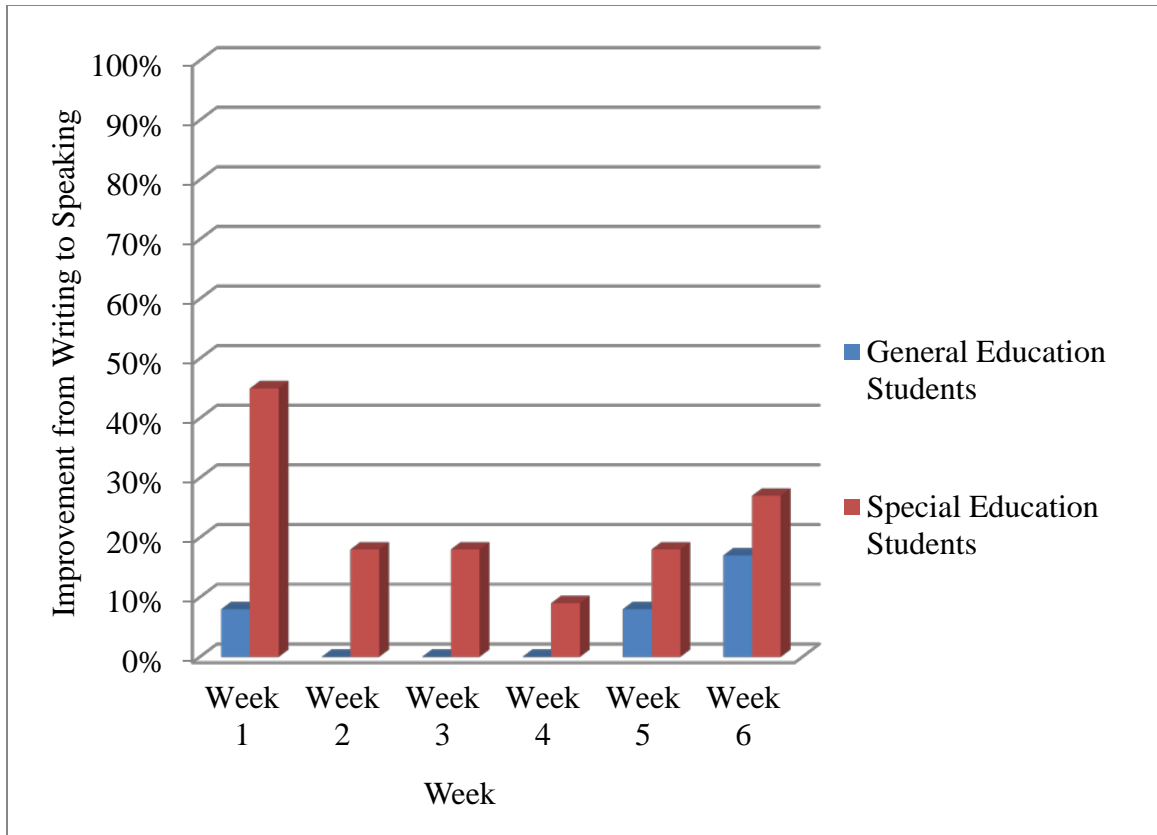


Figure 4. Improvement from writing to speaking of students, ($N = 23$).

Information regarding thought organization prior to speaking was collected using the survey *I Need Your Help*. At the beginning of the treatment, prior to any writing or speaking, a total of 63% of students *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that it was easier to organize their thoughts when they are written down while the remaining students were neutral about it. Seventy-three percent and 77% of students in Week Four and Week Six selected *strongly agree* and *agree* in regards to writing thoughts down. One way students benefited from writing their opinions in class was, “It made it easier to organize thoughts.” During Week Four and Week Six, though, 5% of students *disagreed* and another 5% *strongly disagreed* during the final week (Figure 5).

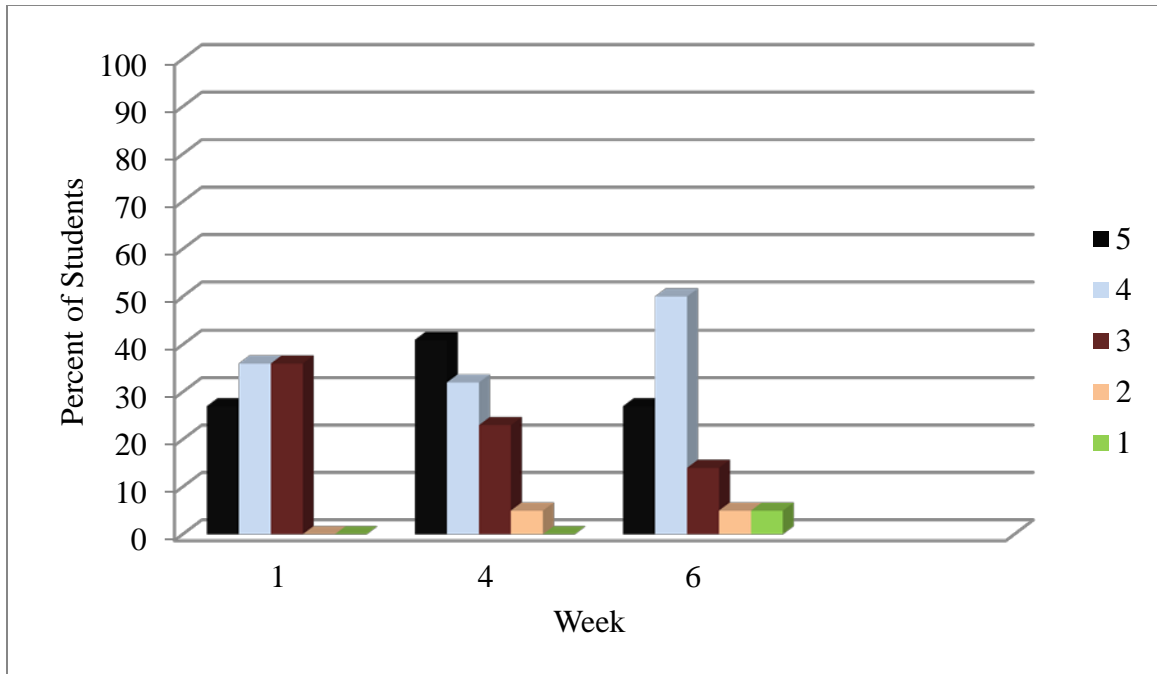


Figure 5. Students who found it easier to organize thoughts through writing, ($N = 23$). Note: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree.

During Week One, 55% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked if they had trouble organizing thoughts before speaking. One student felt, “I think of how fluid the sentence will go in my head.” Forty-one percent and 45% of students still *disagreed* in Week Four and Six respectively. “I just need to think before I speak,” said one student. The number of students who *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that had trouble organizing their thoughts before they speak dropped from 32% in Week One to only 27% who *agreed* in Week Four and 23% who *agreed* in Week Six (Figure 6).

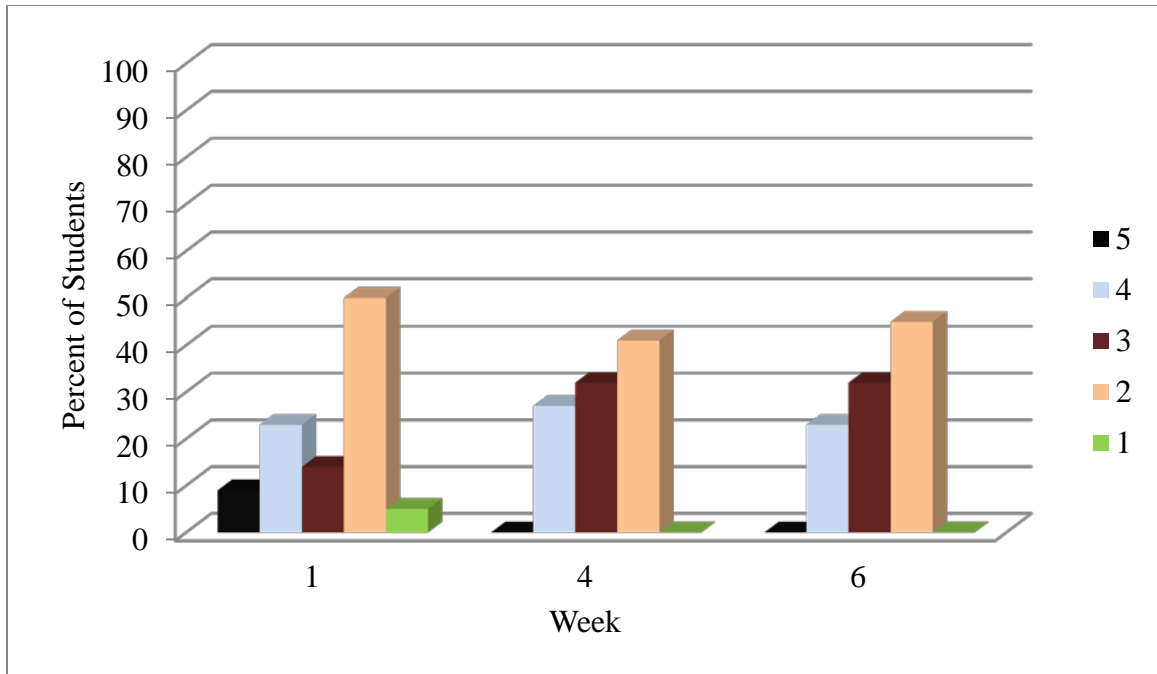


Figure 6. Student responses about organizing thoughts before speaking, ($N = 23$). Note: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree.

When given a choice, 50% of students *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that they would rather talk than write during Week One. That decreased to 37% of students who *strongly agreed* or *agreed* in Week Four, but by Week Six half of the students preferred talking rather than writing with 36% of the class who *strongly agreed*. “I like sharing my opinion with others and hearing their points of view.” said one student who prefers talking over writing. Another stated, “I become more confident in my answers.” The percentage of students who *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* were the same at Week One as they were at Week Six at 18% with a slight increase during Week Four when 23% of *disagreed*. One student said they sound “awkward” when they talk. “I just don’t like to talk at all,” said another student (Figure 7).

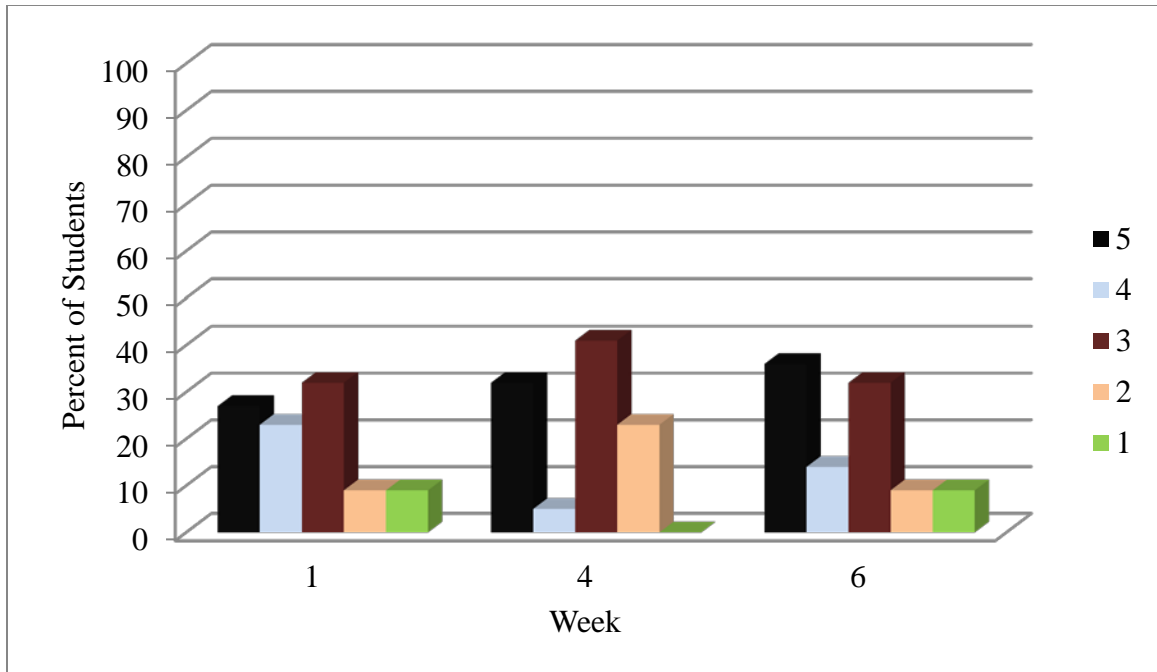


Figure 7. Students who would rather speak than write, ($N = 23$).

Note: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree.

Observations were collected through journaling during the discussion sessions, and a special note was made of those students who participated by saying something to the effect of “They already said what I was going to say.” These remarks were recorded as “No comments” which peaked during Week Three with a total of four students unwilling to share their written responses. During the first half of the treatment, students were still getting comfortable sharing their opinions. “People think I’m weird,” said one student. Another student stated, “I just like to not talk at all.” Within the last three weeks of the treatment, though, there was only one student who had nothing they wanted to contribute to the group (Figure 8). “By talking more, I’ve learned about some of the misunderstanding I’ve had about what we’re discussing,” said one student. Another student who feels they have benefited from talking about their opinion said, “Got to say what I wanted to say, feels good.” Students who shared their opinions, even if it may

have been similar to what another student had said, still benefited from doing so. “I have better speaking skills and better understanding of topic,” a student commented. One particular student who often appeared to lack focus during instruction demonstrated adequate knowledge over the topic during small group discussions when given the chance to speak and share their thoughts.

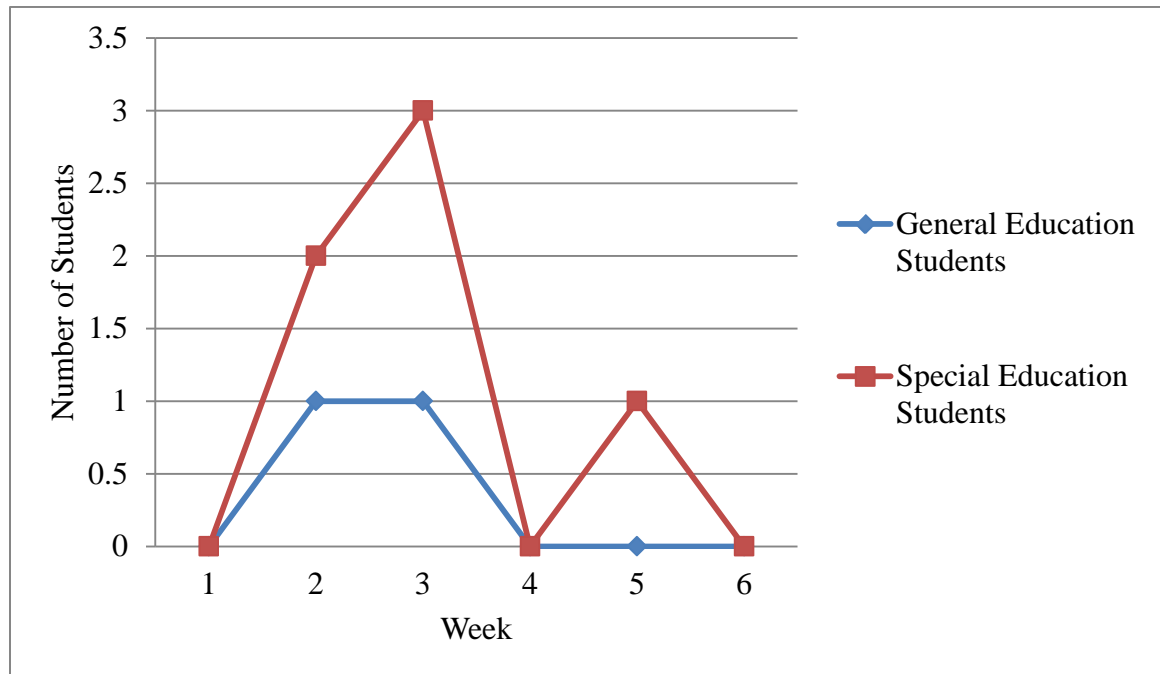


Figure 8. Number of students with no comment during discussion, ($N = 23$).

INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSION

Although the average weekly rubric scores did not show improvement in the difference between speaking and writing for the class as a whole, the number of individual special education students did show improvement from their speaking skills. These individuals may not have earned high scores but showed improvement when given the opportunity to write down responses prior to speaking. General education students did not show as much improvement, because many of them scored high on both the

writing and speaking rubrics at the beginning of the study. According to the *I Need Your Help* survey, a majority of the class felt that they were better able to organize their thoughts and ideas better when they were written down. This could help explain why special education students showed consistent improvement. By writing and being able to visualize the language of their ideas on paper, they could better understand what they would eventually want to verbally express.

As the treatment period continued, the number of students each week who felt that writing helped their thought organization increased. This correlates with the pattern of special education students who, beginning in Week Two, showed gradual improvement in their average speaking scores. The familiarity of the treatment also helped student comfort levels by understanding the process of the discussion groups. This also helped build relationships with me and with peers while students experienced the expectations of the treatment more clearly. Written responses became more detailed and discussions became more engaging. Students began to see the more they wrote down, the better prepared they would be to participate in the discussion group.

While students felt more organized when writing ideas down, a majority of the students were indifferent or did not think they had trouble organizing their thoughts before speaking. Lower speaking than writing scores showed otherwise, even though there was some improvement. The student survey responses are somewhat contradictory because the majority of students felt writing was beneficial to organizing thoughts yet they didn't believe they had any trouble organizing those thoughts before speaking. When given a choice of whether to speak or use their journal, an increasing number of students each week preferred talking over writing. This could be because to students not

wanting to take the required time and effort needed to write or due to an increase in speaking confidence.

One reason student confidence and speaking skills increased may have had to do with being comfortable in the setting in which they were asked to speak. Because students met with the same, small group of students during discussion each week, there may have been a good comfort level. Students became more willing to provide responses, even though they may have been incorrect. I provided no negative feedback after individual student responses, only thanking them for their participation. The consistency of the group members, as well as my facilitation of the discussions, gave students clear expectations that had a positive impact on their participation. Further studies and follow up surveys, as well as interviews of students are needed to better understand the reasoning behind their comfort levels.

VALUE

Students who struggle with language skills, as well as other special education students, are often at a disadvantage when it comes to expressing themselves. These individuals may lack confidence or feel embarrassed to speak due to a lack of thought organization. Not knowing how to phrase a question or a response can send the wrong message to a teacher who may be informally assessing student knowledge with prompts or discussions. By providing students the opportunity to organize their ideas through writing, they became more confident in what they were going to say when called upon. Students who would not have typically spoken aloud in class provided everyone in the group with unique insights. In typical inclusion classrooms, teachers and students could

be losing out on different points of view when possibly a third of the students are in special education and are too nervous to talk.

I had perceived some individuals as maybe not understanding the science content due to their lack of participation in class, but while facilitating the small group instruction, I was amazed at the ideas they had developed through their comprehension of the prompts over the material being studied. Whether students are working in groups, partners or talking in front of the class, my approach to engaging all students has changed to make them feel more comfortable and confident in their participation. I continue to provide students with time to write over prompts related to the current topics. If a large discussion occurs, or students are divided into smaller groups, everyone would have had an opportunity to organize their ideas regarding the subject. I have also begun to implement writing prompts to guide students through speaking in my smaller special education biology class. Those eight students all had certain deficits and specific needs but grew more comfortable expressing themselves during informal class discussions. This leads me to believe that writing down thoughts prior to speaking could be utilized in various classroom settings.

As an educator, this study provided me with a better understanding of how to make accommodations for students with language impairments. In order to do so, appropriate lesson planning must be made to help ensure participation from all types of students. Filled with thoughts, ideas, and opinions, students deserve an outlet where they can comfortably express themselves with confidence. Facilitating the small groups allowed me to build personal connections with students that fueled student confidence. Gaining insight into their content knowledge prevented me from having any

misconceptions about what they were learning. It can be challenging to build connections when instructing large groups of students, but by becoming more personable with students, it is possible to build strong, positive relationships.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SPEAKING ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

SPEAKING ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

NAME _____

DATE:

	4	3	2	1
Speaking	Thoughts are well organized, vocabulary retrieved and used appropriately, complete sentences, answer produced without hesitation, complex language used	Thoughts are mostly organized, some vocabulary retrieved and used appropriately, complete sentences, answer produced with some hesitation, some complex language used	Thoughts are somewhat organized, vocabulary retrieved but used incorrectly, complete sentences, answer produced with hesitation, simple language used	Thoughts are unorganized, no vocabulary retrieved or used appropriately, incomplete sentences, answer produced with hesitation, simple language used

DATE:

	4	3	2	1
Speaking	Thoughts are well organized, vocabulary retrieved and used appropriately, complete sentences, answer produced without hesitation, complex language used	Thoughts are mostly organized, some vocabulary retrieved and used appropriately, complete sentences, answer produced with some hesitation, some complex language used	Thoughts are somewhat organized, vocabulary retrieved but used incorrectly, complete sentences, answer produced with hesitation, simple language used	Thoughts are unorganized, no vocabulary retrieved or used appropriately, incomplete sentences, answer produced with hesitation, simple language used

APPENDIX B

WRITING ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

WRITING ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

NAME _____

DATE:

	4	3	2	1
Writing	Thoughts are well organized, vocabulary used appropriately, complete sentences, ideas compared and contrasted, complex language used	Thoughts are mostly organized, some vocabulary used appropriately, complete sentences, some ideas compared and contrasted, some complex language used	Thoughts are somewhat organized, vocabulary used incorrectly, complete sentences, no ideas compared or contrasted, simple language used	Thoughts are unorganized, no vocabulary used, incomplete sentences, no ideas compared or contrasted, simple language used

DATE:

Speaking	Thoughts are well organized, vocabulary retrieved and used appropriately, complete sentences, answer produced without hesitation, complex language used	Thoughts are mostly organized, some vocabulary retrieved and used appropriately, complete sentences, answer produced with some hesitation, some complex language used	Thoughts are somewhat organized, vocabulary retrieved but used incorrectly, complete sentences, answer produced with hesitation, simple language used	Thoughts are unorganized, no vocabulary retrieved or used appropriately, incomplete sentences, answer produced with hesitation, simple language used
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APPENDIX C

I NEED YOUR HELP SURVEY

I Need Your Help!

Please help me understand you better by honestly completing this survey.

5-Strongly Agree 4-Agree 3-Neutral 2-Disagree 1-Strongly Disagree

Writing

I enjoy writing 5 4 3 2 1

I have good writing skills 5 4 3 2 1

I want to improve my writing skills 5 4 3 2 1

It's easier to organize my thoughts when I write them down 5 4 3 2 1

I would rather write about my opinion than talk about it 5 4 3 2 1

Speaking

I like participating in class 5 4 3 2 1

I feel comfortable asking the teacher questions 5 4 3 2 1

I feel comfortable asking my classmates questions 5 4 3 2 1

I have trouble organizing my thoughts before I speak 5 4 3 2 1

I would rather talk about my opinion than write about it 5 4 3 2 1

Almost done...

APPENDIX D

PROGRESS CHECK

Progress Check Questions

Please answer the following questions.

How do you feel when the teacher asks you a question in front of the class?

How do you feel when the teacher asks you a question individually?

What is your first reaction when you have to work with someone that isn't a friend?

How have you benefited from talking about your opinion in class?

How have you benefited from writing about your opinion in class?

How do you feel you can improve your speaking skills?

How do you feel you can improve your writing skills?

What else would you like to share?

I will be asking you these questions after our discussion over your survey answers. These questions will help me learn more about you so I can become a better teacher, and you can become a better learner. Thank you!