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Interventions in the Written Expression of Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

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Abstract
Written expression represents one of the most demanding academic skills, as it integrates linguistic, cognitive, metacognitive, and affective processes. Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD) frequently experience persistent challenges in written language production, including deficits in spelling accuracy, limited syntactic complexity, difficulties in text organization, and reduced use of writing strategies. These difficulties often lead to lower writing quality, decreased self-efficacy, and avoidance of writing tasks. The present study provides a narrative review of theoretical models of written composition and research-based interventions designed to support the written expression of students with SLD. The review synthesizes findings from research in cognitive psychology, literacy education, and special education in order to examine the mechanisms underlying writing difficulties and identify instructional approaches that demonstrate empirical effectiveness. Particular emphasis is placed on explicit strategy instruction, the development of self-regulation skills, structured teaching of text organization, differentiated instructional practices, and the use of educational technology to reduce transcription barriers. Evidence from the literature suggests that systematic, structured, and metacognitively oriented instructional interventions can significantly improve the quality, coherence, and length of written texts produced by students with SLD. In addition, these interventions contribute to the development of writing self-efficacy and greater engagement in writing activities. The findings highlight the importance of integrating cognitive and pedagogical approaches in order to design effective instructional practices that support struggling writers in inclusive educational environments.

Keywords: Written Expression, Specific Learning Difficulties, Writing Instruction, Self-Regulation, Writing Interventions, Differentiated Instruction

1. Introduction

Written expression constitutes a fundamental pillar of school learning and academic success. The ability to produce coherent, organized, and functional written discourse is not limited to linguistic accuracy, but also includes the

capacity to plan, organize, revise, and adapt text to a specific communicative purpose. Writing functions as a tool for thinking, a means of representing knowledge, and a mechanism for constructing meaning. However, for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD), written production often constitutes an area of systematic failure. Students with SLD display difficulties that go beyond simple spelling accuracy. Deficits are observed in text planning, limited development of ideas, simplified syntactic structures, weak cohesion, and reduced revision ability. The increased cognitive load resulting from non-automated lower-level skills, such as spelling and graphomotor execution, limits the cognitive resources available for higher-order processes of organization and argumentation (Berninger & Winn, 2006). At the same time, repeated experiences of failure negatively affect students' self-perception and self-efficacy, leading to avoidance of writing activities (Pajares, 2003). Within this context, the search for effective interventions to enhance the written production of students with SLD becomes particularly important. The present article attempts to synthesize the main theoretical and research data concerning intervention in written expression, with the aim of highlighting practical directions for educational practice.

1.1 Theoretical Models of Written Production

Written production has been approached theoretically as a complex, multilayered, and dynamic process in which cognitive resources, linguistic skills, metacognitive self-regulatory mechanisms, and contextual factors interact. The evolution of theoretical models of writing reflects precisely this broadening: from early cognitive-processing descriptions of the composing process toward more comprehensive integrative approaches that incorporate developmental, sociocultural, and dynamic-systems parameters.

A starting point for the modern study of writing was the "Cognitive Process Theory of Writing" proposed by Flower and Hayes, which described writing as a set of overlapping processes—planning, translating, and reviewing—that are activated recursively rather than linearly. A central element of the model was its emphasis on goal regulation and the continuous monitoring of the process within a "task environment" and the writer's long-term memory (Flower & Hayes, 1981). For special education, and particularly for students with Specific Learning Difficulties, the value of this approach lies in shifting attention from the final product to the component processes, thus making it possible to pedagogically target dysfunctional stages, such as inadequate planning or limited revision. At the same time, the model highlighted that writing quality is influenced by the way the writer allocates limited cognitive resources across competing processes, something directly related to the profiles of students with SLD. The later revision and "remodeling" of writing models by Hayes contributed decisively to broadening the cognitive perspective. In the article *Modeling and Remodeling Writing*, Hayes describes the historical development of writing approaches and documents the shift toward models that incorporate factors such as motivation, emotion, attention, and the influence of the social and communicative context, as well as differences depending on genre and developmental stage (Hayes, 2012). In developmental education, the incorporation of motivation and emotion is not a secondary addition but a central factor, since low writing self-efficacy and evaluation anxiety often accelerate avoidance and superficial engagement, especially among students with SLD.

Closely related to this development, the model of Chenoweth and Hayes for written language production offered a more detailed deconstruction of the "internal mechanisms" of writing, introducing distinct functional units such as the proposer (idea generation), the translator (linguistic encoding), the transcriber (conversion into written or typed text), and the reviser/evaluator (evaluation and revision). Empirical investigation into the role of working memory and the "inner voice" demonstrated that writing presupposes constant shifts between idea production and linguistic encoding, with significant costs for cognitive processing (Chenoweth & Hayes, 2003). For students with SLD, this deconstruction is particularly useful because it makes visible why reduced automatization in lower-level skills, such as spelling or graphomotor execution, can "block" higher-order processes: when the transcription stage places disproportionate demands on cognitive capacity, the proposer and reviser operate under constraints, resulting in weaker organization, less revision, and often shorter texts.

Alongside cognitive process models, developmental and pedagogical research highlighted theories focusing on qualitative differences in strategy and cognitive maturation. The distinction drawn by Bereiter and Scardamalia between "knowledge-telling" and "knowledge-transforming" has been highly influential, as it describes the transition from simple reproduction of information to more complex forms of writing that require reflection,

transformation of knowledge, adaptation to purpose and audience, and the management of contradictions and argumentation (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). This framework is particularly significant for students with SLD, because many remain confined to "knowledge-telling" strategies not due to lack of ideas, but because the burden of the writing process, low self-regulation, and limitations in linguistic competence hinder the transformation and reorganization of content.

In recent years, the literature has attempted to connect the processing view of writing with developmental and componential models, in order to explain more precisely the "pathways of influence" from specific skills to writing quality. Within this framework, the Direct and Indirect Effects Model of Writing (DIEW) has gained particular prominence, as it seeks to go beyond generalized statements of simplified models and identify direct and indirect pathways of influence among working memory, linguistic skills such as vocabulary and grammar, higher-order cognitive skills such as inference and theory of mind, transcription skills such as spelling and writing fluency, and the final written product. The empirical investigation of Kim and Schatschneider demonstrated that discourse-level oral language and transcription skills function as critical mediating variables through which other cognitive and linguistic factors influence writing quality (Kim & Schatschneider, 2017). This approach is especially useful for intervention with students with SLD, because it demonstrates that improvement in writing does not result merely from "general practice," but requires targeted intervention at key points in the system, such as transcription fluency and discourse-level language skills, in order to free cognitive resources and strengthen higher-order processes.

Similarly, more recent research expands developmental models by emphasizing the co-occurrence of reading and writing difficulties and their dynamic interdependence. Kim's Interactive Dynamic Literacy Model (IDL) introduces a unified perspective according to which reading and writing constitute interrelated systems within a broader communicative act, with hierarchical and dynamic relationships among shared and specific skills (Kim, 2020). The application of this model to cases of learning difficulties suggests that the co-occurrence of reading and writing problems can be interpreted as the result of interaction between common foundational mechanisms, such as language skills and executive functions, as well as specific mechanisms that affect reading and writing differently (Kim, 2022). Within the context of SLD, this perspective has practical value: assessment and intervention in writing are often ineffective when they ignore the level of language comprehension, reading experience, and text comprehension skills that feed written production.

In the same spirit of refining developmental theories, recent empirical work surrounding the Not-so-Simple View of Writing (NSVW) attempts to organize the components of writing into a structure that clearly distinguishes general-domain resources, such as executive functions and motivation, from writing-specific skills, such as handwriting, spelling, planning, editing, and revision, and examines how these relationships differ in students who struggle with writing. This approach underlines that "narrow" models, which explain difficulties mainly as a result of transcription deficits, underestimate the role of self-regulation and executive resources in real classroom conditions, where the student is required to plan, maintain goals, and revise under time constraints (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Finally, writing process theory has been enriched by dynamic-systems and functional approaches that highlight the interdependence among cognitive activities, the task environment, and the temporal evolution of the writing act. The "functional dynamic approach" proposes that writing cannot be understood as a fixed sequence of stages, but rather as a system in which component activities—such as idea generation, formulation, monitoring, and revision—change functionally depending on the task, time, requirements, and available means. This perspective leads to interpretive frameworks that avoid oversimplifications and are particularly compatible with the heterogeneity of the profiles of students with SLD, since they allow us to understand why the same student may display different performance depending on the text genre, production conditions, or support provided (van den Bergh et al., 2016).

In summary, contemporary theoretical models of written production converge on the assumption that writing is a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon. The shift from general cognitive descriptions toward more specialized, developmental, integrative, and socio-communicative models allows for a more precise interpretation

of the difficulties experienced by students with SLD and, most importantly, for better intervention design targeting critical mechanisms—transcription, text organization, self-regulation, discourse-level language skills, and reading foundations—rather than merely superficial aspects of the final product.

1.2 Characteristics of Writing Difficulties in Students with SLD

The difficulties experienced by students with Specific Learning Difficulties in written language production are multilayered and extend across all stages of the writing process, from initial planning to final revision. International literature indicates that these problems are not limited to spelling accuracy or graphomotor fluency, but extend to macrostructural organization, metacognitive regulation, and the emotional dimension of writing (Graham et al., 2012; Berninger & Winn, 2006).

At the level of lower-order skills, students with SLD frequently display deficits in spelling, punctuation, and graphomotor flow. The lack of automatization in transcription has significant effects on the quality of written discourse. As Berninger and Winn (2006) argue, when basic skills have not been automated, they consume a disproportionate share of working memory, thereby limiting engagement in higher-order cognitive processes. Students often write slowly, interrupt their train of thought in order to retrieve spelling forms, and produce an increased number of errors. Sentences tend to be short and display limited syntactic variety, which affects the overall quality of the text (Graham & Harris, 2000). In addition, difficulties in managing punctuation negatively affect clarity and readability.

Beyond technical skills, students with SLD exhibit significant deficits in higher-order writing processes. According to the cognitive model of Flower and Hayes (1981), writing includes planning, translating, and reviewing. Students with learning difficulties often show limited planning ability prior to writing. They frequently begin writing without a clear goal, without organizing their ideas, or without considering the audience they are addressing. Text organization constitutes a particularly challenging area. One often observes the absence of a clear introduction, insufficient development of main ideas, and weak connections between paragraphs. The use of cohesive devices is limited or non-functional, which affects cohesion and coherence. Students often remain at the level of "knowledge-telling" rather than "knowledge-transforming," as described by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), that is, they record information without substantial processing or argumentative restructuring. Metacognitive awareness is a critical factor in successful written production. Students with SLD often show limited ability for self-monitoring and self-evaluation. They do not systematically check whether their text responds to the goal of the task, nor do they revise content and structure effectively (Graham et al., 2012). Revision, in particular, constitutes a problematic stage. Many students restrict themselves to surface-level corrections, such as spelling mistakes, without making substantial changes to structure or content. This is linked to deficits in executive functions such as planning, cognitive flexibility, and inhibition (Graham et al., 2013). The macrostructural organization of text constitutes one of the most stable indicators distinguishing students with and without learning difficulties. Students with SLD struggle to develop coherent argumentation, prioritize ideas, and maintain thematic coherence. Paragraphs often lack a clear topic sentence, while ideas are presented discontinuously. Research has shown that the texts of students with learning difficulties are characterized by lower organizational quality, shorter length, and limited lexical variety (Graham & Perin, 2007). In addition, the inability to integrate examples or evidence affects the persuasiveness and functionality of the discourse. Writing is not only a cognitive but also an emotional activity. Students with SLD often develop negative self-perceptions regarding their writing abilities. Low self-efficacy has been shown to negatively affect both the quality of writing and persistence in the writing process (Pajares, 2003). Students avoid demanding writing tasks and show reduced engagement. At the same time, the increased effort required for writing may lead to fatigue and frustration. Slow text production intensifies time-related anxiety, particularly in evaluative environments.

2. Method

The present study employed a narrative review methodology in order to synthesize theoretical and empirical research concerning written language production and evidence-based interventions for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD). Narrative reviews are particularly suitable when the objective is to integrate findings

from different research traditions and methodological approaches in order to develop a comprehensive conceptual understanding of a complex educational phenomenon. Research on writing development and writing instruction intersects several disciplinary domains, including cognitive psychology, literacy education, special education, and educational intervention research. Consequently, the integration of theoretical models together with empirical findings provides a broader perspective on the mechanisms underlying writing difficulties and the instructional practices that can effectively support struggling writers. The literature search was conducted through major academic databases commonly used in education and psychology research, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected because they offer extensive coverage of peer-reviewed research related to literacy development, special education, and educational psychology. The search strategy involved combinations of keywords associated with written language production and learning difficulties, including terms such as written expression, writing development, writing difficulties, writing intervention, learning disabilities, specific learning difficulties, writing strategies, self-regulated writing, and writing instruction. Boolean operators were used to combine these keywords in order to ensure broad and systematic coverage of the relevant literature. The selection of studies followed a multi-stage screening process aimed at ensuring the relevance and quality of the included publications. Initially, titles and abstracts were examined to identify studies that addressed writing development, writing instruction, or writing interventions in educational contexts. Studies were retained when they focused on written language production or instructional practices relevant to students with Specific Learning Difficulties or learning disabilities, when they presented empirical findings or theoretical frameworks related to writing processes, and when they were published in peer-reviewed journals or academic books. Studies were excluded when they focused exclusively on reading without reference to writing, when they addressed writing in non-educational contexts, or when they did not contribute theoretically or empirically to the understanding of writing development and intervention.

Following the initial screening stage, the full texts of the remaining studies were examined in order to determine their relevance to the objectives of the present review. Particular emphasis was placed on influential theoretical models of writing, meta-analyses of writing instruction, and empirical studies investigating interventions designed to support students with learning difficulties. Foundational theoretical contributions were included regardless of publication year when they represented key conceptual developments in the field, whereas more recent empirical studies were prioritized in order to reflect contemporary research developments. The analysis of the selected literature was conducted through thematic synthesis. Key concepts, theoretical perspectives, and empirical findings were identified and organized into broader thematic categories in order to facilitate interpretation of the research evidence. The synthesis focused on four interrelated dimensions: theoretical models explaining writing development, the characteristics of writing difficulties observed among students with Specific Learning Difficulties, instructional interventions that have demonstrated empirical effectiveness, and the pedagogical implications of these findings for inclusive educational practice. Through this analytical process, recurring patterns across the literature were identified and instructional approaches with strong empirical support were highlighted, particularly those emphasizing explicit strategy instruction, structured writing instruction, and the development of self-regulation in writing.

3. Results & Discussion: Interventions for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

3.1 Explicit Instruction in Writing Strategies

Explicit instruction in writing strategies constitutes the most well-documented axis of intervention. According to the meta-analysis by Graham and Harris (2018), strategies that are taught systematically and include clear modeling, guided practice, and gradual release toward independence show high effect sizes, especially for students with learning difficulties. The Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) model remains the most extensively studied approach, as it combines cognitive strategies with techniques of self-regulation and self-reinforcement (Harris et al., 2012). The effectiveness of SRSD has been confirmed across different age levels and cultural contexts (Graham et al., 2012; Harris et al., 2012). Students who participate in such interventions show improvement in the quality of arguments, structural organization, and text length. In addition, enhancement is observed in self-efficacy and positive attitudes toward writing.

3.2 Teaching Text Structure and Genre

Instruction in the macrostructural organization of text has emerged as particularly important for students with SLD. Research shows that explicit teaching of the structure of narrative and argumentative texts leads to significant improvements in coherence and the use of cohesive devices (Graham & Perin, 2007). Furthermore, Andrews et al. (2006) emphasize that the teaching of argumentative writing through explicit analysis of structural elements enhances the quality of written texts. The use of graphic organizers and concept maps functions supportively, as it reduces cognitive load and facilitates strategic planning (Kim et al., 2021). Visual representation of structure contributes to transforming writing from a spontaneous process into a conscious and controlled activity.

3.3 Interventions in Lower-Level Skills

Although contemporary interventions emphasize higher-order cognitive processes, the strengthening of basic skills remains critical. Automatization of spelling and graphomotor skills reduces cognitive load and frees resources for macrostructural organization (Berninger & Winn, 2006). Graham et al. (2000) found that systematic instruction in spelling patterns improves not only accuracy but also text quality. The link between reading and writing is also decisive. Students with learning difficulties benefit from interventions that combine text comprehension and written production, as the two skills reinforce one another (Shanahan, 2006).

3.4 Self-Regulation and Executive Functions

The development of self-regulation skills constitutes a crucial factor for success. Students with SLD often show deficits in executive functions, such as planning, time management, and progress monitoring (Graham et al., 2013). The incorporation of goal-setting and self-monitoring techniques has been shown to be effective in enhancing the quality of written discourse. Self-efficacy, as Pajares (2003) underlines, functions as a critical mediating factor between skills and performance. Interventions that strengthen students' sense of capability lead to greater persistence and more strategic engagement.

3.5 Collaborative and Dialogic Writing

Collaborative writing has emerged as an effective practice, especially when structured through clear roles and strategies (Graham et al., 2007). Interaction among peers strengthens metacognitive awareness and facilitates the negotiation of meaning. Students with SLD benefit from the collective processing of ideas, as individual cognitive load is reduced.

3.6 Technology-Supported Interventions

The use of digital tools has increased significantly in recent years. According to Peterson-Karlan (2011), speech-to-text tools and digital idea organizers reduce barriers related to graphomotor execution. At the same time, MacArthur and Graham (2016) point out that technology is effective when combined with explicit strategy instruction.

3.7 Multi-Tiered Models of Intervention

The implementation of models such as Response to Intervention (RTI) allows for early identification and intervention. Al Otaiba et al. (2012) argue that students with persistent difficulties benefit from more intensive and individualized instruction in small groups. Systematic progress monitoring ensures the adjustment of the intervention.

4. Conclusion

The synthesis of the theoretical and research data presented above clearly demonstrates that the written production of students with Specific Learning Difficulties cannot be treated simply as a matter of linguistic competence or

spelling accuracy. On the contrary, it is a multifactorial phenomenon involving cognitive, metacognitive, executive, and emotional dimensions. International literature converges on the conclusion that writing difficulties are linked both to the lack of automatization of basic skills and to deficits in strategic planning and self-regulatory management of the writing process (Berninger & Winn, 2006; Graham et al., 2012). First, it is confirmed that cognitive load constitutes a central mechanism explaining the difficulties of students with SLD. When spelling, graphomotor execution, or morphosyntactic processing has not been automated, a significant portion of working memory is consumed by lower-level processes, thereby limiting the ability to engage in higher-order processes of organization and argumentation. This finding is consistent with both the cognitive model of Flower and Hayes (1981) and the neurocognitive framework of Berninger and Winn (2006), both of which emphasize the ongoing interaction between lower-level and higher-level processing. Second, research evidence supports the view that explicit and systematic instruction in writing strategies constitutes the most effective intervention axis. The meta-analysis by Graham and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that interventions focusing on the teaching of planning and revision strategies show high effect sizes, especially for students with learning difficulties. Likewise, the report by Graham and Perin (2007) documented that interventions combining text structure instruction, strategic planning, and guided practice lead to statistically and educationally significant improvements in writing quality.

Particular importance is attributed to linking cognitive strategies with self-regulatory processes. The Self-Regulated Strategy Development approach does not merely transmit writing techniques, but also integrates training in goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-reinforcement (Graham & Harris, 2000). The strengthening of self-regulation appears to function as a catalyst in transforming the writing process from a mechanical task into a conscious and strategic activity. Furthermore, the development of writing self-efficacy, as argued by Pajares (2003), is directly associated with text quality and persistence in effort, underlining the importance of the emotional dimension of interventions.

Third, the need for a multi-level approach to intervention is emphasized. Effective practices do not operate in isolation, but are embedded within a coherent instructional framework that combines explicit teaching, repeated practice, feedback, and gradual release toward independence. Formative assessment, when it focuses on text structure and strategic organization rather than exclusively on surface errors, contributes substantially to metacognitive development (Graham et al., 2012). The active involvement of students in the process of self-assessment strengthens responsibility and conscious management of written production. Fourth, technological support appears to play an important role as a compensatory mechanism. The use of digital tools that reduce lower-level barriers allows students to focus on macrostructure and content (Berninger & Winn, 2006). However, technology does not substitute for strategy instruction; it functions effectively only when integrated into a pedagogically sound framework. Fifth, the literature indicates that interventions must begin early and be sustained over time. Students with SLD do not benefit from short-term or occasional interventions. Systematicity and repetition are critical conditions for the stabilization of skills and their transfer to new learning environments (Graham & Perin, 2007).

At the level of pedagogical implications, the conclusions of the present analysis lead to several guiding principles. First, written production should be taught explicitly rather than treated as a natural consequence of reading. Second, instruction should combine cognitive and metacognitive strategies while simultaneously strengthening students' self-efficacy. Third, assessment should function formatively, providing targeted feedback that supports improvement rather than merely pointing out errors. Fourth, teacher training in evidence-based writing practices constitutes a necessary condition for the systematic implementation of interventions. Overall, research documents that writing is not a static skill but a dynamic process that can be improved through appropriate intervention. Students with Specific Learning Difficulties are capable of achieving substantial progress when instruction is structured, strategically organized, and metacognitively oriented. The shift from viewing writing as an innate ability to understanding it as a teachable and developable skill constitutes a critical pedagogical and research conclusion. Future research should further examine how evidence-based writing interventions can be adapted to diverse educational contexts and how technology-supported instruction can complement strategy-based writing instruction for students with Specific Learning Difficulties.

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