

**USING SELF-MONITORING TO IMPROVE A FOURTH-GRADE  
STUDENT'S WRITING**

Senior Scholars Thesis

by

KELLIE ANN LOTT

Submitted to Honors and Undergraduate Research  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as

**UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR**

May 2012

Major: Special Education

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May 2012

Major: Special Education

## **ABSTRACT**

Using Self-Monitoring to Improve a Fourth-Grade Student's Writing. (May 2012)

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Department of Educational Psychology

A single case study was conducted with a 10-year-old fourth-grader who struggled with writing. The goal of the study was to increase the quantity and quality of words written by the student when he wrote a story. The interventions being assessed were self-monitoring with and without goal setting and story starter selection. Self-monitoring required the student to graph the number of words that he wrote in a ten-minute period to improve his writing output. To improve his writing quality, the student was taught to self-monitor correct capitalization and punctuation. Story starter selection involved the researcher providing various types of story starters as prompts for the student's writing.

Results indicated that the student did not experience a substantial change in writing output with self-monitoring or story starter choice, but demonstrated an immediate and significant change in writing output when goal setting was introduced. Only one session

was conducted to introduce elf-monitoring quality. Therefore, the study is inconclusive regarding the effects of self-monitoring capitalization and punctuation on writing quality. Implications and suggestions for future research are included.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Seventy-two percent of fourth graders did not meet the basic standards of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing proficiency goals (Perskey, Daane, & Jin, 2002). If the nation is having a problem with fourth-grade students writing at a proficient level, there is even more concern with students who have trouble writing because of a disability. In fact, students with learning disabilities face a huge challenge when it comes to writing. These students have writing difficulties ranging from basic mechanics (e.g., spelling, punctuation and grammar) to writing complete and complicated sentences (Schumaker & Deshler, 2003). Students also have difficulty with planning and organizing information before writing (De La Paz, 2007). The goal of this study was to improve writing output and quality of a fourth-grade student with suspected learning disabilities whose writing skills are well below grade level expectations.

There are basic procedures that may change the way children with learning disabilities can improve their writing. For example, self-graphing is an effective and beneficial way to help students become better writers (Goddard & Sendi, 2008; Stotz et al., 2008). Stotz and colleagues worked with three fourth-grade students with disabilities. Students were first provided a story starter and given one minute to think about what they would write. Next, they were instructed to write as much as they could in three minutes. After writing,

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This thesis follows the style and format of *Reading and Writing Quarterly*.



they counted the number of correctly spelled words they wrote. The researcher also measured quality of writing by looking at correct word sequences. Results showed that all participants wrote more and experienced improvements in the quality of their writing.

Goddard and Sendi (2008) achieved similar results by having students count and graph the number of words written in ten minutes as well as the number of quality elements included in their stories. Anecdotally, students in the Goddard and Sendi study grumbled at the beginning of the study that ten minutes was too long but by the end they complained that they did not have enough time to write. Exit interviews with these students showed that the students liked using self-monitoring and wanted to continue using it. Also, all students in this study passed the state-mandated writing exam after the study ended.

Self-monitoring is a very powerful tool because it shows students that they are responsible for their own writing. Self-monitoring helps students to actually see how their writing is seen by other readers. With the concept of self-monitoring and graphing, students are able to visually see the progress they have made. Seeing the progress made can make a student optimistic about future writing. When the student sees how much he has accomplished, he is compelled to strive for better. There is a better chance that he will push himself to beat his last score.

Self-graphing goes in line with self-monitoring because the student is required to graph his own progress. Graphing one's own progress can be a great motivational tool.

Students can see the progress they are making on a scale as their writing improves. Self-graphing involves using a graph that is labeled according to a specific goal. We may first start with words written in ten minutes. The dates are labeled on the x-axis of the graph, while the number of words written is labeled on the y-axis of the graph.

With self-graphing, first the student records the numbers of words he writes. Spelling correctly does not count at this point because we are simply recording the number of words he has written.

Once the student begins to write significantly more words in one ten-minute period, quality of writing is attended to next. One of the major reasons students with learning disabilities have so much trouble with writing is because of spelling, capitalization and punctuations errors. Students who write and have their papers proofread for them are not likely to improve their skills because students will better understand the mistakes they have made if an educator sits there with them and shows them their errors and then shows them how they can be corrected (Graham & Perin, 2007). Many children may actually need to see the mistakes they have made and be shown how to fix them.

The purpose of this study is to help the student become a better, more self-observant writer. The goal is to teach the student to look at his paper and be aware of errors that he may have made during writing. In sum, the goal of this study is to help a struggling writer improve the amount and quality of his writing. Therefore, I hypothesize the following:

1. Self-monitoring and self-graphing the number of words written will result in more words written during a 10-minute timed writing period.
2. Allowing choice of story starters will result in more words written in a 10-minute timed writing period than when story starters are assigned.
3. Self-monitoring paired with graphing and goal-setting will result in more words written during a 10-minute timed writing period than will self-monitoring without goal-setting.
4. Self-monitoring beginning capitalization and ending punctuation will result in higher percentages of correct word sequences than will self-monitoring the number of words written during a 10-minute timed writing period.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODS

#### **Participant**

Stephen is a fourth-grade white male from a single parent household. He is 10 years old and has a younger brother in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. He attends a charter school and is suspected of having a learning disability that affects reading and writing. Academic assessments conducted in the Fall, 2011 indicate that his reading skills are at least one grade level below current grade placement. His writing skills are two to three grade levels below his current grade placement.

#### **Design and procedures**

The research method was single case analysis using a multiple baseline across behaviors design with one participant, Stephen. Various teaching techniques were used in order to graph the progress he made when teaching interventions were added or changed. Using Excel, the researcher graphed correct and incorrect word sequences and the number of words Stephen wrote per 10-minute timed writing session. As data were entered into Excel, the researcher, in conjunction with her advisor, conducted data analysis to examine the student's ongoing progress. In addition to these data, the researcher maintained anecdotal records to note mannerisms and verbalizations made by Stephen during the writing sessions. The dependent variables measured in this research were a) number of words written and b) correct and incorrect words sequences in ten minutes. The independent variables were self-monitoring and self-graphing words written during

Phase 2, self-monitoring words written plus goal-setting for Phase 3, and self-monitoring capitalization and punctuation for Phase 4. Each of these variables will be described in more detail in the following sections.

### **Multiple baseline design across behaviors**

In this study, using multiple baseline design across behaviors is necessary to address the many components needed to be an efficient writer. When working with Stephen, the researcher measured a) the number of words he wrote in a 10-minute timed writing period, and b) his correct versus incorrect words sequences. These two writing outcomes were graphed separately but examined together to assess effects associated with each independent variable.

### **Baseline (Phase 1)**

This study involved four phases. The first phase was the baseline phase. During baseline, the researcher drew random story starters from a box of about 56 commercial story starter cards. The story starters were made by Super Duper Publications and can be found at [www.superduperinc.com](http://www.superduperinc.com). Each story starter card had an animated picture on it with a caption under the illustration. The researcher would shuffle the cards, lay them face down on the table, and the student would pick a card at random. After the student chose a story starter at random, he would read the story starter aloud. After he read the story starter aloud, the researcher would encourage Stephen to brainstorm. During brainstorming, he was allowed to either write notes or talk about what he planned to

write. Stephen chose to speak aloud and talk about what he would write. After brainstorming, the timer was set to ten minutes. During the ten minutes, Stephen would write a story that was related to the story starter. After ten minutes of writing, he was able to mark where he ended and continue to write if he was not finished. After Stephen completed his writing, the researcher counted the number of words Stephen wrote and graphed the results. The x-axis marks time, and is labeled with the session number. The y-axis indicates the number of words Stephen wrote in ten minutes.

In addition to number of words written, the researcher charted the correct and incorrect word sequences Stephen wrote in ten minutes. A correct word sequence was defined as two adjacent, correctly spelled words that were acceptable within the context of the phrase to a native speaker of the English language. If a sentence was missing a capital letter at the beginning of a sentence, an incorrect word sequence (IWS) was recorded. An IWS was also labeled where there were misspelled words and incorrect punctuation. In order to distinguish an incorrect word sequence (IWS), and a correct word sequence (CWS), a dash (-) was put in between an IWS and a caret (^) is put in between a CWS. Also, if there was punctuation not used where there should have been punctuation, a tilde (~) was used. There were brackets placed around a series of CWS. This sentence show how CWS and IWS were used:

-when-[ I^ went^ to^ the^ store^ with^ a]- cupple- [of^ friends^ and^ saw ^the^  
game^ I^ wanted]~ we- [were^ all^ so]- exsited-!

The sentence above has 8 IWS (-), and 15 CWS (^). There are 23 word sequences in all. This means the CWS percentage is 65.2%.

In the scored example above, there is a dash at the beginning of the sentence because the word is not capitalized. That causes there to be a dash before and after the word because it is not properly capitalized. There is a dash put before and after “cupple” because it is supposed to say *couple*. There is a tilde put after “wanted” because there is supposed to be a comma. If there is not proper punctuation before the word, there is a dash placed after the word because it is an IWS without the comma. And lastly, there is a dash put before and after “exisited” because it should be spelled *excited*.

### **Intervention 1 (Phase 2)**

During the second phase, the intervention began. Exact procedures were followed as described for baseline except at the end of the timed ten-minute writing period, Stephen counted and graphed the number of words that he had written. The researcher continued to collect graphical data in an Excel document as described earlier, including a graph for number of words written and percent correct word sequences. Phase two was the first implementation of self-monitoring. Self-monitoring with graphing was designed to be a tool to motivate Stephen to write more words session after session in order to surpass the number the words he wrote the session previous. The goal was to help him get his thoughts onto paper more fluently so that we could begin attending to the quality of his writing.

**Intervention 2 (Phase 3)**

For phase three, different story starters were used. The story starters that were used in phase one and two were random but in this phase Stephen was given a choice in the story starter used. The story starters he was allowed to choose were pictures with content that was more likely interesting for him. Stephen is very scientifically inclined and is interested in chemistry, physics, robotics, and biological facts about animals. The story starters were pictures chosen with these interests in mind. The pictures had no captions at the bottom so Stephen was required to create a story based on the photograph he was shown. This phase was designed to assess differences between giving a student random, commercially produced story starters versus story starters containing content in which students are actually interested. Stephen continued to count the number of words he wrote and graphed them on the graph paper provided to him. The researcher continued to input data into an Excel document to examine the number words written and the percentage of correct words sequences in an ongoing manner as described earlier.

**Intervention 3 (Phase 4)**

After session 23, goal-setting was added to the research. I told Stephen that if he had wrote at least 70 words he would receive a treat. The treat was a pack of fruit snacks. If Stephen were to write at least 100 words his reward would be substantially better.

**Intervention 4 (Phase 5)**

Phase 5 required Stephen to continue to count the number words he wrote and graph them onto graph paper. The difference with phase five was that he also needed to



recognize his punctuation and capitalization errors and think about them as he wrote during the 10-minute writing period. Stephen and the researcher reviewed passages that Stephen wrote in prior phases correct any mistakes made with capitalization and punctuation. If there was a mistake with capitalization, he will draw three lines under the letter that should be capitalized. When he does not write in a punctuation mark where there should be one, he will write down the correct punctuation and circle it. If he writes the wrong punctuation, he will cross it out, write the correct punctuation under the crossed out punctuation and circle the correct punctuation. By doing this in phase four, the student is expected to recognize how to correctly capitalize proper nouns and words at the beginning of the sentence. The student will also indicate where proper punctuation is supposed to be placed in a sentence. Self-monitoring the *quality* of his work was the goal of this phase, so in addition to counting and graphing the number of words he wrote in 10 minutes, Stephen counted and graphed the number of correct and incorrect beginning capitalization and ending punctuation marks in his writing sample. The researcher continued to graph the number words and CWS percentage achieved during the 10-minute writing period. Due to time constraints and the addition of a phase to examine the effects of different story starters, only one data point was collected during this phase. The researcher plans to continue this study beyond the due date for this thesis, however.

**Treatment fidelity**

A second researcher observed 34% of all sessions across phases, using a standard protocol to assess treatment fidelity. Treatment fidelity is indicated by the percent of steps followed in the protocol and was calculated as

# steps conducted according to the protocol – # steps not conducted per the

protocol number of steps in the protocol

X100

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

The results of this study show that self-monitoring and self-graphing the number of words written did not result in changes in the number of words Stephen wrote.

Therefore, the first hypothesis of this study was not confirmed. Having choice of story starters also did not result in changes in writing output, so the second hypothesis was also not confirmed. When goal setting was added to self-monitoring, however, Stephen experienced an immediate, significant change in the number of words written. The third hypothesis was therefore confirmed. There was data collected for the fourth hypothesis during the last session but percentage of correct word sequenced was not any higher than before the intervention was set in place.

This section describes, phase-by-phase, the data collected as well as qualitative descriptions of Stephen's comments and behaviors during each phase. The two graphs are discussed separately, with number of words written (Figure 1) discussed first, followed by percent correct word sequences (Figure 2). The chapter ends with results presented for treatment fidelity.

#### **Number of words written**

Twenty-seven sessions were conducted in this study, across five phases. During each session, the researcher collected quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data are displayed in Figures 1 and 2 and include number of words written in a timed, 10-minute

period and percent of correct word sequences, respectively. Qualitative data included anecdotal notes taken by the researcher during each session as well as picture prompts that Stephen responded to in writing.

### **Baseline (Phase 1)**

During the baseline, the interest Stephen had in the picture that were chosen at random definitely had a factor in the number of words he wrote. If he did not find the picture interesting, he would not write much about it. For instance, he did not find anything interesting about a picture with a baby laughing because he felt it did not take much effort to make a baby laugh. With that session (session 9), he wrote eight words in ten minutes. The average number of words he wrote during baseline was 69.1. During this time he would talk about what he could write about but would take more time to begin writing if he was not interested in the story starter.

### **Intervention 1 (Phase 2)**

During baseline, the researcher would count the number of words Stephen wrote in ten minutes. Starting with session 11 (Intervention 1), Stephen began to count and graph the number of words he wrote as a way to self-monitor. The average number of words he wrote for this phase was 41, less than baseline. There was also a wide range of variability in this stage with numbers of written being as low as 8 and as high as 84. During this time the same story starters were being chosen at random and the interest of the story starter would determine if he wrote a substantial amount of words.

**Intervention 2 (Phase 3)**

Consistent with prior writing studies (e.g., Goddard & Sendi, 2008), story starters appeared to have a dramatic effect on Stephen's writing. The variability within and across phases seemed to be a function of Stephen's interest in the story starter, as verified by anecdotal data gathered during each session. Therefore, during this phase Stephen was provided story starters that appealed to his particular interests as a test of our second hypothesis. We used Google search to look for futuristic designs, robots and new inventions, all topics that Stephen would talk about extensively. Stephen seemed to be very intrigued by the pictures and would talk for at least 10 to 15 minutes about the story he wanted to write. After observing his enthusiasm, we expected that he would write much more during the 10-minute session. But contrary to this assumption, Stephen needed much more persuading to begin to write. He would say that if he were to write, he would write pages and pages about this one particular picture. Because he had only ten minutes, he would not have time. The idea was offered to him the next session that there be no time limit. The researcher would have a timer to note when Stephen had written for ten minutes, but he could continue writing after the timer went off. After presenting Stephen with no time limit, he appeared anxious and said he liked having ten minutes. During this phase he stated that he wanted to go back to the old story starters because it was easier to write a story with them. It seemed to be overwhelming for him to write about a picture that prompted so many ideas for Stephen. His ability to talk about the pictures did not translate into an ability to write about them. Instead of writing more about a subject, he wrote less than expected. The researcher then brought pictures that depicted more mysterious photos illustrated by Chris Van Allsburg. With these

pictures, Stephen thought of a story to write about much more quickly during the brainstorming process. During one of his sessions, he mentioned that he liked mysterious story starters. There was a portfolio edition book that had artwork by Chris Van Allsburg that sparked his interest. It was just enough to catch Stephen's interest and not too interesting to the point where he seemed to be overwhelmed. With this balance he began to write more. Even so, Stephen wrote an average of 47 words during Intervention 2. We concluded that this was a good point at which to introduce goal-setting, as we had explored the effects of various story starter types to no avail.

### **Intervention 3 (Phase 4)**

During the third intervention, we introduced goal-setting paired with positive reinforcements. Stephen mentioned how he tried pop rocks once so I told him that if he wrote at least 70 words we would eat something like fruit snacks. Writing at least 100 words (more than his highest score since baseline) would get him a surprise treat. Goal setting combined with positive reinforcement resulted in an immediate, positive level change and more stability of the number of words he wrote. I also made an effort to find topics that were generally interesting for Stephen, such as story starters that would be characterized as mysterious. During this phase, there was less variability and he wrote an average of 85 words, his highest phase average since the study began. Although data points in this phase overlap with data points from baseline, the greater stability of data points in this intervention phase is important to note. During this phase he enjoyed the mysterious pictures that I picked for him to write about. The pictures were not something he had a special interest in, but they were interesting enough for Stephen to write about.

**Intervention 4 (Phase 5)**

At the writing of this thesis, we were able to collect one data point for the CWS intervention. As expected, when Stephen began focusing on the quality of his work as he wrote, he demonstrated a slight drop in written output, although the single data point falls within the range of data collected during Intervention 3. Based upon one data point, we are unable to draw conclusions regarding our fourth hypothesis.

**Correct word sequences**

Because interventions were extended for quantity of writing, the baseline for percent correct word sequences (the quality measure) was extended. For correct word sequences, Stephen had an overall average of 43% across baseline. Less variability is evident in the quality of Stephen's writing than in the amount he wrote. Upon close inspection of the data, it becomes apparent that there is some correlation between the amount of writing Stephen did and the quality of his work. Generally, the more Stephen wrote, the lower his CWS percentage was. The most Stephen wrote was during session 2 was a total of 98 words in ten minutes. This session was the second lowest CWS percentage (23%). The most important aspect of these data, however, is that there are no changes in CWS upon introduction of a new intervention related to the number of words written. In other words, a change in one behavior (writing output) did not affect change in the second behavior (writing quality). Therefore, we can conclude that any changes in writing output were due to the intervention and not an extraneous variable that affected both behaviors.

As described in the methods section, we began having Stephen focus on certain aspects of the quality of his writing. We collected one data point for correct word sequence but the data point that was collected was not significantly higher than any data point collected before the intervention. The percentage did not change very much because of the many spelling errors that are in his writing. As a scientifically inclined student, the vocabulary he uses is somewhat above grade level, which would make for there to be a substantial amount of misspellings.

### **Treatment fidelity**

A second researcher observed 34% of all sessions across phases, using a standard protocol to assess treatment fidelity. 100% of the procedures were followed in this study for all sessions in which treatment fidelity was observed.



## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSIONS

Four hypotheses were addressed for this study. The first hypothesis stated self-monitoring and self-graphing the number of words written would result in more words written during a 10-minute timed writing period than simply writing for 10 minutes. This strategy alone did not have an effect on how much Stephen wrote in a 10 minute period. The next hypothesis said that allowing choice of story starters would result in more words written in a 10-minute timed writing period than when story starters were assigned. Stephen loves science, especially robotics and futuristic designs. Several robotic and futuristic pictures were shown to him and he would choose which one he wanted to write about. Having a choice in story starters had a negative effect on the student and seemed to be too overwhelming for him to actually write about something that he was interested in and able to talk about extensively. When presented with a picture of a futuristic or robotic image, he would look at every part of a robot and with much detail verbalize what that part may be used for and what it could do. When it came time to write about the image that presented to him, he was very reluctant to write and would say things like, "I could write chapter after chapter about this." The average number of words he wrote during this intervention actually decreased. After noticing how difficult it was for him to write, different types of story starters were chosen for him. The researcher found pictures that were something children his age would generally find interesting. Pictures that were mysterious and spooky were something a person in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade would be interested in so the researcher gave him a story starter that went

along those lines. The third hypothesis was that self-monitoring paired with graphing and goal setting would result in more words written during a 10-minute timed writing period than would self-monitoring without goal-setting. This hypothesis was proven to be true because the average number of words he wrote was at least 1½ times more than the baseline and the first two intervention phases. The results were similar to Goddard (1998), who found that the number of words written did increase in a ten-minute period but only after goal setting was added. In order to receive a reward for his writing, Stephen had to write at least 70 words. If he met or exceeded this goal, he would get a treat or a piece of candy. The major reward would come when he wrote 100 words. To date, the most words he has written in a 10-minute period was 98 words. The fourth hypothesis states that self-monitoring beginning capitalization and ending punctuation would result in higher percentages of correct word sequences than would self-monitoring the number of words written during a 10-minute timed writing period. This hypothesis has yet to be proven in that we have just begun to test this hypothesis. This hypothesis is also an extension to a study conducted by Graham and Perin (2007) in that the capitalization and punctuation will be assessed with the percent correct word sequence measure.

### **Interviewing Stephen**

I asked Stephen several questions after collecting data for 28 sessions.

Researcher: Did you like counting and graphing the number of words you wrote?

Stephen: I can't say I did like it or disliked it. I was like, alright I'll do it.

Researcher: Do you think it helped you write better when there was a goal set in place?

Stephen: I do not think it helped, I think the new topics helped.

Researcher: Was it more difficult to concentrate on your writing when you had to focus on your capitalization and punctuation? Why or why not?

Stephen: It was not more difficult but it made me slower. I would have to back and erase.

Researcher: Will you continue to use free writing as a way to help you write in school?

Stephen: I would want to but I wouldn't be able to because I'm a slow writer and I would not finish in time.

Researcher: What if you were writing a paper in which you had a week to complete? Would you use free writing?

Stephen: I would use it if I had a week.

Researcher: Did you like the pictures of robotics and futuristic inventions? Why did you write less for these pictures?

Stephen: Yes only there were so many ideas that it was a little hard. There were so many ideas it was hard to think of what to write next.

Researcher: Why did you write more with the mysterious pictures?

Stephen: There was less to think about but it was more interesting.

Researcher: What did you like most?

Stephen: Getting to explain my ideas on paper.

Researcher: What did you like least?

Stephen: Trying to think of a beginning.

**Limitations**

Because there was only one child who participated in the study, the research is not generalizable beyond that child. However, several single case design studies have been conducted with similar populations of students (e.g., Goddard, 1998; Goddard & Sendi, 2008; Moxley et al., 1995; Stotz et al., 2008), so evidence is accumulating that self-monitoring with goal setting may be an effective intervention for students with learning disabilities. More replications and extensions of this research are therefore needed.

**Future research**

With this research, the impact of promoting creativity and confidence was further studied. Although teaching students how to write chronologically and cohesively is important, confidence in expressing themselves through writing needs to be established. Researching how to teach students who are twice exceptional (e.g., learning disabled and gifted) to write better should also be studied. Before conducting research with this student, the researchers theorized that having Stephen write about something he was really interested in would result in more writing. However, we discovered that this had a negative effect and that more structure and control had to come from the instructor regarding types of story starters. More research about the effects of story starters on students' writing is also warranted.

**Implications**

The study can be influential in the classroom in that it can build a lot of confidence in a student who has had trouble writing. Giving students 10 minutes to write and telling

them to not worry about the grammar or spelling allows students to focus on content. Teachers want to teach their children how to write grammatically correct but this is difficult to teach if the students are reluctant to write in the first place. Confidence in creativity has to be established and is something that is important to writing. Finding pictures that incite imagination and interest is also crucial to getting children to write. After children have established their confidence in writing, it is good to then teach how to write grammatically correct. It is also beneficial to provide goal setting when writing so that students have something to work toward.

In summary, goal setting can have a positive impact on students' writing, as can pictures that are interesting to them. My study also showed that there may need to be some control when providing topics for students to write about if they have a learning disability. Finding something that particular child is interested in may be too overwhelming if there are no specific guidelines to what teachers would like the students to focus on in their writing.

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APPENDIX A

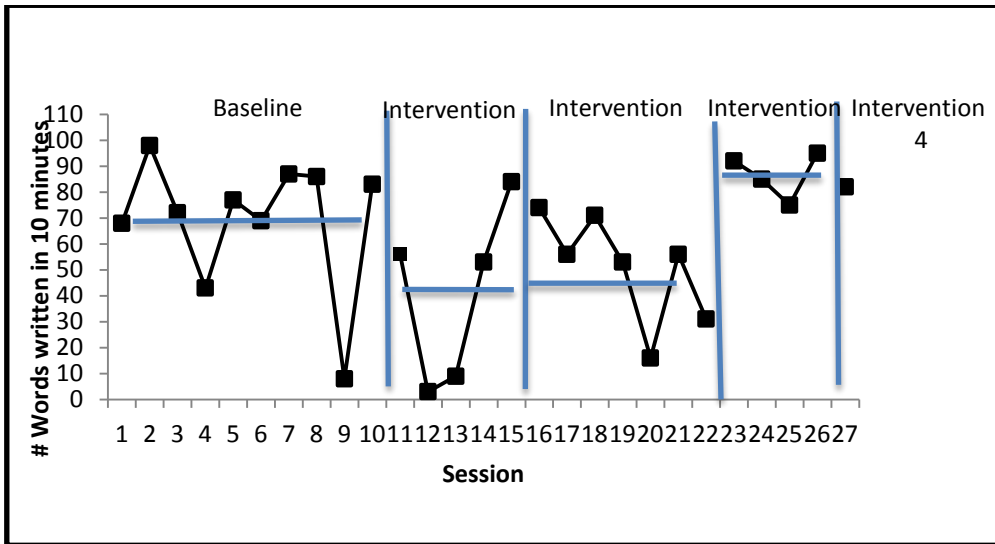


Figure 1. Number of words written in a 10-minute period.

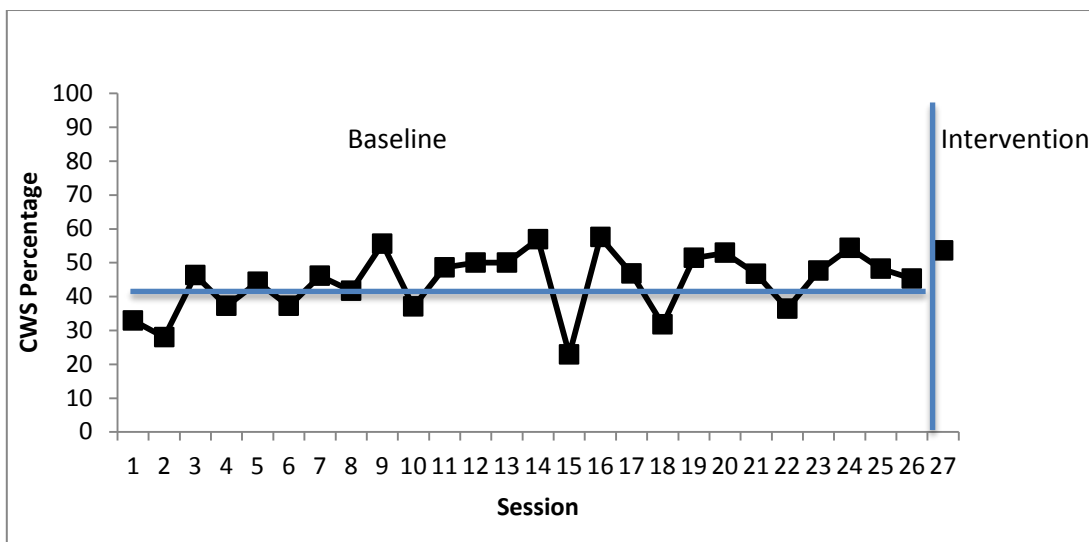


Figure 2. Percent of correct word sequences written in a 10-minute period.

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