Self-Monitoring in the Writing Process

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In recent years there has been an increasing focus on developing the writing skills of students at all grade levels. Much of the focus has been the result of research that has indicated that students are not able to competently produce a composition that is well organized and effective. Harris, Graham, and Mason (2003) cited a study done by Applebee, Langer, Mullis, Latham, and Gentile (1994) in which national and state writing assessments have suggested that a large portion of elementary and high school students struggle with the writing process and in particular have difficulty with writing narrative, expository, and persuasive compositions. According to Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986), there are five areas that students typically struggle with: generating content, organizing compositions, developing writing goals, efficiently and consistently using the mechanical components of writing, and revising.

According to a research study performed by De La Paz and Graham (1997), a large percentage of students tend to approach writing in a haphazard manner by writing whatever seems to come to mind without any thought to the organization of their writing. For students who have a learning disability, it has been found that they are even more likely to have difficulties generating ideas, setting a purpose or goal for writing and presenting their ideas in a logical and sequential manner. In addition, students with learning disabilities have trouble with regulating their own learning. To address the need for writing strategies to be taught to students who may struggle with regulating their own writing, Harris and Graham (1996) developed the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) model to teaching writing. In this model students are taught to monitor their own writing process by learning strategies for brainstorming, planning, writing with a purpose, and revising. The methods and procedures presented in the SRSD model were used in this study to teach students to regulate their own writing by using a writer's checklist and an acronym.

The purpose of the current research project was to prepare a self-contained class of 22 sixth-grade students for a school-wide writing assessment in which the students would be tested on the presence of eight elements in a one paragraph essay. For the assessment, each student was required to compose a paragraph and receive a score of at least 90%. Students who did not reach the 90% criterion would be required to participate in a three week program after school in which they would receive intensive writing instruction. The paragraph was scored by determining if the student included a title, a topic sentence, three supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. Additionally, the paragraph was assessed on whether or not it was indented.   The sentences in the composition were to be graded on whether or not they were presented in a logical order with different sentence lengths beginning with a capital letter and ending with the correct punctuation at the end of the sentences. The current research project presented in this paper focused on teaching the students to include the eight required writing features in their writing by teaching self-monitoring strategies and acronyms using the SRSD model.

Methods and Procedures

Participants

Direct instruction in the use of graphic organizers, self-regulation check-lists, and acronyms designed to encourage the students to become more independent writers were taught to twenty-two sixth grade students in a self-contained classroom.   No students were identified as having a learning disability. Although none of the twenty-two students have been identified as having a learning disability, the researcher believes that direct instruction in learning strategies that have been proven to be beneficial with students with a disability can also be effectively used with students with differing abilities. Of the twenty-two students being taught using the same

instructional methods, five students were selected to be monitored based upon factors such as lack of interest and motivation, poor editing skills, poor handwriting, and overall quality of writing before the baseline data were collected. Furthermore, these students demonstrated difficulty in remembering to use the writing strategies taught on a consistent basis. To hide the identity of the students each student was assigned a fictional name during the study.

Setting

The systematic writing instructional study took place in a sixth-grade regular education classroom in a middle class, private Christian school setting located in the Mid-Atlantic States. About 360 elementary students attend the school. Contrary to the popular trend of including sixth grade in the middle school curriculum and switching classes, the sixth grade students participating in this study were considered elementary students and spent the entire morning in a self-contained classroom. In the afternoon, the students switched classes for exploratories. Although all twenty-two students received the same instruction as noted above, only five were selected for their writing samples to be monitored for improvement.

Many school systems, including the school in which the current study was located, have responded to the writing crisis by adopting writing curricula in which teachers are held accountable for teaching explicit writing strategies to increase the writing competency of their students. One program that has been adopted by many schools is the <u>Developing Writing and Thinking Skills Across the Curriculum: A Practical Program For Schools</u> developed by Collins (1992). The goal of this program is to offer teachers of every academic content area, writing formats to encourage their students to write on a daily basis without adding more work on the teacher. The twenty-two sixth grade students had previously received writing instruction in the fifth grade using Collins' program.

Procedures

The research study consisted of four phases that included scaffolding procedures for the students at different phases within the study. Before the intensive writing strategies were taught, the students were asked to complete a personal writing evaluation form in which they were asked questions about how comfortable they were with the writing process, what type of writer would they classify themselves as, what were their personal goals as a writer, and what type of writing did they enjoy the most. At the end of the study, the students were given a similar personal evaluation form to determine if their attitude towards the writing process had changed as they had become more comfortable with their writing due to more confidence as a result of the intensive instruction.

The first phase of the study was the baseline. In this phase, students' writing samples were collected before they were instructed in the self-regulatory strategies. At this stage, the students were taught how to use a graphic organizer to plan, brainstorm, and focus their writing (see example in Figure 1). Each writing assignment included modeling by the teacher on how to use the graphic organizer to plan a paragraph. After modeling, the students were given a similar graphic organizer and were required to do their own brainstorming and planning of their paragraph. After brainstorming, they used the graphic organizer to develop the outline for their paragraph. Each organizer included a format that encouraged the students to develop a topic sentence, three supporting sentences and a concluding sentence. During this phase, the five targeted students' writing samples were collected to be used as a baseline measurement.

The second phase of the study included instruction on how to use an individual Writer's Checklist (designed by the researcher; see Figure 2) to help the student make sure that they have included the eight writing features they would be required to incorporate in their writing

paragraphs during the school wide writing assessment. Instructional methodology in brainstorming, planning, and organizing the paragraph was the same as in the baseline but explicit directions were given as to how to use the checklist when writing to make sure that they included every writing feature in their paragraph on the check-list. The Writer's Checklist consisted of eight items to check off: title, paragraph indention, topic sentence, three supporting sentences, sentences in logical order, concluding sentence, sentences beginning with a capital letter, punctuation at the end of each sentence. Five writing samples from each of the five selected students were collected and analyzed during this phase.

The third phase of the study consisted of teaching students to use an acronym, developed by the researcher, to help the students remember how to organize their paragraph and to include the targeted features in their writing. During this phase, the students were not given the writer's checklist to use in monitoring their writing. Instead, they were encouraged to memorize the acronym and to use it in place of the writer's checklist. While students were memorizing the acronym, they were allowed to use their own copy of the acronym that was placed in their writing folder for their own personal reference. To encourage the memorization of the acronym the students were informed that they were going to have a quiz on the acronym. The acronym taught was "STOP COPS on STILTS" (see figure 3).   The word "STOP" was created and used to help the student organize the paragraph. The well-known and frequently used acronym "COPS" (Schumaker, 1981, as cited by Polloway, Patton, & Serna, 2005), was taught to assist the students in editing their paragraph for mechanical and grammatical mistakes. The word "STILTS" was created and used to encourage the students to edit their sentences to make sure their sentences contained elements such as: transitional words, interesting words, sentences that were in logical

order, varied in length, and complete. As in the other phases, five writing samples from each of the five selected students were collected and analyzed during this phase.

The last phase was included in the study to evaluate whether or not the five students generalized the acquisition of the new writing strategies in other subject areas. In this phase samples were taken in different subject areas and students were not reminded to use their new writing strategies. Writing samples were evaluated to determine if each student maintained their previous level of writing competency.

Analyses

Each student completed twenty paragraphs during the four phases of the study. A checklist was designed for each student to verify how many features the student used in each paragraph. The data from each of the four phases were compared and analyzed to verify if the student had improved their writing by including more of the targeted elements of writing than they did during the baseline. The twenty paragraphs were scrutinized to determine if each student actually improved in certain areas such as punctuation, or remembering to include a title or concluding sentence. In addition, the data from each of the twenty writing prompts were compared to see if the five students scored better on certain writing prompts. The purpose of analyzing the data from all five students on each prompt was to make sure that other factors beyond the control of the researcher did not change the data.

Results

Data collected during this study were analyzed and compared in three different dimensions. First of all, the five targeted students' scores were compared on an individualized basis to determine if certain students benefited from the instruction and at which phases the instructional methodologies were the most helpful in improving the number of writing features included in the

student's compositions.   The data on each student (see Figures 5 through 9) revealed that the instructional methodology using the SRSD model of self-regulatory strategies seemed to be beneficial for each student in different areas.

Although data were not gathered during the generalization stage for Seth due to extended absences during the generalization phase, this student did improve across the first three phases in seven out of the eight writing features assessed (see Figure 5). Nick demonstrated consistent improvement in two areas (see Figure 6). However, two different areas indicated a slight drop during the generalization phase.

Lee showed substantial progress by using the methods and strategies taught during the course of this study.   The quality of his writing compositions was enhanced during this study as demonstrated by improvement across all phases in five out of the eight areas (see Figure 7). It is also important to note that Lee did improve in two of the areas (including a title, and correct punctuation at the end of sentences) during the check-list and acronym phases, but this improvement did not extend to the area of generalization.

Dramatic inconsistencies in the data collected on Rick and Brice made it difficult to interpret the benefit of the strategies taught in this study. For Rick this may be due in part to the fact that he did exceptionally well during the baseline. The researcher believes that the added emphasis on writing during this stage motivated Rick to try harder during this phase and thus the good results were used as a baseline.   Brice also did better than expected during the baseline phase, hitting the targeted goal of using the writing features in all five paragraphs by receiving a score of five of the eight writing features tested.

In the areas that Brice did not receive a score of five, he did show improvement during the check-list phase.

Secondly, a data table was constructed to compare the results of all five students across the four phases of the study (see Table 1). The data reported in Table 1 revealed that, overall, the students improved in the number of writing features included in their written compositions when they were using the check list as a self-regulatory strategy. However, this improvement did not transfer for all students to the acronym phase and the generalization phase of the study. In fact, some of the students seemed to lose their motivation to use the strategies taught when they did not have something concrete (Writer's Checklist) to keep them focused on what should be included in their writing.

Individual writing features such as remembering to include a title and indent the paragraph were compared (see Figure 4) and analyzed in the last dimension of the data collection process for all students across the four phases. Results indicate that on average the five targeted students remembered to include more of the writing features stressed during instructional times during the check-list phase than during the baseline phase.

Results also indicate that on average the five targeted students remembered to include a title, a topical sentence, three supporting sentences, a concluding sentence, capital letters at the beginning of the sentence, and correct punctuation at the end of the sentences, more times during the check-list phase than during the baseline phase. The only writing feature that improved during the acronym phase was paragraph indention. Three features were used on average the same number of times during the check-list and acronym phase: three supporting sentences, sentences in logical order, and correct punctuation at the end of each sentence. Only four of the eight writing features showed a slight decrease in the number of times included when comparing the baseline and the generalization phase: including a title, paragraph indention, three supporting sentences, and punctuation.

Discussion

The results of the study suggest that the strategies taught using the SRSD methods were beneficial for the targeted students as a whole, but the gains were more difficult to interpret for particular students. For example, although Brice did not show a dramatic improvement in the number of writing features included in his writing, he did show the most improvement in his attitude toward the writing process as indicated by the Personal Writing Evaluation, the improvement in the quality of his handwriting, and the effort expended. The gains in handwriting appear to the researcher to be a by-product of the emphasis on writing and the students' overall effort to improve his writing.

In terms of generalization, results indicate that the findings of this study were consistent with the results of a study conducted by Sexton, Harris, and Graham (1998), in which students had difficulty maintaining the gains made immediately following instruction. The students in the present study demonstrated a lack of maintenance between the check-list phase and the generalization phase. The implications of the data suggest that the students in this study would benefit from "booster sessions and follow-up procedures to promote maintenance" (Sexton, Harris, & Graham, 1998, p. 311). One factor that may have contributed to the decline in scores during the generalization phase was the fact that this phase happened to fall the week before a holiday vacation. Students seemed to display a restless spirit during this week and did not put forth as much effort as was shown during the previous three phases. Additionally, Seth was absent repeatedly during the generalization phase due to illness which hampered the collection of data.

In this present study, students learned to organize their writing first by using a graphic organizer, then by using the acronym STOP. They also learned strategies to help them edit their own writing using a self-monitoring checklist, and finally by using the acronyms COPS and

STILTS.   In contrast to a similar study conducted by Troia and Graham (2002), testing the efficacy of using self-regulatory strategies to teach students to become better writers, the students in this study were not identified as having a learning disability. One might state that a limitation of this study was that it was based on the SRSD model that was developed to help students that have some type of a learning disability.   However, despite the lack of an LD label, the patterns of improvement shown during the four phases of the direct instructional strategy of this study are consistent with the results found by Troia and Graham (2002). The data from this study suggest that students who are not identified with a learning disability but express learning difficulties in the classroom, can, and do, benefit from direct, explicit instruction in the writing process by using self-monitoring checklists and acronyms to help them organize and edit their compositions.

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Table 1: Number of Times Writing Features Are Included Across Five Paragraphs

Number of Times Writing Features Are Included Across Five Paragraphs

Student #	Title	Indent	Topical sentence	3 Supporting Sentences	Sent. in logical order	Concluding Sentence	Capitals	Punctuation
Base Line Data								
Seth	4	4	3	5	5	3	3	4
Nick	5	5	4	5	5	3	5	5
Lee	3	4	3	4	5	4	3	3
Rick	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Brice	3	5	5	5	5	5	3	2
Average	4	4.6	4	4.8	5	4	3.8	3.8
Check List Used								
Seth	5	3	5	5	5	4	5	4
Nick	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Lee	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4
Rick	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	4
Brice	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5
Average	4.8	4.6	4.8	5	5	4.8	4.8	4.4
Acronym Used								
Seth	3	5	4	4	5	4	4	5
Nick	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Lee	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Rick	3	5	3	3	5	3	3	4
Brice	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	3
Average	3.8	5	4.4	4.4	5	4.4	4.4	4.4
Generalization								
Seth	Absent - Did not collect enough data during generalization stage.							
Nick	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5
Lee	2	5	5	5	5	5	4	2
Rick	2	4	5	4	5	5	4	5
Brice	3	4	5	4	5	4	2	2
Average	2.8	4.25	5	4.5	5	4.75	3.75	3.5

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Figure 1: Graphic Organizer

Angling for an Allowance

Opinion/Topic Sentence:

Supporting Details:

① ② ③

④ ⑤

Conclusion: _____

Figure 2: Writer's Checklist

Writer's Checklist

Name_____   Date_____
Assignment_____

Check off each step to edit your writing.

_____ 1. Title
_____ 2. Paragraph is indented.
_____ 3. Topic sentence
_____ 4. 3 Supporting sentences
_____ 5. Sentences are in logical order.
_____ 6. Concluding sentence
_____ 7. Sentences begin with a capital letter.
_____ 8. Punctuation at end of sentences.

Figure 3: Acronym: STOP COPS ON STILTS

COPS ON STILTS

S   Start with a title

T   Topic sentence

O   *Organize* 3 supporting sentences

P   Plan a concluding sentence

C   Capital letter

O   *Overall appearance*   Indention

P   Punctuation

S   Spelling

S · *Sentences*

T · Transitional words

I · Interesting words

L · Lengths are varied and in logical order

T · Take my time & revise

S · Sentences complete and varied

Figure 4: Average Number of Times All Students Use Writing Features
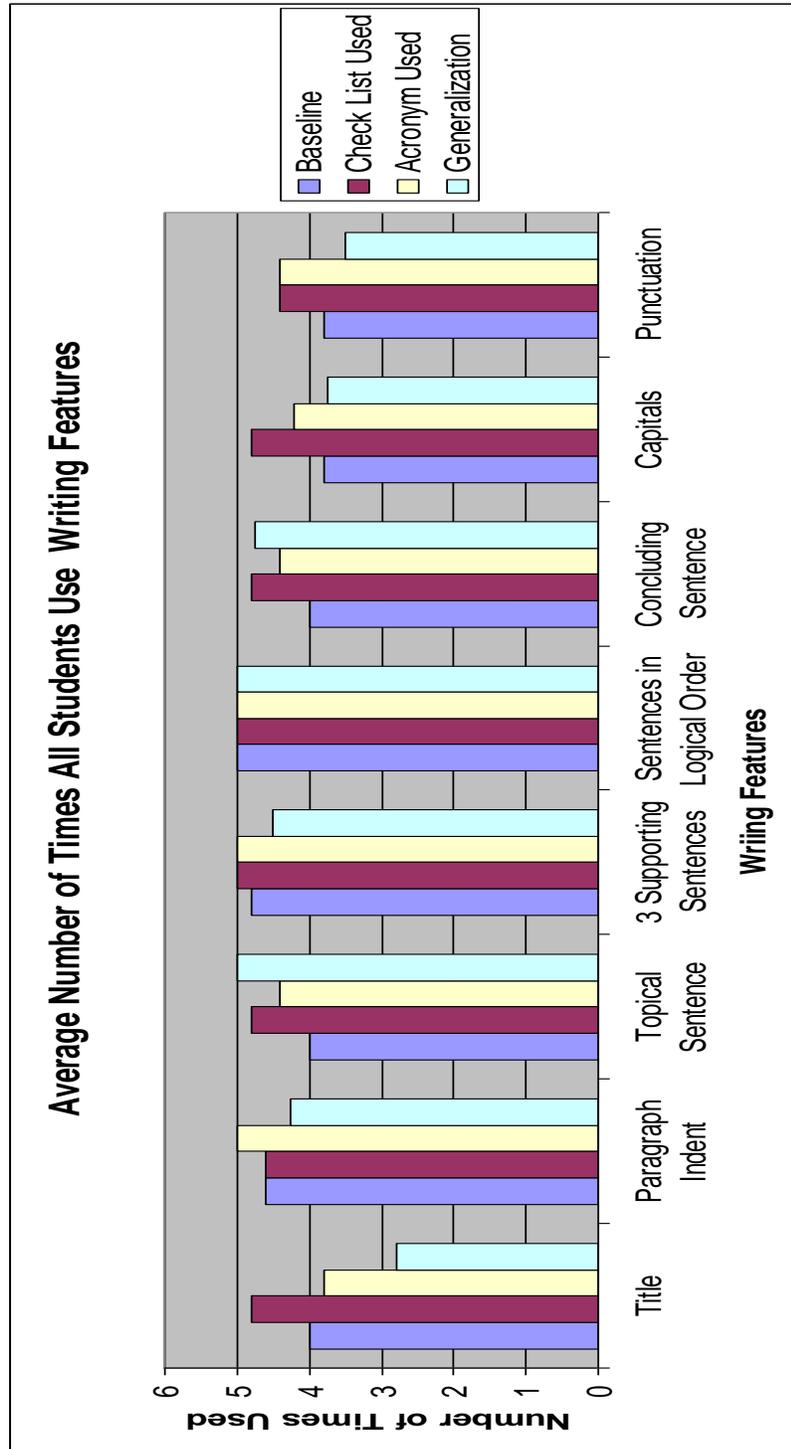
Figure 5: Seth's Writing Assessment Data
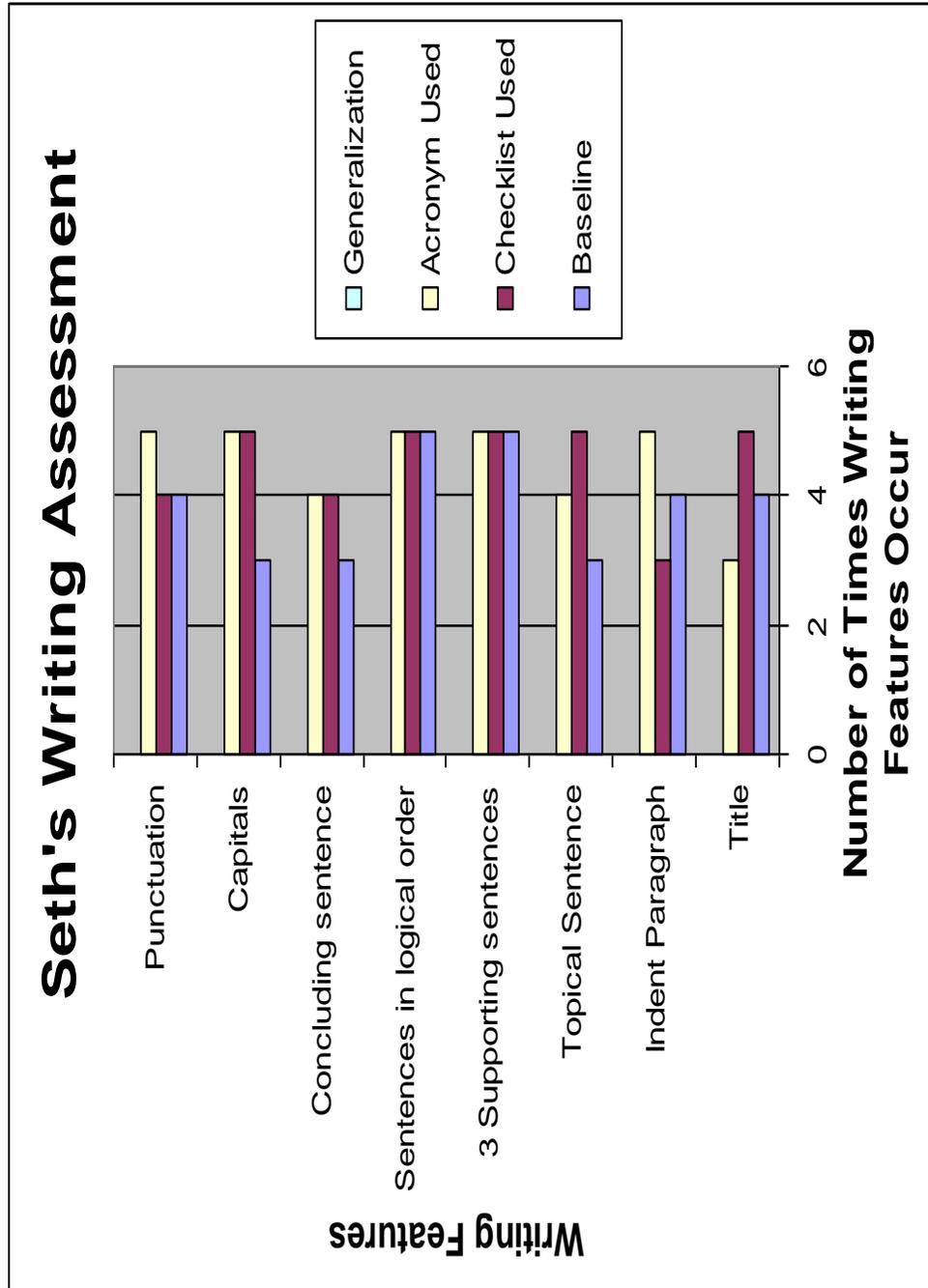
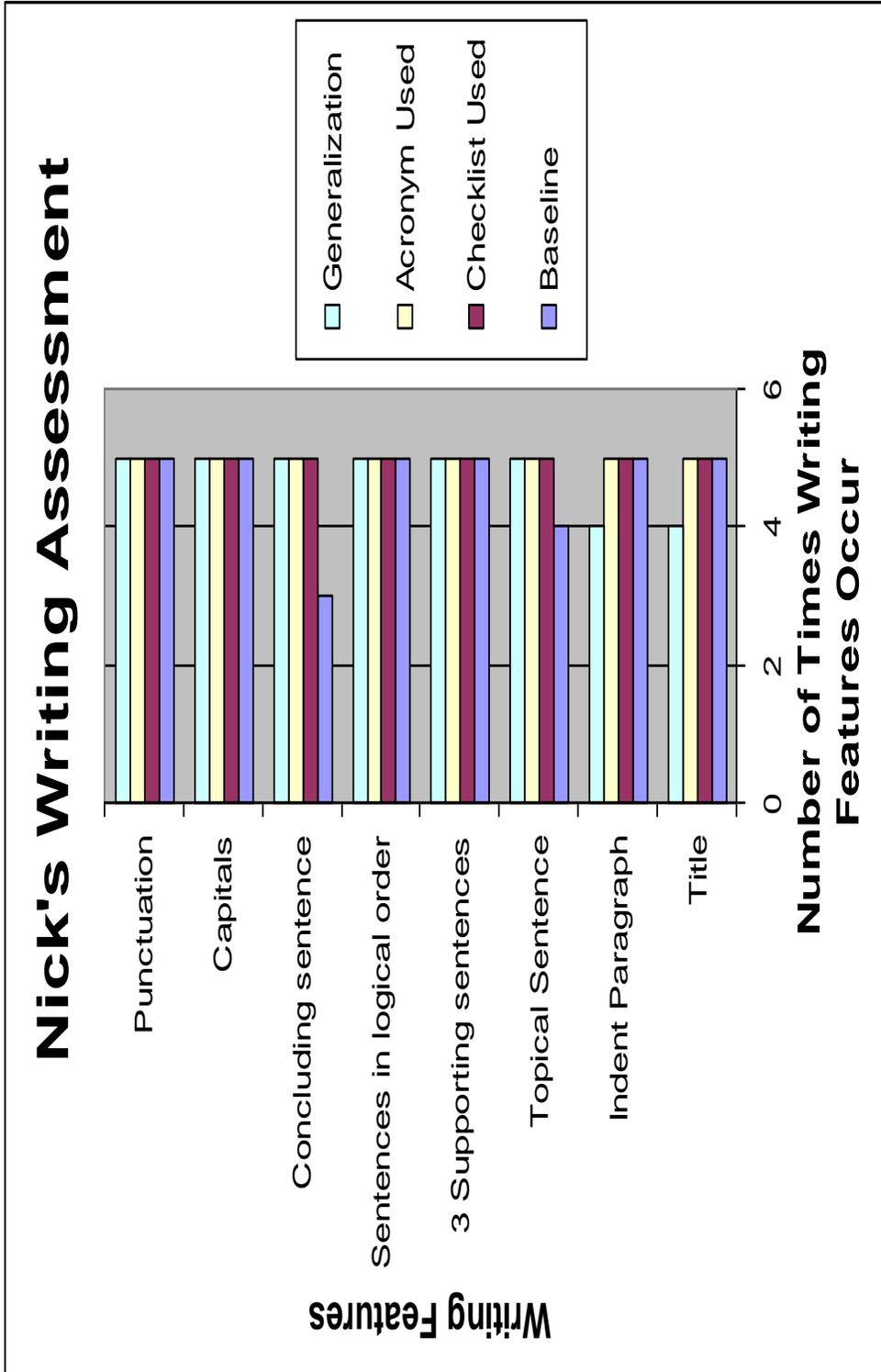Figure 6: Nick's Writing Assessment Data

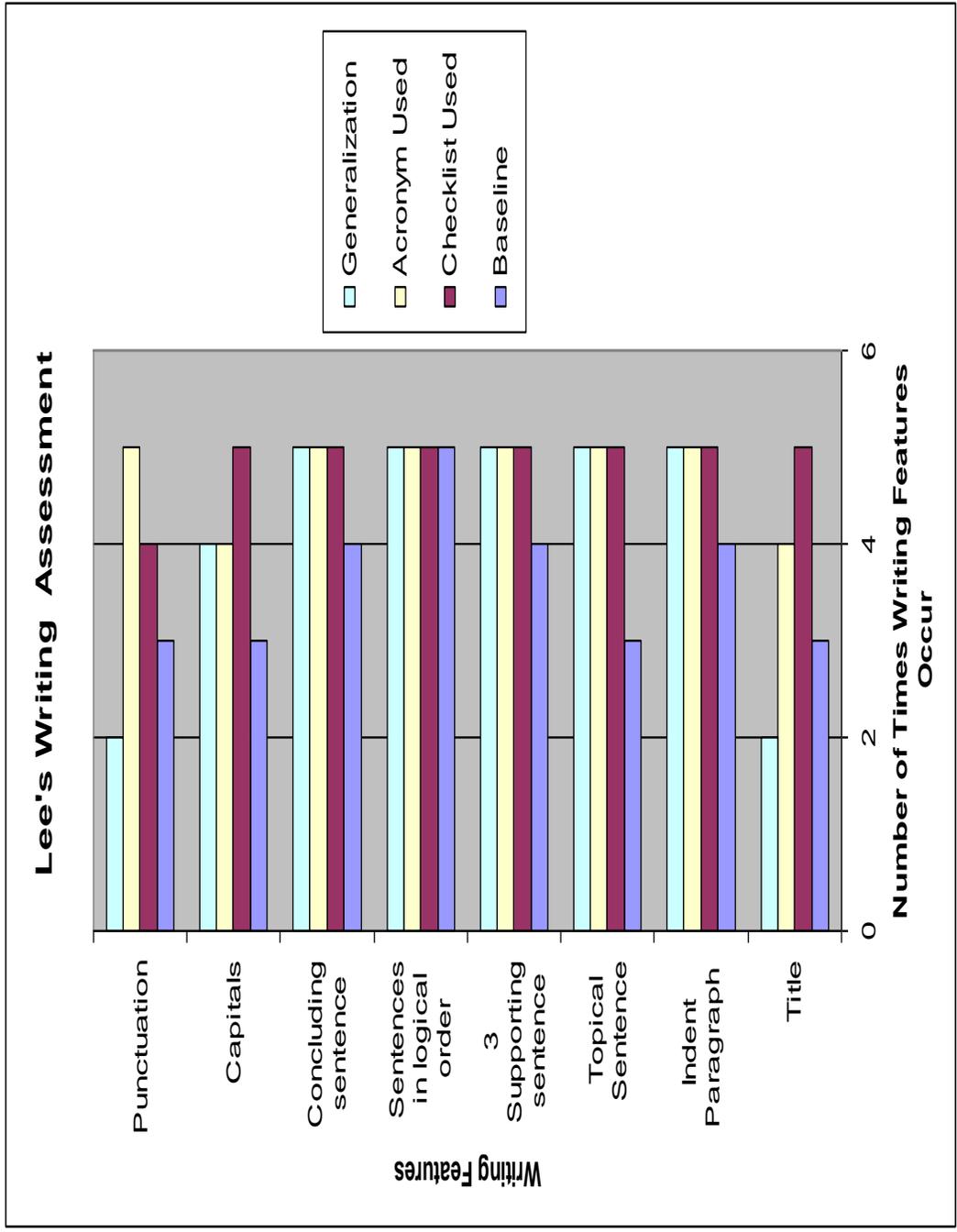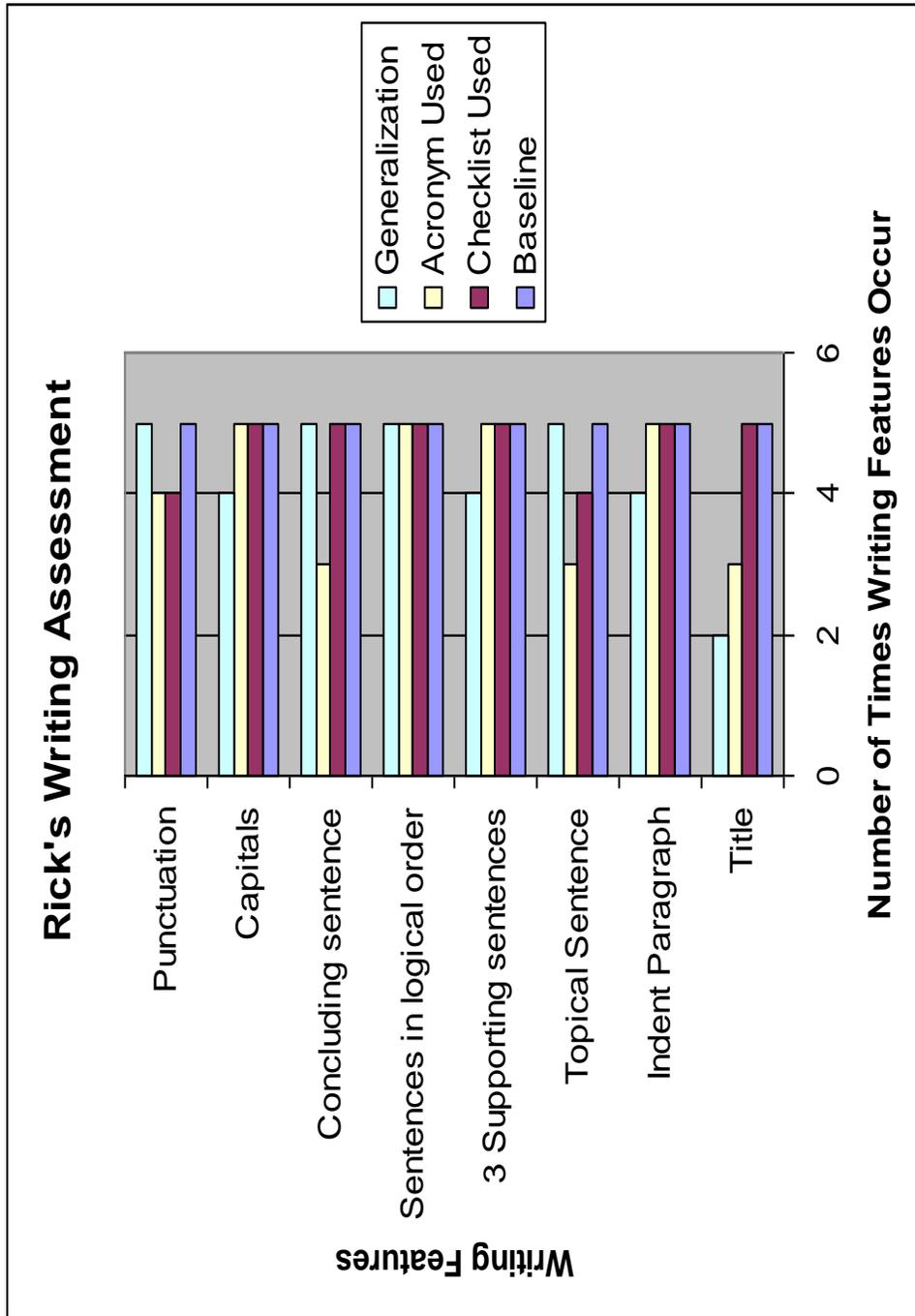Figure 7: Lee's Writing Assessment Data

Figure 8: Rick's Writing Assessment Data

Figure 9: Brice's Writing Assessment Data