The effect of supporting questions on children’s emerging writing skills

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This study investigated the effect of supporting questions for the emergence of children’s writing skills. For this study, five-year-old children in a classroom were observed face-to-face in two implementations. This study used a coding system related to emerging writing skills and supporting questions that were intended to support the emergence of the children’s writing skills. Writing samples were collected two times from the children. First, children freely wrote on their paper. After one week, a second set of writing samples was collected from each child who was asked supporting questions. 18 children’s writing samples were coded two times according to these writing skills. Children showed writing skills on their paper, such as drawings, scribblings and letter writings. They also showed more writing skills in the second sample. The findings of this study showed the effect of supporting questions on children’s writing products; these children spent more time on writing and showed more writing skills with supporting questions.

Key words: Supporting questions, writing skills, preschool.

INTRODUCTION

The current study addresses the relation of supporting questions and emergent writing skills, and basic idea that children’s writing skills increase with supporting questions. An important part of the current study is that if children are supported with questions about planning, explaining, and evaluating for their emerging writing skills, they expend more effort on emerging writing skills and spend more time writing. Children’s early knowledge about writing, plays a vital role for later literacy success (Puranik and Lonigan, 2011; Fogo, 2008; Welsch et al., 2003). Increasing children’s writing knowledge includes print and alphabet knowledge as a concept (Justice and Ezell, 2001; Welsch et al., 2003). Children learn communication by putting words on their paper, and their writing progresses from scribbling to letter writing, word writing and conventional writing (Buxton, 2011; Puranik and Lonigan, 2011; Falconer, 2010; Fogo, 2008; Bennett et al., 2005; Welsch et al., 2003; Haney, 2002; Leong, 1998). Before writing letter skills, children show scribbles that resemble letters, such as linear, vertical, and circular...
Therefore, children's early knowledge about writing plays a vital role for later literacy success (Puranik and Lonigan, 2011). Preschool teachers should provide multiple opportunities and support with classroom activities for encouraging children's emergent writing skills (Fogo, 2008). For effective learning, it is very important for children to decide what they want to write about before they begin to write. When teachers ask questions about children's writing, such as, "What do you think about your writing?" children can begin to think about what and how they will write. Then, children can plan, explain, and evaluate their own writing by giving their responses to such teacher questions. Also, children's writing improves with supporting questions. When teachers ask questions such as "How did you plan your writing?" children focus on writing more than just letters or words. Also, teachers can scaffold children's ideas while they write, and teachers can encourage thinking about what children can write (Fisher et al., 2010). During the scaffolding writing process, children use drawings which have lines to represent words, in order to convey messages. When teachers talk, they help children remember more than when children simply write alone. In particular, teachers' questions help students think about concepts to help them better understand the meaning of words, and children can concentrate on writing their messages. In this way, children can perform at the highest level of the zone of proximal development for their emergent writing (Kozilin et al., 2003; Leong, 1998).

This study is designed to show that asking supporting questions affects children's writing skills. This study also emphasizes the importance of planning, explaining, and evaluating writing by asking questions that support the writing of children.

Propose of the study

This study shows the effect of teacher questions on children's writing, and how these ways of supporting children can develop their writing such as using more lines, letter, or words. Also, children focus their message with their responses to their writing planning, explaining and evaluating. Therefore, children spend more time writing and use more of their writing skills when they receive supporting questions. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of supporting questions emerging writing skills in a preschool class. This study also seeks to understand how they show their writing ability when we ask questions about writing to children. The specific research questions to be examined include:

1. What is the effect of supporting questions in spending time in children's writing?
2. When preschool teachers ask supporting questions, how do children show their emerging writing skills, such
Table 1. Properties of Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of preschool attendance</th>
<th>Gender of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were 10 girls and eight boys; 16 children attended two years and two children attended one year of preschool.

The findings of this study will contribute to encouraging children’s writing abilities. They also will help us understand how children can spend more time in writing by using supporting questions to improve their writing.

**METHODOLOGY**

Experimental and qualitative strategies were used to explore the role of supporting questions in emergent literacy in this study. Qualitative data, such as observations, enabled description and analysis of how children show emergent themes (Patton, 1990). Qualitative comments were noted (why, whom, and what they wrote, the use of scribble, drawing, writing) and all writing samples were evaluated to see the effect of supporting questions on children’s writing.

**Participants**

Many children begin to write through conventional writing in their early years (Bakst and Essa, 1990). Therefore, in this study, participants were from an inclusive preschool class, with an average age of 5 and 6 years old. The classroom was a public school full day classroom in an Eskisehir city. This school serves a middle socioeconomic status (SES) population. The class consisted of 18 students and one teacher. (Table 1)

**Data Collection**

In this study, data collection was conducted in two parts. First, I did face-to-face and one-to-one writing activities with the each child in order to collect writing samples without supporting questions in the teacher’s room in the preschool. I said “You can write a letter for your family” and I gave a pencil and paper to each child. Writing samples were collected from each child, and I used a stopwatch for identifying the amount of time each child took to write. Second, after one week, I collected writing samples again with the same children in the teacher’s room. Similarly, after I gave them a pencil and paper, I said, “You can a write letter.” This time, while the children were writing their letter, I asked questions about planning, explaining, and evaluating their writing.

**Data Analyses**

The first writing samples were collected within one day, during the children’s available times. The second writing samples were collected the following week from the same children. These data were coded with coding system by two coders.

**Coding system**

This study showed how supporting children’s emergent literacy with questions affects the children’s writing samples. Supporting questions provided children with the opportunity to think about their writing, and motivated the children to work on their writing. Children focused more with the questions. This study used eight supporting questions (Appendix), developed according to three investigators, for children to show their writing development skills.

(ON) Own name writing (Did the children write their own name?)
(ONL) Own first and last name written together
(L) Letter writing (How many letters did child write totally on their paper?)
One letter (1), two letters (2), …
(W) Word writing (How many words did the children write?)
One word (1), two words (2), …
(P) Picture drawing
(S) Scribbling (such as linear, vertical, horizontal, and circular)
(N) Number writing
One number (1), two numbers (2), …

**Inter-rater reliability**

The writing samples were coded by the two researchers and they were double-checked independently. To provide uniformity in coding, 25% (n=9) of the writing samples were chosen to assess inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliability was calculated for each coding feature. The reliability of coding the writing samples was 87%.

**FINDINGS**

In the first implementation, I observed that the children directly begin to write. Before starting their writing, they thought very little about their writing. In the second implementation, the children gave answers and they decided to write about who, what and how. They chose family members for writing their message to, such as mother, father, brother, or sister. After their decision to whom to write their messages, usually the children said, “I don’t know how I can write”. In Turkey, The Early Childhood Education Program does not have any object for teaching writing, such as letters or words. Children have the same drawings or picture making activities for improving their small muscles and finger muscles, and teachers teach only print awareness in early childhood education. They learn writing formally in the first grades, so they hesitate how and what to write. Supporting
questions fostered children’s writing, and these questions reveal their emergent writing. The children in this study tried to write some letters and did scribbling. Some children preferred to make writing and pictures together. When I asked what they wrote in their paper, the children held their paper in both hands, and they read their letters. Usually, they read love messages to their families in their letters. (Figure 1)

For example, when I gave Sueda paper to write, she said to me, “I don’t know writing” Then, I asked supporting questions and she began to write some letters. When I asked, “Can you read your writing?” she said to me “I don’t know writing”. She then read her letter, and she said some love message to her mother. Also, she decided whether her letter was finished and she evaluated her writing (Figure 2). Another example was when I asked, “Are you finishing your writing?”, and Idil said, “I know, stop, I found,” and she wrote again some letters for her father. All of the children looked at their letters, and each child said, “I liked my writing.” This conversation shows that she realized what she supposed do, and strived more writing. Figure 2, proved the positive effects of supporting questions. (Table 2) Looking at Table 2, children spent more time writing their product, when I asked supporting questions. Especially, Idil, Alper, Irem, and Burak spent more than twice the time. Only Deren decreased spending time in the second writing (4.32 to 4.12), and she did not want to write; before writing, she said, “I do not know writing.” (Figure 3)

Deren drew a picture like Irem and Kerem in the first sample, but she wrote her name and she drew a clock, including numbers, in the second. After thinking, Deren
Table 2. Coding Writing Samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children's Name</th>
<th>Participation times in first writing (minute)</th>
<th>Participation times in second writing</th>
<th>First Writing samples</th>
<th>Second supporting writing samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idil</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>(P), (S), (L, 4)</td>
<td>(S), (ON), (L, 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elif</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>(P), (S)</td>
<td>(P), (S), (ONL), (L, 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nehir</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>(ONL), (L, 11)</td>
<td>(ONL), (L, 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emre</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>(P), (L, 3)</td>
<td>(P), (S), (ON), (L, 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alper</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>(S)</td>
<td>(S), (ON)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emir</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td>(P), (L, 2), (N,1)</td>
<td>(ON), (L, 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sueda</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>6.53</td>
<td>(P)</td>
<td>(ON), (L, 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deren</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>(P)</td>
<td>(ON), (N, 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mert</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>(P), (L, 6)</td>
<td>(L, 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halil</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>8.46</td>
<td>(P)</td>
<td>(P), (ON), (L,12) (W,1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zumra</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>(P), (ON)</td>
<td>(P), (ON), (L,4), (N,5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerem</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>10.38</td>
<td>(P)</td>
<td>(P), (S), (ONL), (L,5), (N,26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pelin</td>
<td>6.35</td>
<td>8.56</td>
<td>(P)</td>
<td>(ON), (L, 147)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irem</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>(P)</td>
<td>(P), (ONL), (L, 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burak</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>5.36</td>
<td>(S)</td>
<td>(L, 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umut</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>(P), (S), (ON)</td>
<td>(P), (S), (ON)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yasemin</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>(P), (ON)</td>
<td>(P), (S), (ONL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecrin</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>(P), (ON), (L, 2), (W,1)</td>
<td>(L, 12), (W,1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.** Deren’s first and second writing samples

read her paper, and she said, “Mom, I will come soon” in her message. The children showed more writing skills in the second writing samples, outside of Umut. For example, in the first writing sample, even though Halil, Kerem, Irem, Sueda, and Deren only made a picture, their writing skills emerged in the second, such as letter writing, and each child wrote their own name with supporting questions. (Figure 4) Halil showed more writing skills in the second writing samples. He wrote his own name, one word, and 12 letters. I observed that he was more motivated and strived for writing as conventional. He read his letter and he said, “I go to the travel with my dad and we stop in front of tree and we see dog on the road.” (Figure 5a) Kerem made a picture only as in the first writing sample. When I asked supporting questions about his second sample, he wrote his own first and last name. He also wrote five letters and 26 numbers that resembled to writing. He understood the
difference between drawing and writing, based on my questions. (Figure 5b)

Irem similarly, only drew a picture of her own and her mom in the first writing sample. In the second, she wrote her own name and 14 letters. She explained her thinking with a picture in the first sample. She started to think with questions about how, she can write, and she used the words for explaining her thinking in the second session.
She said, “I love mom. You are very special for me.”
(Figure 6a) There is significant difference between the first and second writing samples of Pelin, and the supporting questions clearly affected her writing. She showed more writing skills, and she wrote 147 letters on her page in the second writing sample. Likewise, Burak and Alper only made scribbling, and Elif also made pictures and scribbling in the first sample, but they showed more writing in the second writing samples. (Figure 7) In the first sample, Burak only scribbled. However, He wrote several letters in the second sample. These writing samples exposed his emerging writing skills and the changes of his thought. In other words, supporting questions directed him into the thought of writing in the second sample. Also, he spent more time on writing with supporting questions (1.25 to 5.36 min.), because he thought of writing letters more.

Similarly, Alper showed more writing skills in the second. He wrote his own name and shapes like letters and he spent more time on writing in the second sample (.15 to 4.33 min.) Looking at Elif’s samples, first she drew a picture, but she wrote her own name and some letters and she explained the relations between oral language and the writing in her picture in the second sample and also she gave information about comprehending writing functions (Figure 6b).

Elif’s writing samples showed that she was considering writing skills in the second sample (Figure 8). She started
to separate the difference between writing and drawing, so she wrote her names and several letters. The children showed different writing skills in their samples. Considering the first and the second samples, only the rate of drawing a picture decreased in the second while other writing skills increased by crucial proportions. (Table 3) When supporting questions to the children were used in the second writing samples, they showed their emergent writing skills. 61.1% (n=11) of the children wrote their names on their paper, and 27.8% (n=5) of the children wrote their first and last name together, so 88.9% (n=16) of the children totally wrote their names. While 33.3% (n=6) of the children wrote letters in the first samples, 77.8% (n=14) of the children wrote letter in the second. For children who focused a writing because of the questions in the second, they drew picture less (n=8).

In Turkey, early childhood education programs do not have direct goals for teaching writing. Children learn reading and writing skills formally in the first grade, so children only learn some letters and words through environmental interactions. When I asked supporting questions about their writing planning, explaining, and evaluating, they began to reason and they struggled with their emerging writing, so supporting questions were watershed for their understanding the differences in writing. Thus, this study supported children’s emergent writing, and children showed their developmental writing stages.

Table 3: Differences in the Emergent Writing of Children in the Two Implementations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Samples</th>
<th>ON</th>
<th>ONL</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n %</td>
<td>n %</td>
<td>n %</td>
<td>n %</td>
<td>n %</td>
<td>n %</td>
<td>n %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fist</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

The first research question for this study was what the effect of supporting questions is in raising the time children spend in writing. Another research question was how the children show their emerging writing skills, such as letter writing or word writing when preschool teachers ask supporting questions. In this study, I implemented support aimed at increasing children's awareness of their own writing skills and emerging their writing skills. The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of support questions on children’s emerging writing skills, and their thoughts about the meaning of writing by means of the support questions. Data were collected during first and second writing samples, to show children's ability to explore writing skills when planning, explaining, and evaluating their writing. Overall, the descriptive analyses reveal that when children asked more questions, they used more writing than pictures, and they spent more time within the writing product in the second writing samples. Also, in the second writing samples the children appeared to focus more on their writing skills and to get more motivated. With the first research question, I addressed the effect of supporting questions on the time children spend time in writing. Outside of one child, each child spent more time during their second writing product, compared to their first writing samples.

In support of this view, Falconer (2010) has shown that asking questions helps children find objects and use writing tools, so children keep writing a long time. In response to the second research question, the findings show the effect of supporting questions on children’s emerging writing. In the second writing samples, children showed more writing skills, such as writing their own name, and their letter writing improved over their first writing samples. Also, when I asked questions about their writing, the difference between writing and drawing emerged in their writing skills, such as letter writing (n=16). This method allowed children’s writing skills to emerge and they showed frequently the importance of practice in stages of writing. After reviewing several studies, King (2012) implemented writing a workshop in preschool. This implementation had conference time, and during this time she asked questions for thinking about writing topics or the planning of children. Children talked obviously about their writing. The study was showed that children began to understand writing meanings, and they added more things in their paper. Similarly, this study was implemented to ask children direct questions about their writing organization, and children showed more writing stages.

Levin and Bus (2003), analyzed children’s writing and drawing for exploring the differentiation of writing and drawing by the children. Thus, they used drawing and writing tasks, and they used questions for understanding their product as writing or drawing. These questions intentionally encouraged them to think about the meaning of writing; and the children improved in their ability to classify their writing and their drawing in their study. Buxton (2011), examined gender differences in writing skills, and she collected work samples from children. She used some questions for children to organize their writing; thus, children understood the writing process better. Hall et al. (2013), implemented an interactive writing program during the 13 weeks in preschool. This program included some strategies related to this study, such as discussion negotiation about writing topics and talking about letters or sounds. They found a significant difference between interactive writing and the control group, and the children who received interactive writing developed alphabet knowledge skills. Rowe (2008), investigated the participation of children and teachers at a preschool writing center, and she observed the teachers over nine months, in all the observations, teachers talked very little, and they used five talk strategies for understanding the writing meaning of children. Only 10.5% of the teachers used questions for descriptions of the writing message of children, such as “What did you write?” Finally, she found that the use of talk and questions has a powerful influence in children's emerging writing skills, by providing them motivation and guidance, so children can recognize their own writing, and it also encourage participation in writing events.

Emergent writing consists of a developmental sequence that includes picture drawing, scribbling, random letter-like shapes, as well as writing a conventional letter (Kaderavek and Justice, 2004; Welsch et al., 2003). Supporting children in their attempts to use writing, is a crucial role in their writing development. Thus, children should be supported to use a variety of emergent writing strategies and the production of developmental stages in order to increase their responsibility for a range of writing tasks (Kaderavek and Justice, 2004). When Table 3 was examined, the children in their second writing samples showed how their writing skills were emerging. It is not surprising that the children showed more writing skills with supporting questions. Supporting questions were shown to be a valid indicator of children’s emergent writing performance. Considering the first and the second writing samples, the relationship between supporting questions and writing performance was shown by a positive correlation. Teachers should use questions as a strategy in their writing activities for supporting the writing products of children, using more writing concepts with children, and tracking children's progress over time. Finally, using supporting questions should be presented to teachers within the emergent literacy approach.

CONCLUSION

In this study, writing samples were collected two times and first time children wrote freely. In the second implementation, supporting questions were asked for they show
their emergent writing skills. The children were observed to strive more in their writing in the second implementation. Even though 15 children drew a picture without supporting questions, in the second implementation only 8 children drew a picture with other writing skills, such as letter writing. Mostly, children were content to write letters (14), their own first or first and last names together (16), when supporting questions were asked. Looking at the first and second writing samples, the relation between the supporting questions and their writing performance showed positive correlation. Children were observed to be more motivated and they struggled to show conventional writing in the second implementation.

Limitation and future direction

This study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the most critical limitation is that my examination of the writing samples was conducted for identifying the effect of questions on 18 children by experimental implementation, so the participants in this study were a narrow sample. Future research needs to examine the effect of questions on children’s emerging writing in the different ways than just the experimental. A second limitation is that this study used eight supporting questions, developed according to three investigators, for planning, explaining, and evaluating writing. Supporting questions should be improved, and questions should be added for more effect on writing skills in future research. Finally, this study examined the effect of supporting questions on five and six year old children’s writing skills in preschool. Using supporting questions should also be researched for different aged classrooms and in other countries.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

Appendix

This study asked following supporting questions:
1. What do you want to write about?
2. Who are you writing for you? Who is it?
3. Can you show how you write?
4. What did you write in your paper?
5. What else do you want to write? Do you want to write anything else?
6. Are you finish your writing?
7. Can you read your writing?
8. What do you think about your writing? Did you like it?