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RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPROVING BASAL SKILL INSTRUCTION

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For many years, basal teachers' manuals have been used as the primary resource for providing reading skill instruction. Recently, researchers have found that basal teachers' manuals provide little structure and rationale for helping teachers give effective skill instruction. In fact, teachers themselves rate skill lesson directives in teachers' manuals as only moderately helpful (Bacharach & Alexander, 1986).

In 1981, Durkin found that comprehension skill lessons in teachers' manuals were more evaluative in nature than instructional. Because basal skill lessons provide little help for teaching effective skill lessons, teachers often resort to a practice Durkin (1981) labeled "mentioning and assigning." Mentioning is saying just enough about a skill or concept to assign a worksheet. In fact, recent reports indicate that skill instruction in many classrooms generally consists of teachers assigning and monitoring students' completion of commercially developed worksheets (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson, 1985). This article suggests three changes emerging from recent theory and research to help teachers improve the effectiveness of their lessons.

#1: Skill instruction should occur prior to reading rather than after the fact.

Although the story or text is the presumed context for applying skill instruction, the typical basal sequence has skill instruction following the story (Reutzel, 1985). Duffy and Roehler (1984) confirmed this fact when they remarked, "When comprehension is dealt with, it is after the fact; teachers frequently teach comprehension skills after students have read, and perhaps misunderstood, a story. They do this partly because it's recommended in most basal textbooks (page 1)."

We recommend that teachers teach basal skill lessons prior to reading the stories or text regardless of the placement of basal skill lesson instructional directives in the teacher's manual. By teaching skills prior to reading, students gain necessary reading skills in preparation for reading rather than learning reading skills after reading only to be applied to worksheets. Aside from theory and research, common sense dictates that if reading skills are learned to help one successfully read a text, then reading skill instruction should precede the text reading.

#2: Explicitly Relate Basal Skill Instruction to the Stories or Text.

In 1983, Mason found that 76% of teachers' instructional time was spent on instruction unrelated to the stories or texts children would be asked to read. Beck (1981) found that phonics instruction was poorly related to the stories children were assigned to read in their primers. Reutzel & Daines (in press) traced Mason's (1983) findings of the unrelatedness of reading instruction to basal teachers' manuals. They found that the instructional directives in seven basal series teachers' manuals were related to the stories or text less than 33% of the time. As a result, Reutzel and Daines strongly suggest that reading skill instruction be explicitly related to 1) the stories or texts the children will be expected to read, or 2) to functional, real-life reading situations in which the skill can be applied.

Since most basal teachers' editions fail to connect skill instruction to the stories or to real life situations, teachers will need to examine and adjust skill instruction to make explicit the relation between learning a reading skill and its application in reading a text. As it now stands, children may fail to recognize the connection between instruction in reading skills and strategies and the act of reading.

#3: Use Direct Instruction Techniques to Improve Basal Skill Instruction.

Another modification to traditional skill instruction we propose is rooted in the teacher effectiveness literature. Researchers such as Anderson, Evertson, and Brophy, 1979; Good, 1979; Rupley and Blair, 1978; and Stevens and Rosenshine, 1981 have established a strong connection

between student achievement and the use of direct instruction procedures. Direct instruction implies that the teacher is central to and actively involved in the teaching act.

Durkin (1978) defined comprehension instruction as the teacher engaging in modeling, demonstrating, explaining, and defining how to comprehend a text. Pearson (1985) indicated that teachers of reading in the '80s should assume the role of "sharers of secrets, conspirators, coaches, and cheerleaders" (p. 736), and provide students guided practice and substantive feedback.

To provide the direct, explicit skill instruction as suggested above, we find Hunter's Model (1984) to be an effective framework. This model consists of seven parts: 1) Anticipatory set, 2) Objective, 3) Instructional Input, 4) Modeling, 5) Checking for Understanding, 6) Guided Practice, and 7) Independent Practice. The elements of vocabulary development and background preceding the introduction of a new skill are captured under the heading of Anticipatory Set. We use Hunter's term Objective to represent the goal or purpose for learning the reading skill. Input focuses on necessary explanation of the reading skill. Next, the use of the skill to be taught is modeled in text or in a real world situation (Modeling). After modeling, students participate in a group experience where they apply the skill under the guidance of the teacher. This experience is called Guided Practice. Before, during and after guided practice, we check for understanding by observing student behavior and by asking questions. After guided practice, students are given an opportunity to apply the skill independently to the story in their reader and/or to a simulated real life event.

Finally, to Hunter's (1984) seven components of instruction, we add an eighth--Assessment. The effect of instruction if evaluated by the use of a criterion referenced test and/or teacher observations. The steps involved in using the Hunter Model (1984), including our modification, to provide direct, explicit basal skill instruction are summarized in Figure 1, on the following page.

To help teachers visualize the use of the three suggested changes to improve basal skill instruction, we present an example lesson on the comprehension skill of "getting the sequence." We chose this skill because many teachers find this skill to be particularly difficult to visualize teaching

Figure 1
THE DIRECT INSTRUCTION SKILL PLAN FOR
FOR TEACHING READING SKILL LESSONS

ANTICIPATORY SET

Relate the reading skill to be taught to the children's experiential backgrounds.

OBJECTIVE AND INPUT

Inform students about which reading skill they will be learning. Give students a purpose for learning the reading skill.

MODELING

Demonstrate how one learns and applies the reading skill.

PURPOSE SETTING AND GUIDED APPLICATION

Prepare the students to apply the reading skill in reading the basal story, or in a real life situation.

INDEPENDENT PRACTICE

Students apply the reading skill in reading the basal

CHECKING FOR UNDERSTANDING

Understanding the reading skill is checked throughout the lesson

REAL-LIFE APPLICATION

ASSESSMENT

prior to reading the story or text.

APPLYING THE SUGGESTED CHANGES IN INSTRUCTION

At the outset, we are careful to provide our basal skill instruction before the students read the story or text to be assigned. This is important to help students bridge the gap between instruction of the skill and application of the skill in reading. The lesson on "getting the sequence" begins with providing the anticipatory set.

Anticipatory Set

We begin by discussing several real world situations

when "getting the sequence" is of critical importance, such as using recipes, working math problems, assembling a bike, etc. Children are asked if they can recall a time when they failed to follow the correct order and the consequences that resulted. This is done to make critical ties between the skill taught and the individual backgrounds of the children.

Objective and Input

Next, the students are informed that the objective for the lesson is "getting the sequence." Getting the sequence is defined as the ability to reorder the events that occur in a story or in life.

The lesson input begins with a piece of text shown on an overhead projector to the entire group of children. Texts in which magic tricks are described serve well as an initial experience for demonstrating sequence of events. For example, we show children the water glass trick by filling a glass of water, putting a heavy piece of paper over the glass, turning it over and observing that the water remains in the glass without touching the paper. After this demonstration, a discussion of the written directions for the water glass trick ensues. Emphasis is placed upon locating sequence signal words. We point out to the children that there are words (vocabulary) in our language which often signal sequence, i.e., before, after, next, first, second, then, etc. Then, we sequence the directions on a timeline. To test the correctness of the sequence, several children can be invited to come forward and by following the sequence of our directions, perform the trick. This helps students immediately monitor their construction of the sequence of events leading up to the successful completion of the water glass trick.

Modeling

The role of the teacher during this stage of the lesson is to "model" the desired reading and thinking behaviors pertaining to the skill lesson. This usually means a "thinking aloud" process is used whereby we discuss aloud and demonstrate the application of our mental strategies to determine the sequence for the children. It is crucial to the success of the lesson for teachers to select an example for modeling that closely parallels the story to be read by the students

during subsequent stages of the reading lesson.

Another text is placed onto the overhead projector dealing with hot air ballooning. We read the passage aloud to the class, and list the important elements of the text related to hot air ballooning at the board. As we order and reorder these elements, we "think aloud" for the class so that the students are allowed to witness the logical processes and verification strategies we use to successfully complete the task.

Once the modeling process is completed, the steps for getting the sequence are recorded at the chalkboard. Students ask questions afterwards and will frequently offer alternatives in logic that bring others to the same conclusions. When we are reasonably certain that the students have grasped the essential elements of the skill, the lesson proceeds.

Guided Practice

The purpose of guided practice in our minds is to supervise the application of the skill and verify whether or not the children have understood the skill or concept being taught. Another reading selection is chosen that closely parallels those previously used, this time, a selection is presented on how to assemble a bicycle. To begin, we conduct a discussion about unfamiliar vocabulary and background information in preparation for reading the passage. After previewing the title of the story, surveying pictures and reading any subheadings, we ask the students to close their books and predict the necessary sequence for a success in constructing a bicycle based upon their limited knowledge of the story. Next, the children make advance predictions, then read the story silently. If the predictions are incorrect the children are instructed to revise them on their own to match the passage information. When students feel they have successfully noted the correct sequence, the summary is presented to the teacher for final evaluation.

Checking for Understanding

A pervasive element in direct instruction is checking for understanding. We continually assess student understanding throughout the instructional sequence and are prepared for reteaching activities as necessary. The most crucial

checkpoints seem to be after modeling, after guided practice, and after independent practice.

Purpose Setting and Independent Practice

The purpose of independent practice, we believe, is to verify whether or not the children have understood the skill or concept being taught and can apply it to their reading without requiring additional teacher assistance. It is also at this point in the lesson we make explicit the relation between the skill instructed and its application to reading the story or text. To accomplish this, we introduce the children to the story in their basal reader. In our basal lesson the story pertains to sky diving. To begin, we conduct a discussion about unfamiliar vocabulary and background information in preparation for reading the story. After previewing the title of the story, surveying pictures and reading any subheadings, we ask the students to close their books and predict the necessary sequence for a successful sky diving experience based upon their limited knowledge of the story. To increase the motivation and focus for the selection we remind the class that failure to "get the sequence" in this situation cause a prospective sky diver to suffer a very negative consequence.

As the children begin to venture their best guesses, we put the individual events onto large cards and hang them on a clothesline timeline. Next, we arrange the cards to reflect the group's predictions with respect to the story's sequence. Children are instructed to write down their own predicted sequence of events in the story if their sequence differs from the class prediction.

Now the children are ready to read the story to check their predictions. After the selection has been read, the children will be asked to review the sequence, revise the order as necessary, and add any missing elements not anticipated before the story had been read.

There is an important distinction between guided and independent practice that deserves some attention. When students engage in guided practice activities, they have the privilege of asking the teacher for assistance should they have difficulty completing the assignment. Formative evaluation and reteaching are necessary and integral components in guided practice. In contrast, during independent

practice the teacher does not intervene until the assignment has been completed by the student(s).

Real-Life Application

As a culminating activity, we involve our students in art, cooking, construction, or extended language projects. We brought an unassembled bicycle to school with the instructions and tools necessary to assemble it. We read books to the children about how bicycles were invented, and we have a wide variety of trade books available for them to read on cycling. Projects such as these help children realize that reading skills have application in the larger world context of life. These activities emphasize the social utility of reading skills and help them value the new reading skill acquired.

Assessment

To evaluate the effect of our instruction, a criterion test from other selected texts or passages can be designed to assess the reading skill of getting the sequence. Informal observations of the students' performance during the real-life application projects can also be used to assess student learning.

SUMMARY

The suggestions advanced provide comprehensive changes for providing purposeful, direct, and text-related reading skill instruction. The changes offer greater direction and rationale for teaching the various reading skills included in the typical reading curriculum. Moreover, the changes place skill instruction prior to the reading of the text in the reading lesson sequence to facilitate application of skills to the act of reading. Finally, the suggested changes encourage teachers to explicitly relate their instruction to the text or story the children will be asked to read. This is done to make critical connections between the teaching of reading skills and the application of reading skills during reading. Teachers who have used these suggestions for improving instruction have found their students to be the delighted beneficiaries of thoughtful, coherent basal reading skill instruction.

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