

How Do the Reading Strategies of Soar to Success Affect the Reading Levels of Sixth Grade Students?

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Submitted June 2001

Abstract

This study explores a reading program called "Soar to Success." The program focuses on the use of four reading strategies to improve students' reading abilities: summarizing, clarifying words, questioning, and predicting. The effectiveness of the program will be examined by examining student surveys (Appendix A), personal interviews, test scores based on the Degrees of Reading Power test (DRP), student reflections (Appendix B) and anecdotal records.

Introduction

Ellen Glasgow Middle School is located in Alexandria, VA. It educates approximately 1300 students who have origins in over thirty countries and speak roughly fifty-seven different languages. My class consists of ten students, six of whom are enrolled in the English as a Second Language program (ESL). These ten are all on similar reading levels and have similar reading skills and thus have been placed together to benefit all students including those that are in the ESL program and the four in general education.

Reading has become a priority at Glasgow and the administration is pursuing several programs to help students improve their reading abilities in both achievement and comprehension. Glasgow has used several programs over the past few years and hasn't found the program that best meets its needs. These programs are very expensive and the administration wants to determine which programs work the best for the population of students that attend Glasgow. However, Glasgow tested Soar to Success last year and decided to implement it full time this year.

Review of Literature

I am studying the effectiveness of a reading program that is used at Glasgow Middle School called "Soar to Success" (Soar). Four strategies are used in Soar to help students increase their reading and comprehension levels: summarize, clarify, question and predict.

According to J. David Cooper, the purpose of the Soar program is to accelerate learning for students in grades three through six who have difficulty reading. His two goals are (1) to accelerate student reading levels quickly and (2) to help these students be able to apply and use comprehension and reading strategies when reading in the other curriculum areas. Much of his work is based on the following research.

One book, edited by Cooper and Harris, has an article written by Anne Marie Sullivan Palincsar and Ann L. Brown entitled "Reciprocal Teaching: Activities to Promote 'Reading with the Mind'." This article focuses on the above strategies and how teachers should use those strategies when teaching reading to students.

Palincsar & Brown begin by stating that summarizing is used for self-review by remembering the most important parts of a story for their understanding. Using clarification can help students recognize words they do not understand and learn to use the context of the story to help them understand. Palincsar & Brown also noted that questioning is used by the students for self-testing. Is a student able to find or recall information if they are asked a question about what they just read? Predicting should be used to help students recall background information for helping them set goals for their reading.

A second source came from a pamphlet describing *Ten Proven Principles for Teaching Reading* (2000). The National Education Association distributed this pamphlet and one of its principles describes the strategies of summarization, questioning and predicting for helping students with their reading.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher gathered information using several methods including student surveys, personal interviews, DRP test scores, anecdotal notes through personal observations and student reflections incorporated in the Soar program.

DRP Test Scores

DRP tests were given to the students three times over the course of the school year to assess student progress. In looking at DRP scores, six students increased their reading levels while one student's score stayed the same and three students' scores went down.

It was disappointing to see three students, all ESL students, had decreasing test scores. This was distressing since the ESL population was the target group for the attempts to increase reading achievement.

Several explanations for this decrease in test scores may be offered. One possibility is that the decrease may be due to poor test taking skills. Both students appeared to be making progress in class even though the test scores may not show it. Another explanation may lay with the design of the DRP test items. These tests require students to read a cloze passage with blanks for words to fit in. They have a list of five words to choose from that could fit appropriately. The Soar program does not specifically target test taking in this manner. Assessment in the Soar program relies on reflecting and answering short questions about what the students just read which is completely different from the DRP.

DRP Scores

	Fall	Winter	Spring
Brenda	3.5	3.4	3.5
Devon	2.3	2.2	3.8
Daniel	3.0	3.1	3.5
Sam	3.7	3.5	4.2
Becky	3.9	4.7	5.4
Alana	3.4	3.1	3.0
Donald	3.5	3.1	3.8
Jake	3.4	2.8	2.6
Gretchen	3.5	2.7	3.2
Ethan	n/a	4.7	5.1

Surveys and Personal Interviews during Small Group Work

Student surveys and personal interviews were conducted at the mid-point of the Soar program to determine how students to explore students' preferences for strategies and then to see if they were using them during in-class reading. To collect this data, the researcher also kept anecdotal records and the students wrote reflections while they were working in small groups reading the Soar books.

When surveyed, students indicated preferences for two strategies as their favorites to use when reading Soar books. Six students chose the summarizing strategy, while four students chose the clarifying strategy. The summarizing strategy was chosen because the students liked understanding what the story was about without having to reread the whole story. The clarifying strategy was second, primarily because the students often did not know what some words meant. Many students said that they would rather not ask their friends about a word or look it up in the dictionary but would prefer to reread the sentence for better understanding.

Follow-up interviews with students showed that five students were using the strategy they chose in the survey on a regular basis. Three students used their chosen strategy as well as another strategy. Two students did not appear to be using the strategy that they had chosen during the survey. One student actually said that they used whichever strategy helped them the most and it all depended on the book they were reading. While the clarifying strategy was the listed as the first strategy students in the three (above) groups used, it was one of the strategies to which students after trying another strategy. Because of this, it appeared that students were using the clarifying strategy most often in their independent reading.

Reflections

In general, while students' reading abilities appears to have improved over the year, one must consider their growth shown in comparison with the growth made by students in another of the researcher's classes.

Students are expected to show at least one years' growth during a school year. While not all of these students in the SOAR class improved this much, six out of nine students did. These students began the school year as sixth graders reading well below the sixth grade reading level. Yet when comparing the results of the SOAR class with another class taught by the researcher – one that was not using SOAR—some interesting contrasts were noticed. The Soar class averaged an increase of one-half grade reading level. The students in the non-Soar class increased their reading levels by more than one grade reading level.

Several explanations might be considered for this difference between the SOAR classes and non-SOAR classes. The non-Soar class began the school year reading at a much higher level. Perhaps they had a stronger literacy foundation than those in the Soar class. The type of reading material may have effected students' interest and therefore, motivation, in reading. The non-Soar class worked on novel units and reading projects. Perhaps those in the Soar class might have benefited from more complex novel units and reading projects. A third explanation might be the implementation of the Soar teaching technique. Perhaps the techniques for implementing the SOAR reading program might be reviewed.

Areas for Further Exploration

Another possible future topic could focus on the speed at which the Soar program was implemented with the children. Each Soar book was read over several days in chunks. At the end of one day, one child even asked, "Do we have to stop reading now?" Students often exhibited frustration over the inability to finish one book that day, instead of having to read only one more section the next day. The book topics were pretty interesting but perhaps having topics more to the students liking would entice them to want to read more.

A final, disquieting finding was that most students in the SOAR class said that they do not use these strategies outside of the Soar program. Students working on other readings during social studies had a difficult time using the strategies to better understand the reading on assignments that stressed using these strategies. Perhaps teachers might model using the strategies while they read. In addition, more modeling of how to use the strategies when reading might help the students practice and show their understanding of how to use these strategies.

References

Cooper, E. & Harris, T. (Eds.) (1985) *Reading, Thinking, and Concept Development*. College Board Publications, pp. 147-158.

Cooper, J. David, (1999). *Soar To Success: The Intermediate Intervention Program*. Houghton-Mifflin Company.

Sweet, Anne P. (2000). *Ten Proven Principles for Teaching Reading*. National Education Association, p. 12.

Appendix A

Dear Students,

I am trying to learn more about how the “Soar to Success” program works with student readers. Your honest, thoughtful answers to the questions below will help me get a better understanding.

Thank you,
Mr. M.

1. Thinking back to when we started “Soar To Success” with Nana Hannah’s Piano, what has changed or stayed the same about the books?
2. Which reading strategy do you use the most and how does it help you as a reader?
3. Do you ever use any of the strategies when you read your other books? Please explain why you do or not use the strategies. Give an example of when you have used one of the strategies.
4. How is what you do in your “Soar To Success” group like or different from what you have done in other reading groups in school?
5. What do you like about the way we do reading in the “Soar” groups?
6. What would you like to do differently in the “Soar” reading groups?
7. Has “Soar To Success” helped you as a reader? Why or why not?

Additional information:

Please add anything else you would like me to know about working with “Soar To Success.”

Appendix B



Wilma
Unlimited

Name _____

REFLECTION

5

Circle the section you liked best in *Wilma Unlimited*.

Pages 8–13

Wilma gets sick.

Pages 14–19

Wilma works at
her exercises.

Pages 20–27

Wilma begins to
walk, and gets
rid of her brace.

Pages 28–33

Wilma plays
basketball, and
goes to the
Olympics.

Pages 34–43

Wilma wins
gold medals for
three races.

How did one or more of the four strategies help you read that section?

Predict

Clarify

Question

Summarize

