

Make a Movie in Your Head: Visualization with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learning Disabled Students in the Reading Classroom

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Abstract

What happens to reading comprehension when multi-lingual learning disabled middle school students are taught a specific reading comprehension strategy?

The purpose of this study is to explore best practices in teaching Learning Disabled English Speakers of Other Languages (LD/ESOL) reading comprehension strategies. Every school year this researcher is faced with 6th graders who read and comprehend 4-5 years below grade level. Research indicates that successful readers use several strategies to derive meaning from text. This research focuses on the explicit instruction of the visualization strategy. The Qualitative Reading Inventory, Gates MacGinitie, teacher observations, and student interviews are used as indicators of growth. Results indicate that students require much modeling and practice, concrete examples, and a slow pace of instruction. Students apply the visualization strategy with instructional level materials, but are unable to transfer the skill to content areas as much of the material used in the 6th grade content classes is above the student's reading level.

Rational

It happens every September. I analyze the results of various reading assessments administered to my 6th grade special education students and the outcome is always the same. Their reading abilities fall within a wide range - that of beginner to advanced, with roughly 1/3 in the late beginner (1.0 –2.0) to transitional (2.0-3.0) reading stages.

These are the same students who are expected to read and comprehend 6th grade reading materials. Obviously that is an unrealistic demand, yet it is my responsibility to support and guide them towards reading and comprehending the more challenging materials of content areas.

In facing this challenge, I have tried to develop a balanced reading regiment that includes fluency, word study, and comprehension work at their instructional levels. For me, the difficulty arises in teaching comprehension strategies. How do I most effectively teach reading comprehension strategies to 6th grade beginning/transitional readers? What percentage of the daily one hour reading time should be allotted to comprehension work? And, will my students successfully apply these strategies across the curriculum?

My action-research project focuses on the above challenges with five 6th grade special education/ESOL students from Ellen Glasgow Middle School located in Fairfax County, Virginia. The participants range in age from eleven to

thirteen. Towards the end of my research I lost one student but gained another. All but the most recent addition come from Spanish speaking households and are first generation Americans.

Glasgow's student body is a reflection of the ethnic diversity that exists in Northern Virginia. Glasgow enrolls 1,200 students, 72% of the school population comes from low socio-economic households as indicated by their participation in the free and reduced lunch program. 40% are English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and 21% are served through the special education department and have Individualized Education Plans (IEP). The special education department serves students with special needs in order to help them reach their full potential. Special education incorporates a variety of service delivery models in conjunction with accommodations and modifications in order to go above and beyond the general education classroom to reach children with special needs. Special education is also heavily influenced and programmed to meet federal, state and local government laws and regulations regarding children with special needs. The students served through the special education department carry a wide range of labels including Learning Disabilities, Emotional Disabilities, Traumatic Brain Injury, Other Health Impaired, Attention Deficit Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Speech and Language Impairment, Mild Mental Retardation, and Autism.

Literature Review

Comprehension is the ultimate goal when reading, but how do we go about teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students with learning disabilities to be effective comprehenders? According to Bos and Vaughn, the authors of *Strategies for teaching students with Learning and Behavior Problems*, there are five components in reading instruction: 1) Phonological awareness and the alphabetic principle, 2) Word identification, decoding, and word study, 3) Fluency, 4) Vocabulary, and 5) Comprehension. Since it is important to emphasize certain components of reading based on the student's level of development and needs, instruction should integrate these components.

Students with learning disabilities, however, present unique challenges as they may demonstrate one or more of the following behaviors: processing deficits, language delays, attention difficulties, hyperactivity, and aggressive or withdrawn behavior. Consequently, adaptations and accommodations need to be made to the instructional approaches (Bos et al., 2002). Bear and Barone, authors of *Developing Literacy: An Integrated Approach to Assessment and Instruction*, also contend that children develop literacy and learn to read on a continuum, thus a developmental approach to instruction is required. Despite learning difficulties, Bear and Barone state that most learning disabled students perform within the developmental continuum, as they are not permanently limited in what they can achieve. Many of these students are delayed in their reading, but can continue to develop with appropriate developmental instruction.

In *I read it, but don't get it*, author Chris Tovani further explains that reading is thinking. Readers must do more than decode words. They also must understand concepts and register subtleties. Tovani outlines eight strategies

used by successful readers when constructing meaning from text. Many struggling readers are unaware of these strategies and need to be taught how to utilize them. The eight strategies are: 1) use of existing knowledge to make sense of new information 2) Asking questions about text before, during, and after reading, 3) Drawing inferences, 4) determining what is important, 5) Sensory imaging by creating images using different senses to better understand what they read, 6) Synthesizing information to create new thinking, 7) Monitoring own comprehension, and 8) Using “fix-up” strategies when meaning breaks down.

The last two strategies are particularly important when working with students with learning problems. Comprehension strategy instruction must be combined with metacognition instruction – an awareness of when, how, and why to use comprehension strategies (Bos et al.; Harvey et al.).

Another key element in teaching comprehension strategies is the need for explicitness and the inclusion of the following five components: 1) Provide rationales and evidence for the effectiveness of its use, 2) Describe and model the strategy, 3) Provide guided practice, 4) Provide independent practice, and 5) Teach for generalization and maintenance (Bos et al.). Author Richard Allington, cautions that strategy learning takes time. The most successful interventions taught one strategy at a time and developed that strategy through long term instruction and repeated application across different genres. Children need to become proficient in strategy use, allowing them to simultaneously use strategies necessary for comprehension.

When teaching reading comprehension to culturally and linguistically diverse students with learning disabilities a number of other points must also be taken into consideration. First, the role of task persistence may be at least as important as knowledge of metacognitive strategies in making sense of text, especially with more complex expository text. Various scaffolds and organizers may help students persevere, as they allow students to see the big picture and how the pieces fit together (Gersten et al.). The incorporation of multicultural literature into the reading program as well as making input more comprehensible are additional factors to consider. For example, pace can be slowed when asking questions or discussing new ideas or vocabulary; vocabulary can be shared in the first language; if students share a common language, more proficient English –language learners can be paired with less proficient peers to discuss what they are reading (Bos et al.).

The above research demonstrates that struggling readers must be explicitly taught how to make sense of text by actively engaging with it. Students need to not only be aware of when their comprehension fails, but must also have the ability to choose and implement the learned strategies that best meets their needs. The ultimate goal is for students to successfully and independently use these strategies across all curricular areas.

Methodology

This action research project was conducted with five ESOL students with Learning Disabilities that were assigned to my reading class in January. Reading consisted of a daily one hour block, which I divided as follows: word study,

reading for decoding and comprehension, and fluency work. The amount of time spent in each category depended on the planned activities. Word study usually lasted between 15-25 minutes during which time students were guided through phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary activities. During the reading segment, students read aloud in the group and were guided through the passage for both decoding and comprehension. This is also where I instructed for comprehension strategies. On average, the reading segment took thirty minutes. To work on fluency, students reread books and passages they had previously read or written. Fluency work was completed individually with periodic checks by the teacher.

The research focused on the comprehension skill of visualization. Prior to introducing the concept, the class and I discussed what reading meant to them and how they perceived themselves as readers. After the discussions, I asked them if they would like to learn strategies that would help them read and comprehend text better. They all said yes. Since I wanted them to be invested in the process, I then asked if they would be willing to put in the time and effort needed to learn and practice this skill. It was important to get this verbal agreement, as motivation is a factor. Once everyone was in agreement, I laid out the reading schedule for the remainder of the year, discussed the strategies we would learn and gave the reasoning behind each strategy.

The next step was the introduction of the visualization strategy. I used a modified version of the Visualizing and Verbalizing for Language Comprehension and Thinking (V/V) Program. I told the students that the strategy would help them 'make a movie in their head' and that we call this visualizing. The strategy calls for students to initially develop and refine their verbalizing skills as they describe a simple picture. This step is teacher directed as the teacher asks questions that compares and contrasts the elements in the picture. In this manner, students learn to communicate with more concise vocabulary. Students are taught to describe the picture in such a way that it is re-created in their partner's head. Students learn to do this by using a series of seven 'guide words'. These words are: who, where, what, when, color, number, and size.

Once this step was modeled, practiced and mastered at a picture level, I then moved to short 3-5 sentence passages. This step required me to read a short paragraph to the students. As the passage is read, students close their eyes and visualize, or make a movie in their head. One sentence at a time, they are asked to practice using the guide words to help guide them through the visualization process. Once they have visualized the sentences, they then verbalize and explain the movie they made in their head. To help them with this process and to make sure no elements are left out, they once again must go through the guide words. Lastly, students give a summary of their movie. Again the process was modeled, and students practiced the skill with teacher support, until they could accomplish the task independently.

Once students were familiar with the sentence by sentence imaging process, it was time to transfer the skill to short selected passages from the chapter books we were reading. The process with chapter books was once again

modeled and practiced. This step transitioned students to the more difficult task of summarizing paragraphs.

Results

To get a baseline of my students' instructional level as well as their self-perceptions as readers, I administered a number of assessments and personal interviews. Throughout my research, I also used teacher observations, informal assessments and student participation as a measure of progress.

Two formal reading assessments utilized at the beginning of the school year included the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) and the Gates MacGinitie (GM). The QRI assesses word recognition in isolation (WRI), word recognition in context (WRC), and comprehension. The WRI looks at a student's automaticity in identifying graded words, the WRC looks at the student's ability to decode words in context, and comprehension is assessed by asking a series of inferential, factual and vocabulary questions. The Gates MacGinitie is designed to provide a general assessment of reading achievement via comprehension and reading vocabulary tests.

The QRI assessment yielded the following instructional levels for the 2002-2003 school year:

2002-2003 School Year

	WRI		WRC		Comprehension	
	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall
Student A	1 st	1 st	1 st	3 rd	1 st	3 rd
Student B	Primer	2 nd	Primer	1 st	1 st	1 st
Student C	Primer	1 st	Pre-primer	1 st	1 st	1 st
Student D	3 rd	4 th	1 st	4 th	1 st	3 rd
Student E	2 nd	N/A	Primer	N/A	Primer	N/A

The GM yielded the following results:

Gates MacGinitie

	Fall 2002	Spring 2003
Student A	2.4	3.4
Student B	2.5	2.9
Student C	3.2	2.9
Student D	2.6	3.3
Student E	2.7	N/A

As can be seen by the above charts, my students' instructional comprehension levels fell within the Primer – 2.0 level in the September of 2002.

In late February and again in March, I conducted student interviews (appendix A) to get a better understanding of their feelings and thoughts in regards to reading in and out of school. I was also curious as to whether or not they saw themselves as readers. Based on the personal interviews and discussions, I discovered that only one of my students saw himself as a reader and enjoyed it. The rest felt that reading was 'okay', and read less than thirty minutes outside of school, mainly for the purpose of homework completion. When asked in which class reading is easiest, all answered reading class. When asked which class had the most difficult reading materials, all but one who said science and math, claimed that history was the most difficult.

Another question I asked during the personal interview dealt with their definition of reading and strategy use. They basically saw reading as decoding and when I inquired about their use of comprehension strategies, they answered with "I stretch out a word", "I sound it out" or. "I read around it". All mentioned decoding rather than comprehension strategies.

Throughout the research phase, teacher observations, informal assessments and student participations were used to measure growth. The data was used to guide instruction and individualize lesson plans. By April, students had an understanding of the visualization strategy and were utilizing it with short text. We had practiced some with longer texts, but I felt that they needed to master the skill and reach automaticity with shorter materials prior to moving fully to longer texts. Another challenge was the gain of a new student at the end of third quarter. He had transferred to Glasgow in late December and there was no formal reading data in his records. Based on informal assessments and his previous IEP, his instructional level also fell within the 1.0 –2.0 level. He is a stronger decoder than comprehender. His first week with me slowed the group, as I had to spend one-to-one time teaching him the routines.

In late April, I asked my students to rate the visualizing strategy. We began by discussing what strategies they used to understand text. They all answered that visualizing was a strategy they applied to texts in reading class. They also mentioned re-reading and thinking about what they read as additional strategies. None confused decoding with comprehension strategies. When asked if they use visualizing in other curricular areas, I received a much weaker confirmation. Overall, the students understood the strategy and used it to 'create a movie in their heads'. They claimed the strategy was helpful and helped them understand the text better.

Analysis

Since my students are learning to read not reading to learn, I reluctantly deviated from my reading instruction routine in introducing the visualizing reading strategy. Comprehension strategies such as visualization have been, in the past, more of a sidebar than planned instruction. Initially, I also struggled with the amount of time I allotted to visualization daily.

Did it pay off? What did I learn? And will I continue on this path? Through informal teacher observations, I would have to say that three of my four original participants benefited and understood the concept. They were able to apply the visualization strategy to short passages from chapter books we read in class. The fourth student, however, continues to need slower instruction with more practice time. She applied the visualization technique to three to four sentence passages on the third grade or below levels. However, she will require more practice before she can apply the visualization strategy to chapter books. None of my students are applied this strategy consciously to materials in their content area readings. This is, however, to be expected since the majority of the text presented to them in content area classes is expository and the reading level is above their instructional levels.

As can be seen on the above charts, formal assessments also demonstrated an increase in students' reading levels. Both the GM and the QRI showed improvements for students A and D. I expected as much from these two students as they demonstrate task persistence and spend time on task. I was surprised at the small gains made by student C per the GM. He is a persistent student and demonstrates knowledge in class. However, he does rush through his work and demonstrates some hyperactivity. I suspect that had he slowed down and taken his time on the GM, he would have tested better. On the QRI, he tested closer to his in class performance. Student B tested right at the level I would have put her. She requires slower paced instruction. She lacks task persistence and needs frequent redirection. Despite her low test score, I believe comprehension strategy instruction is beneficial to her. She, as previously mentioned, needs slower paced instruction, much practice and a structured classroom to keep her on task.

In looking forward to next year, I would like to implement part or all of the eight reading comprehension strategies utilized by successful readers as noted in my literature review. Realizing that strategy instruction takes time, the mastery of these strategies will probably not occur, yet, I feel that exposing my students to the strategies will be beneficial.

I am presently working with other staff members at my school to develop a consistent and systematic special education reading program for grades 6-8. In doing so, I will include the results of this research, and will emphasize the importance of including reading comprehension strategies with students who are learning to read.

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Appendix A

1. What do you think of reading?

2. What is your definition of a good reader?

3. Do you see yourself as a reader? Explain.

4. How much time do you spend reading outside of school?

5. How much time do you spend reading at school?

6. What types of books do you like to read?

7. Why do you read?

8. Which class has the most difficult reading materials?

9. In which class is reading easiest?