

Non-Fiction for Non-Readers
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Abstract

Below grade-level readers experience difficulty when confronted by texts used in grade-level content-area classes. This research study investigates what takes place when these same students are taught to apply specific reading strategies to non-fiction text. Twelve language-minority sixth grade students reading on a 2nd-3rd-grade level are the subjects of this study. The reading strategies used throughout the study are prediction, visualization, questioning and making a personal connection to the text through response. The effects of strategy instruction on the students' interaction with non-fiction text are based on teacher observation, written and verbal responses of the students and Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) assessments.

Rationale

Upon being assigned to a sixth grade position my principal informed me that all sixth grade teachers are required to teach an hour of reading per day. I felt comfortable with the idea since I had taught an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) reading class at my former school. However, after meeting with my team and discovering that I would be given a group of twelve students who tested on a second to third grade reading level, my confidence began to lag.

After meeting the students and interacting with them for a few days I started to realize that these students lacked the basic strategies they needed in order to be good readers. Although the majority of them possessed the skills they needed to be successful decoders, none of them possessed the skills they needed to give the words they were decoding some meaning. As a result, my students were reading, but not comprehending. It became clear to me from that point on that these students needed to acquire a wide variety of reading strategies they could use to take their reading to the next level.

Research has demonstrated that middle school students encounter more complicated expository texts and are asked to perform more demanding tasks related to these texts. However, middle school students are often not provided with the assistance they need to accomplish these tasks (Wilhelm, 2001). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that about 42% of fourth graders score below basic in overall reading skill (Moats, 2001). Therefore, if children are entering middle school as below grade-level readers and we are expecting more of them as readers in middle school, but not teaching them the strategies they need to be successful, then we are setting up our students for failure. If this trend is not reversed, then our students will continue to withdraw from instruction because of their frustration over not being able to succeed. In addition, some students will engage in passive resistance, which will further affect the instruction being delivered in the classroom. In the end some students

will choose to withdraw from their education completely by the time they reach secondary school.

My twelve students fit the mold of the above-mentioned statistics. Out of the five males and seven females, each one of them was reading at least three grade levels below sixth grade in September 2002. Moreover, each of these students is an English Language Learner with ten currently receiving ESOL services. In light of these facts I have come to the realization that I must find some way to equip these students with the strategies they need to be more successful readers of all genres, but especially of non-fiction. As more strategic readers, it is my belief that these students will also be more successful and more engaged as they continue on with their education.

Literature Review

According to Richard Vacca struggling readers lack fluency while reading, have difficulty decoding polysyllabic words and make little sense of what they read (Vacca, 2001). Struggling readers are constantly battling with the demands placed on them in school. "Although readers who struggle with text may have developed some reading skills and strategies, they are often inappropriate for the comprehension demands inherent in potentially difficult texts" (Vacca, 2001). As a result, struggling readers grow increasingly disenchanted with school because of their inability to learn and read effectively.

The frustration level of struggling readers is exacerbated upon entering middle school where the texts used and tasks required grow increasingly demanding (Wilhelm 2001). According to Vacca, these types of students are not equipped with the variety of strategies they need to "engage in meaningful transactions with text" (Vacca, 2001). As a result, many struggling readers opt to remain passive and disengaged from the text instead of trying to actively construct meaning from the text. In addition, struggling readers do not have the confidence they need in themselves as readers to overcome the challenges of the more difficult texts and tasks they are encountering (Vacca, 2001).

According to a number of researchers, reading strategies are the key to overcoming the above-mentioned obstacles encountered by struggling readers. According to the NAEP 1998 Reading Report Card for the Nation and the States (Washington D.C: United States Department of Education), the majority of adolescents are able to read at basic levels of performance, but experience difficulty with more advanced levels of reading. Those students who are reading at basic levels of performance do not know how to process the information they are reading. They can decode the words, but they are unable to piece together the information to make it meaningful. According to Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis (2000), authors of *Strategies That Work*, students need to be shown and taught how to make meaning when they read. Moreover, they also need to be encouraged to make connections between what they are reading and their own life experiences. Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmerman, in their 1997 book *Mosaic of Thought*, echo these ideas.

Harvey and Goudvis and Keene and Zimmerman advocate for explicit strategy instruction. "Researchers who explicitly taught students strategies for

determining important ideas, drawing inferences and asking questions found that teaching these thinking/reading strategies improved students overall comprehension of text" (Harvey & Goudvis, 2001). Reading involves both the decoding of words and the construction of meaning. However, many students fail to take reading much further beyond decoding because they have not been taught how to make meaning out of text. Harvey and Goudvis along with Keene, Zimmerman, Vacca and Wilhelm believe that teachers are failing their students by not explicitly teaching them the strategies they need.

Harvey and Goudvis and Keene and Zimmerman encourage teachers to teach their struggling readers the strategies that have been identified as being used by proficient readers. These strategies include: making connections between prior knowledge and new information in the text, questioning, making inferences after reading, distinguishing between more important and less important ideas in the text, synthesizing information, monitoring comprehension and using imagery to construct meaning (Harvey & Goudvis 2000). According to Harvey & Goudvis there are four steps that must be followed in order to teach these strategies effectively to struggling readers. First, the teacher must model the strategy to the students. The students must then be given the opportunity to practice using the strategy with guidance from the teacher. The students should then be given opportunities for independent practice. Later, the students should be required to apply the strategy to real reading situations. After following these steps the students, in addition to understanding the strategy, will also know when, why and how to use the strategy. Keene and Zimmerman use this same model. However, they stress the importance of focusing on one strategy for extensive periods of time. Keene suggests that comprehension strategy instruction takes eight to twelve weeks per strategy. This may seem to be an impossible task to some educators, but Keene and Zimmerman recommend that these strategies be taught explicitly in kindergarten through twelfth grade thus providing the child with opportunities for exposure and practice throughout his/her education.

Vacca supports the theory of gradual release of responsibility, but classifies this type of instruction as scaffolded instruction (Vacca, 2001). Scaffolded instruction emphasizes explicit instruction in strategy use and encourages students to not only read the text, but also to process what they are reading. Vacca suggests that teachers establish strategy workshops in which the strategy being taught would initially be explained and then modeled through teacher-conducted think-alouds. After the modeling phase of the workshop, students are then allowed to practice the strategy and then apply the strategy to a text being used in the classroom.

Wilhelm's theory of strategy instruction is in alignment with the theories of Harvey & Goudvis, Keene and Zimmerman and Vacca. He also advocates for the strategy to be introduced through teacher modeling. He believes that students should then be given the opportunity to help implement the strategy. Following this, the students should be encouraged to practice applying the strategy to a purposeful reading situation with the teacher providing assistance as necessary.

The final step is that the students are able to use the strategy independently (Wilhelm, 2001).

All of these researchers support the idea that strategy use by struggling readers will not only improve their comprehension, but will also empower them to be more involved with the text. As a result, explicit reading strategy instruction produces more engaged, active learners who have access to a repertoire of strategies they can apply to any reading situation.

Methods

Throughout this research study a number of different methods were used to provide the students with the tools they need to learn and implement the strategies of questioning, visualizing and making a personal connection with the text through response. The methods were introduced and expanded upon in three phases: the early phase, the middle phase and the late phase.

Early Phase

In September the students were divided into two homogenous groups: five boys and seven girls. Each small group was separately instructed using fiction books from the third level of the SOAR to Success program. Before reading each book, the strategies of predicting, questioning and visualizing were introduced, defined and discussed. To begin each book I read a few pages of the book to the group and then modeled the strategies being taught. I continued this process until the book was finished. Then the students repeated the activity by reading five or six pages at a time while trying to apply the strategies to their reading. As the students read each selection, I moved around the group and asked the students to think-aloud and explain which strategies they applied to each passage. As a group we would also make predictions about what was going to happen next.

After repeating this same method of modeling, instruction and guided practice through four level three fiction SOAR books, the students were then allowed to choose a fiction or non-fiction book from the library. While reading their selections the students were encouraged to apply the three strategies used during the SOAR to Success lessons to the pieces they had selected. As the students read they also responded to questions about the application of the three strategies in their reading journals, in class discussions and in individual reading conferences. This phase lasted until late November.

Middle Phase

The middle phase began in late November. What I had observed through the first phase was that my students could apply the strategies they had learned, but they were still not passionate readers. I wanted them to see that reading is very personal and can be a real adventure as long as you allow yourself to become involved with the text. Therefore, I decided it was time to introduce a new strategy: making a personal connection with the text through response. I knew that this strategy would be more difficult for many of them to apply to non-fiction text. Therefore, I decided to begin there.

In order to introduce the new strategy I modeled the strategy to the entire class using a level six non-fiction SOAR to Success book. In order to make a

connection between the new strategy and some of the strategies we had already learned, I also included questioning in my think-alouds. As I came upon a passage that caused me to ask a question or make a personal connection to the text, I wrote the question or the response on a small sticky note and marked the spot on the text that had inspired the thought. I also modeled how I could use the sticky notes to record and remember facts that were noteworthy.

After modeling this fact, question, response method, students were given the opportunity for guided practice using the same text. I monitored their comprehension by walking around the classroom and asking the students for clarification when necessary. When all of the students finished reading the book we posted our notes onto the chalkboard in fact, question and response columns and then discussed the results.

This same method was repeated again using a level six non-fiction SOAR book. The students were then encouraged to practice using the fact, question and response method independently in non-fiction books of their choice. Their reflections were recorded in their reading journals and in classroom discussions. This phase ended in February.

Late Phase

In order to cement the strategies into the foundation of the students' learning, the late phase consisted almost entirely of independent practice using self-selected fiction and non-fiction text. During this phase sustained silent reading was introduced. Also during this phase each student researched a non-fiction topic related to science or history and wrote a non-fiction children's book for their first grade reading buddy. These books were then read aloud to and shared with their reading buddies during a visit to the elementary school. This phase was completed at the end of the school year in May.

Findings

In order to determine the effects of strategy instruction on the students' interaction with non-fiction text, three main assessment tools were used. These three tools include teacher observations, the written and verbal responses of the students and the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) assessments given in the fall of 2001 and the spring of 2002.

In September of 2001 the first DRP test was administered to the students in their reading class. This test consisted of seventy questions based primarily on text comprehension. In order to answer each question the students needed to read a passage and then choose a word out of the options given that best fit into the missing part of the passage. According to the results of this assessment, two of the twelve subjects in this study were assessed to be reading on a third grade reading level while the remaining ten subjects tested on a second grade level. The lowest reading level out of the twelve subjects was a 2.1 grade level and the highest was a 3.5 grade level.

When the students were tested again in April of 2002 with another form of the DRP test that consisted of only forty questions, there was a significant increase in the results for most of the subjects. Out of the twelve subjects used in this study one of the subject's reading grade levels dropped by .1, another

subject's reading grade level was assessed as staying the same while the ten remaining subjects increased their reading grade levels anywhere from .5 to 1.8.

Throughout the course of the year the students were given a number of opportunities to share their own perceptions about learning and using reading strategies through both written and verbal responses. A review of these responses makes it clear that reading strategy instruction has affected each student differently. There are a few students in the class who report that they do not believe that strategy instruction has enabled them to become better readers. However, there are also students who reported that they believe reading strategy instruction has enabled them to develop into more proficient readers. For example, in response to doing the fact, question response activity for the first time, one student stated, "By having a conversation with the book it helps me understand the book better." Another student reported that it made the book easier for her to understand because she was forced to "stop and think" about the book while reading it.

In a questionnaire (see Appendix A) given to the subjects in May 2002, nine students responded that they believe that learning about reading strategies has helped them become better readers while three responded that it has not helped them become better readers. These same three subjects also reported that they do not see themselves as good readers, never read outside of school and rarely or never try to use the reading strategies they have learned outside of reading class. Out of the subjects that responded that reading strategies have helped them become better readers, five stated that they do not think of themselves as readers. However, one of these subjects did report that she feels she has become a better reader this year due to learning about strategies. She wrote, "It (learning about reading strategies) has helped me by asking questions, predicting, visualizing and responding instead of just plain reading." Four subjects reported that they consider themselves readers. Two of them were also able to explain what makes them a good reader. One of them stated that visualizing and summarizing enables him to be a good reader. Another subject reported that she uses reading strategies such as questioning to help her understand what she reads thus enabling her to be a better reader.

Analysis

The observations I have made throughout the year parallel the results of the study. The three subjects, who do not see themselves as readers and feel that learning about reading strategies has not helped them become better readers, are the same three subjects that I have observed as being the most unenthusiastic about reading. One of these subjects has only completed about four entire books this school year. He often loses interest in a book once he is halfway finished. I have observed that it is difficult for him to stay on task while reading. He is easily distracted and is unable to read for sustained periods of time. When participating in fact, question, response activities I have observed that he struggles with designing questions that are specific to the text and he rarely makes personal connections to the text.

One of the subjects who does not see herself as reader, but does believe that learning about reading strategies has helped her become a better reader is also one of the subjects that I have observed closely throughout the year. She regularly chooses to read non-fiction books related to historical topics. She reads avidly in class and always appears to be quite interested in reading. However, whenever she has taken an Accelerated Reader comprehension test on a book she has completed, she fails. I was interested in trying to determine if this was due to her failure to retain the information or her lack of comprehension while reading. After more observations and discussions with both her and her mother, it became apparent that she concentrates her energy on decoding and is, therefore, missing out on the comprehension piece. In addition it seems as if she is not aware of when she needs to stop and apply a strategy to what she is reading. Therefore, she plows through the text without stopping and fixing her problems along the way.

Three of the subjects who view themselves as readers and as having improved in reading as a result of reading strategy instruction are three of the subjects that I have observed as being the most avid and proficient readers in my class. These three students seem to enjoy reading. All of these subjects reported that they spend up to one hour a day reading outside of school. I have observed that it has been less challenging for these students to utilize reading strategies when they read. In a journal entry written on January 28, 2002 I recorded my observations of one of these subjects, "Lela is the one student that I have seen regularly apply the strategies we have learned in reading class. She is summarizing, visualizing, inferencing and even responding! I can observe her and can really tell that she is trying to think about what she is reading. It's exciting to watch her! My question is how come Lela has learned how to take these strategies to the next level when it doesn't appear as if many of the other students have? What is different about Lela, if anything?"

The difference with Lela is that she possesses self-confidence as a reader. Given the success in learning and using reading strategies that I have observed amongst those students in my class, like Lela, who see themselves as readers and who spend time reading outside of class it seems apparent that self-confidence as a reader plays a major role in affecting a student's willingness to grow and develop as a reader. Those subjects who were already considering themselves poor readers are the same students that struggled with reading strategies all year and, in the end, reported that reading strategies only helped them read bigger words. These same students also believe that a good reader is a person who reads big books! These particular students do not yet have a true idea of what it means to be a good reader and how they can use reading strategies to help them climb up to that level. The students who fall somewhere between these two extremes maintain a negative self-concept as a reader, but are open to the possibility of changing this about themselves.

Given the Degrees of Reading Power Spring results, in which only two of the subjects did not make any progress in terms of their reading grade, it appears as if reading strategy instruction did have an effect on the reading comprehension of most of the subjects in this study. However, this correlation is

not necessarily accurate or viable. The DRP does not measure how well a reader uses reading strategies to comprehend text. Rather, it measures how well a reader comprehends in whatever way he/she manages to do so. Therefore, it is not possible to use the DRP results as a measure of success in teaching learning strategies. The positive DRP results could be accounted for in a number of ways including strategy instruction, but not solely because of reading strategy instruction.

Conclusions

Even though I am a strong believer in the impact that reading strategies can have in enabling struggling readers to be more successful readers of non-fiction -- and even though the research supports this belief -- I do not feel that this has been the reality for every one of the twelve subjects in this study. I do believe that each subject did benefit in some way from the strategy instruction, but I would argue that the depth of this benefit varies widely from student to student. I believe this is not only due to the variations amongst the students and their self-perceptions as readers, but also due to the strength and intensity of the strategy instruction conducted in the classroom.

According to Ellin Keene, each strategy, in order to be taught effectively, needs to be taught explicitly and intensively for 8-12 weeks at a time. Within this explicit and intensive instruction there should be frequent modeling done by the teacher from a wide variety of texts. There should also be ample opportunities for students to practice using the strategy while still receiving assistance from the instructor and from each other through conferences. In addition, each student should be encouraged to apply the strategy to his/her independent reading outside of class thus allowing him/her to realize that the strategy can be transferred to a variety of content areas and contexts.

As exemplified by the results of the questionnaire in which five subjects reported that they never use reading strategies in other content areas while five reported that they use reading strategies every now and then in content area classes and two reported that they always use the strategies in their other classes, it is obvious that the students were not given enough explicit instruction and guided practice in each strategy. A number of the students needed to always be reminded to use and apply the strategies they had learned to the text they were reading. In retrospect the three subjects that seem to be more proficient than the others at using reading strategies are students who, according to my observations of them in History and English class, seem to be able to understand and apply instruction more rapidly than the average student. It is important to bear in mind that every student learns at a different rate and that each student needs to learn at his/her own pace in order to be successful.

As a result of these findings and conclusions I plan, in the future, to follow the guidelines suggested by Ellin Keene and others of more modeling and more explicit, intense strategy instruction over a longer period of time. It will be interesting to see if this type of instruction will have a greater impact on more students in next year's reading class. I believe it will. I also believe that this type of instructional structure will provide those students, who lack self-confidence as

a reader, with more guided reading opportunities that will, in the end, enable them to come to see themselves as good readers.

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Appendix A: Reading Questionnaire

Who are people that you see reading?

- parent
- brother, sister or family member
- teacher, coach or adult in your community
- friend
- none of the above

Where do you see people reading?

- home
- school
- car, bus, train
- doctor's office, church, or public place
- none of the above

About how much time do you usually spend reading outside of school?

- more than two hours per day
- one – two hours per day
- thirty minutes – one hour per day
- less than thirty minutes per day
- I don't read outside of school

How much time do you usually spend reading at school?

- more than two hours per day
- one – two hours per day
- thirty minutes – one hour per day
- less than thirty minutes per day
- I don't read outside of school

What types of books do you choose to read most often?

- fiction
- plays or poetry
- non-fiction
- newspapers, magazines, comics

In which class is it most difficult for you to read the material given to you?

- History
- Science
- Math
- English
- Electives

In which class is the reading material the easiest for you?

- History
- Science
- Math
- English
- Electives

Which one of the following statements do you most strongly agree with?

- Reading is fun.
- Reading is boring.
- Reading can be okay, but I don't have much time for it.

Which of the following explain why you read?

- I read for fun.
- I read to get information about topics that are important to me.
- I read to complete assignments for school.
- I read to learn how to do something.

Which of the following statements do you most strongly agree with?

- I am a reader.
- I do not think of myself as a reader.

Which of the following class reading activities make you like reading and want to read?

- reading aloud with a partner
- reading silently in class
- talking with a friend about a book
- participating in a small group discussion about the book
- none of the above

Which of the following reading strategies do you feel you know how to use the best while reading?

- predicting
- questioning
- visualizing
- making a personal response to what you are reading

Which of the following reading strategies do you feel you know how to use the least while reading?

- predicting
- questioning
- visualizing
- making a personal response to what you are reading

How often do you try to use the reading strategies we have learned about in reading class in other classes?

- every day
- every now and then
- never

In which class have you tried to use a reading strategy?

- History
- Science
- English
- Math
- Electives

Do you think that learning about strategies this year has helped you become a better reader? Yes No

How do you think learning about reading strategies has helped you become a better reader this year?

Out of all of the things we have learned about in reading class this year, what do you think will be the one thing you will remember the most?

Who do you think is a good reader? _____

20. What do you think makes this person a good reader?

What makes you a good reader?
