

Which Books Are Best Suited for Use in a First Grade Classroom?

Dr. Rosalynn Rowan Christensen
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi

Dr. Corinne Valadez
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi

Abstract

Primary teachers often struggle to find high quality literature for use with their first-grade students. Therefore, a list of award winning books was evaluated for characteristics that lend themselves to teaching reading comprehension strategies and literary elements. The Golden Kite Award, an annual award which provides a grant to the winning author and illustrator, was used for this study. The Golden Kite Award reflects five categories, including young reader and middle grade fiction, young adult fiction nonfiction, picture book text, and picture book illustration. Literature in the picture-book text category was evaluated for reading level and possible comprehension strategy use in a first grade classroom. Books best suited for use with first grade comprehension instruction are described in this chapter.

Keywords: *Golden Kite award, early literacy, literature connections*

Introduction

Good quality literature is an important element in early childhood classrooms. Books that have interesting storylines and vivid pictures provide opportunities for engagement and reading motivation in young readers (Snow, 2002). However, many basal readers and traditional reading instruction books lack engaging plots and limit the reading comprehension strategies a teacher can practice with his/her students. In addition, many basal readers contain poor quality pictures which make it difficult to capture the attention and engagement of a young reader. Many trade

books, though interesting reading, are missing the text and storylines that support student learning of literary elements. Teachers wanting to connect literature to skills required of young readers often search extensively to locate materials which reflect necessary literary elements for instructional use with children.

Young readers in elementary schools are introduced to the idea of literary elements in books at an early age. The literary elements of character, setting, problem, and solution are taught explicitly and then students practice identifying these elements in books. The problem is that most books designed for early

readers focus on decoding skills and not on plot or story elements. It is important for a child to learn to decode the words in a story but equally important for the child to enjoy the story he or she is reading. Some of the literary skills that students in a first-grade class are required to learn include the identification of common story elements, the big idea of a folktale or fable; the retelling of a main event, and character traits, including reasons for character actions (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, 2010). Teachers may have a difficult time locating the books with necessary elements to teach to state or Common Core Standards, as most basal readers do not have the essential elements required to teach these lessons. It is important to use quality books when teaching literary elements; however, in order to teach reading comprehension strategies, good quality literature is necessary. In order to alleviate some of the difficult issues with finding appropriate literature to use with students, books that were awarded for quality in pictures and text were examined for characteristics that would lend themselves to teaching reading comprehension strategies and literacy elements.

Background

Teachers often model reading comprehension strategies and provide text for students to practice the reading strategy independently. However, many recently published and interesting books lack the components needed for teachers to model strategies and for students to practice strategies. A goal for this study was to develop a list of quality children's books to use when introducing a new reading comprehension concept or literary element.

Though providing good quality literature is an essential element for reading instruction (Snow, 2002), this characteristic alone is not enough. Research indicates that some teachers limit explicit instruction because they assume reading comprehension develops naturally, without the need for direct teaching of

comprehension (Denton & Fletcher, 2003). Systematic and explicit instruction has been reported to produce greater gains than other forms of instruction (Swanson & Vaughn, 2011). In other words, teachers need to provide good literature and need to devote time every day to explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategies to students. Of the five pillars of reading instruction, vocabulary and comprehension reflect the "keystones of reading" (Cassidy, Valadez, & Garrett, 2010). This chapter reviews ways to teach reading comprehension more effectively with specific books and reading strategies, which can be taught in small or whole groups.

There are many reading strategies that teachers can use with their students. One of them a teacher can choose from is reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984). This tactic is actually a group of four strategies that can be used by students to better understand what they are reading. The four strategies that compose reciprocal teaching include questioning, predicting, summarizing, and clarifying (Palinscar & Brown, 1984). Through asking questions about the text, such as "Who is the character in the story?" or "What is the setting in the book?" students develop an understanding of what they have read (Trinkle, 2009). The ability to predict events in a story and summarize what has been read are valuable skills in understanding what has happened in story. In addition, the ability to clarify what is read is helpful when understanding new and unfamiliar text. Interesting stories are critical when teaching reading comprehension skills and literary elements; good books are also valuable as they encourage students to read for pleasure. The reciprocal teaching strategies effectively supports students by demonstrating ways to monitor reading.

Through providing and reading exciting and interesting literature, teachers are giving students the opportunity to develop the intrinsic motivation to read. Without the intrinsic motivation to read, students may never reach

their full potential as literacy learners (Marinak & Gabrell, 2008). One of the primary goals of a first-grade teacher is not only to teach his or her students to read, but to instill the love of reading. Reading may be the fundamental achievement each of us accomplishes in a lifetime (Leu, 2000). If we are teaching children to read with poor quality books and basal readers, will they learn to love or loathe reading?

Golden Kite Award

For this literature analysis, the researcher developed a way to identify which books would lend themselves to teaching literary elements and comprehension strategies to young readers in a first grade classroom. The initial step was to locate a list of books that were written for early readers. The Golden Kite Award, an annual award, which provides a grant to the winning author and illustrator, was used to locate books for this study.

The Golden Kite Award is an award given by the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. The award was created in 1973 and is the only children's literary award judged by a jury of peers. The jury consists of both writers and illustrators. Books can be submitted by individuals or publishers for award consideration (Society of Children's Book Authors and Illustrators, 2010). The Golden Kite Award is presented to authors and illustrators in five categories, including young reader and middle grade fiction, young adult fiction, nonfiction, picture book text, and picture book illustration. The award, hosted by The Society of Children's Book Authors and Illustrators, is given annually and is accompanied by a grant.

Literature awarded in the area of picture book text was selected for this review, since the goal was to connect literature to literary elements and reading comprehension skills. Other criteria for books included text which would best align with first-grade curriculum and text which would align with literary elements,

specifically the elements of character, setting, problem, and resolution.

Literary Analysis

In order to analyze picture book text, the researchers used six categories of narrative text, proposed by Propp (1984). This theorist studied Russian folktales and developed Propp's Functions of Folktales, but the "formula" derived from his work can be applied to narrative texts as well. The six categories for narrative stories include preparation, complications, transference, struggle, return, and recognition. Nodelman and Reimer (2003) found that a number of the six categories appear in children's literature. However, the complete six steps are not apparent in all works of children's fiction. This framework is best applied to using quality literature in a first grade classroom as it directly addresses struggle (problem) and return and recognition (resolution). A collection of ten Golden Kite Award Winning books for picture book texts between the years 1998 and 2010 was checked out from a public library (see Table 1). The 2002, 2001, and 1999 Golden Kite books were not available in the library and were not reviewed.

The content of the books was read, and a conceptual analysis was conducted. The books were analyzed for the existence of common themes and concepts (Krippendorf, 2004). These common themes and concepts were analyzed for applicability of use with teaching reading comprehension strategies. If Propp's Functions of a Folktale (1984) specified sequence of storyline used in fairy tales existed within the book, then the storyline of the book was analyzed. Propp's Functions (1984) include six groups or categories that appear in sequence in narrative stories, which were also analyzed. These six categories have some replication in the concepts of problem (struggle) and solution (return) and text to self (transference).

Table 1

List of Golden Kite Books Reviewed

Book Title	Author	Publishing Date
<i>Big Red Lollipop</i>	Rukhsana Khan	2010
<i>The Longest Night</i>	Marion Dane Bauer	2009
<i>A Visitor for Bear</i>	Bonny Becker	2008
<i>Pierre in Love</i>	Sara Pennypacker	2007
<i>Jazz</i>	Walter Dean Myers	2006
<i>Dona Flor</i>	Pat Mora	2005
<i>Apples to Oregon</i>	Deborah Hopkinson	2004
<i>The Dirty Cowboy</i>	Amy Timberlake	2003
<i>River Friendly, River Wild</i>	Jane Kurtz	2000
<i>Old Elm Speaks: Tree Poems</i>	Kristine O'Connell George	1998

In order to analyze the content, an *a priori* checklist (see Table 2) was created to collect information. The instrument was developed using common literary elements of character, setting, problem, and solution found in most fiction texts. The content analysis checklist included the same literary elements listed above. The reading level of the books, taken from Follet.com, is also included for convenience and ease of use. The checklist was reviewed by four peers and revised, as suggested by the peer group, to ensure validity of the instrument. The content analysis was used to

record the presence or absence of literary elements in the books reviewed.

The type of character was noted within the checklist (see Table 2) including male, female, or animal. The setting is specified when possible. If a problem and resolution were apparent in the context of the book, then the checklist identified such with a *yes*. When the books did not contain the elements of character, setting, problem, or resolution, the word *no* is under that element.

Table 2

Literary Elements of Golden Kite Books

Books	Character	Setting	Problem	Resolution	Reading Level
<i>The Big Red Lollipop</i>	Female	House	Yes	Yes	1.6
<i>The Longest Night</i>	Animal	Forest	Yes	Yes	1.7
<i>A Visitor for Bear</i>	Animal	House	Yes	Yes	2.0
<i>Pierre in Love</i>	Animal	Varied	Yes	Yes	4.3
<i>Jazz</i>	No	No	No	No	Undetermined
<i>Dona Flor</i>	Female	Village	Yes	Yes	3.9
<i>Apples to Oregon</i>	Female	Country	Yes	Yes	4.1
<i>The Dirty Cowboy</i>	Male	New Mexico	Yes	Yes	4.7
<i>River Friendly River Wild</i>	Female	North Dakota	Yes	Yes	2.0
<i>Old Elm Speaks: Tree Poems</i>	No	No	No	No	2.8

Findings

Of the ten books reviewed (refer to Table 2), only eight books were found to have the necessary elements of character, setting, problem, and resolution. The books that were most appropriate for first grade were *Big Red Lollipop*, *The Longest Night*, *A Visitor for Bear*, and *River Friendly, River Wild*. Four of the ten books reviewed were on a first grade or beginning of second grade reading level varying from 1.6-2.0 specifically. The books that were on a first grade reading level were *Big Red Lollipop*, *The Longest Night*, *A Visitor for Bear*,

and *River Friendly, River Wild*. All of the books on a first grade reading level would be appropriate for independent reading practice of the literary elements listed above.

The books reviewed that were on an advanced reading level of third grade up to fourth grade, 3.9-4.7, were *Pierre in Love*, *Dona Flor*, *Apples to Oregon*, and *The Dirty Cowboy*. These books would be appropriate for modeling and explicit teaching of the literary elements. The advanced books would also be ideal for independent practice of literary elements in

older grade levels or by independent readers on higher reading levels than their peers.

The two books that were missing the necessary literary elements of character, setting, problem and resolution were *Jazz* and *Old Elm Speaks: Tree Poems*. Further, no one resource had the same reading levels listed for *Jazz*, therefore, the reading level of this book was undetermined (see Table 1).

Limitations

The limitations of this study include that only 10 of the Golden Kite Award books were reviewed. The books were initially reviewed only by one person for inclusion or exclusion of the literary elements mentioned throughout. However, the books and checklist were then peer-reviewed for accuracy. Different books by the same author were not reviewed in this summary. All of the most recent Golden Kite Award Winning books for picture book text were not reviewed. Three of the most recent books *George Hogglesberry: Grade School Alien* (Wilson, 2002) and *The Shoe Tree of Chagrin* (Lewis, 2001) and *A Band of Angels* (Hopkinson, 1999), were not available in the local public library and were, consequently, not reviewed. A future review of all of the other award winning books for their inclusion of literary elements should take place.

Discussion

The evaluation established that eight of the ten books reviewed did contain the elements required for explicit teaching of literary elements and reading comprehension strategies. Most of the books reviewed exemplify Propp's Functions of a fairy tale, which is a structuralist theory (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). The structuralist theory proposes that some elements are common to all fiction stories and focus can be made on the relations of elements of text. The six categories included in this theory are preparation, complications, transference, struggle, return, and recognition. This theory simply proposes that all fiction stories have a

hero and that the hero in the story experiences these six elements and that all of the elements occur in order. The books that did contain all of the structuralist theory elements were: *The Big Red Lollipop*, *A Visitor for Bear*, *Pierre in Love*, *Dona Flor*, *The Dirty Cowboy*, and *River Friendly*, *River Wild*. However, this researcher would argue that not all of the elements were present in the literature reviewed and the elements that did appear in the texts *did not adhere to a strict order*, as previously believed to be true of works of fiction. One example of the books reviewed that does not have all of the six steps would be *The Longest Night*. This book began with the struggle step as the animals were all trying to bring the sun back to the sky. Therefore, this book skipped the preparation phase. Further, it did not include the return or recognition of a hero as the little chick-a-dee remained in her element after singing the sun back into the sky. Of the ten books, two of the books, *Jazz* and *Old Elm Speaks*, did not have any structuralist elements. This was because the books were works of poetry and fiction elements did not transfer to the works of poetry. It is advisable to use books with all of the elements when explicitly teaching them. It is also necessary to have books with these elements available for students as they practice identifying them in literature.

Conclusion

The best Golden Kite Award winning books for picture book text to use in a first grade classroom for explicit teaching of literary elements and reading comprehension strategies were: *Pierre in Love*, *Dona Flor*, *Apples to Oregon*, and *The Dirty Cowboy*. These books were on a much higher reading level than a first grade student would be reading, but were interesting stories with vivid pictures. The interest level should engage the students as the teacher reads the higher level stories and has the class help identify the literary elements in guided practice. The best Golden Kite Award winning books for picture book text to include for independent practice of literary elements in a

first grade classroom were: *The Big Red Lollipop*, *The Longest Night*, *A Visitor for Bear*, and *River Friendly, River Wild*. All four books contained the literary elements of character, setting, problem and resolution; and all of the books were on a first grade or beginning of

second grade reading level. This should make them easier for a young reader to understand and enable identification of literary elements. The reader should also be able to better apply what they have learned about comprehension strategies to the book.

References

- Cassidy, J., Valadez, C., & Garrett, S. (2010). Literacy trends and issues: A look at the five pillars and the cement that supports them. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(8), 644-655.
- Denton, C. A., & Fletcher, J. M. (2003). Scaling reading interventions. In B.R. Foorman (Ed.), *Preventing and remediating reading difficulties: Bringing science to scale* (pp. 445-463). Timonium, MD: York Press.
- Krippendorff, N. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Leu, D. (2000). Our children's future: Changing the focus of literacy and literacy instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 53(5), 424-429.
- Marinak, B., & Gambrell, L. (2008). Intrinsic motivation and rewards: What sustains young children's engagement with text? *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 47(1), 9-26
- Nodelman, P. & Reimer, M. (2003). *The pleasures of children's literature*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Palinscar, A., & Brown, A. (1984). Reciprocal teaching of comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring activities. *Cognition and Instruction*, 1(2), 117-175.
- Propp, V. (1984). *Theory and history of folklore*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. (2010). *Golden kite award*. Retrieved from <http://www.scbwi.org>.
- Snow, C. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.
- Swanson, E., & Vaughn, S. (2011). Implementing a response to intervention model to improve reading outcomes for all students. *What research has to say about reading instruction*, 266-285. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Texas Education Agency. (2010). *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills*. Retrieved from <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter110/ch110a.html>
- Trinkle, C. (2009). Reading for meaning: Questioning. *School Library Media Activities Monthly*, 25(5), 48-50.