

Effective Classroom Reading Instruction

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Abstract

As our literate society becomes aware of the gaps between education and educational achievement, teachers of reading must deliver a superior reading program. To sharpen their skills, teachers of reading must research and educate themselves on essential reading instruction components, useful professional development, the characteristics that define individual students, quality resources, informed and ongoing assessment that guides instruction, and the role of educational technology in their teaching of reading. Learning about, reflecting on, and using these five aspects will enhance the effectiveness of any teacher of reading.

As a commonly assumed predictor of achievement, reading ability is currently the focus of many parents, teachers, administrators, superintendents, universities, colleges, cultural groups, businesses, and governments. As the public soldiers on the educational front line, teachers are expected to ensure that the majority of citizens are literate enough to sustain the economy and keep society moving forward. To educate and nurture literate, productive citizens, teachers must consider reading instruction components, professional development, individual student characteristics, quality resources, informed and ongoing assessment, and educational technology when establishing effective classroom reading instruction.

Reading Instruction Components

Effective classroom reading instruction incorporates key teaching points and proven methodologies. The key teaching points include development of phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary building, and comprehension (Caldwell & Leslie, 2009; Limbrick et al., 2012; Meier & Freck, 2012). Phonological awareness refers to an ability to distinguish and manipulate different sizes of sounds in oral language (Caldwell & Leslie, 2009). Phonics instruction involves the teaching of letter-sound relationships. Word work that focuses on phonics and increases phonological awareness provides a solid foundation for reading instruction (Limbrick et al., 2012; Slavin et al., 2011). Variety in words presented during word work, as opposed to similarity in words presented, increases the possibility of acquired skills and improved application of new skills (Adresen, 2012). Fluency and vocabulary building are the bridge between word work and comprehension. When students are able to read smoothly, automatically reading the words and knowing the word meanings, they are able to comprehend what the text is about. Comprehension, as the sole purpose for reading, is enhanced through the teaching of before, during, and after reading strategies. The five focal teaching points of phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary building, and comprehension are most effectively taught through proven methodologies.

Proven methodologies of effective reading instruction include quality, organization, explicitness, cooperative learning, balance, and enthusiasm. First, quality practices of reading instruction involve teachers who use research-based methods and quality texts suitable for their students (Rosenman & Madelaine, 2012). Second, organized, methodical lessons that focus on the five teaching points are the most effective in teaching students how to read. Third, explicit teaching of reading skills and strategies through modelling, prompting, and practice support student reading success (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Lyons & Thompson, 2011). Fourth, establishing cooperative learning opportunities for students to learn from each other through strategic small-group composition reinforces decoding skills and enhances comprehension

(Slavin et al., 2011). Fifth, balanced lessons incorporating pre- and post-writing activities, together with opportunities to improve oral language skills, have a positive effect on reading skills, especially comprehension of a text (O'Sullivan et al., 2009; Rosenman & Madelaine, 2012). Finally, inspiring students to be passionate about reading inherently solidifies the skills and strategies students are learning (Reading Rockets, 2011). The proven methodologies of quality, organization, explicitness, cooperative learning, balance, and enthusiasm are best incorporated into the effective classroom practice of guided reading.

The Brandon School Division (BSD) has chosen guided reading as the framework for effective classroom reading instruction (Early Years Literacy, 2008). Guided reading has been part of early years' classrooms for decades, but has only recently been introduced in middle years' classrooms. Most stakeholders in students' reading development have assumed that students can adequately navigate their way through necessary print text when they reach middle years. However, due to the number of students failing to achieve standard expectations in the middle years and high school, "explicit instruction" in reading is necessary in the upper grades as well (O'Sullivan et al., 2009). The BSD has therefore implemented guided reading in several of its best practices literacy documents, and there is a general expectation that guided reading will be part of kindergarten to grade 8 classrooms within a few years (C. Nevill, BSD Literacy Consultant, personal communication, May 29, 2012). This implementation of guided reading will require teachers trained to run quality guided reading programs.

Professional Development

Professional development and ongoing training are vital to the success of an effective classroom-based guided reading program. Teachers of reading require training to plan effective and structured lessons in order to make the most of the time available for reading (Early Years Literacy, 2008; Lyons & Thompson, 2011; O'Sullivan et al., 2009). With only approximately half of the students in the BSD reading at their appropriate grade level, we need qualified teachers of reading (Reading Rockets, 2011). Quality training is necessary to meet the needs of the students, choose appropriate texts, and guide instruction and conversation (Slavin et al., 2011). To augment quality reading instruction, teachers need to find out what resources are available within their school community and keep informed about current research (Meier & Freck, 2012). Whether they be classroom teachers or educational assistants, the best training for teachers of reading involves initial up-skilling, ongoing collaborative sessions with other teachers of reading, opportunities to reflect on teaching, and autonomy in planning and running guided reading groups (Fried et al., 2012). As the BSD implements mandatory guided reading programs, literacy support teachers and administrators will be responsible for supporting the efforts of the teachers of reading with appropriate training in their pursuit of effective reading instruction. All students deserve well-trained teachers making informed decisions about their reading programs, as reading ability is considered a reliable predictor of achievement in life (O'Sullivan et al., 2009). Teachers must not only be trained in implementing, planning, and running effective guided reading programs in their classrooms, but they must also attend professional development sessions to learn about their students.

Individual Student Characteristics

Teachers of reading will have more success facilitating development of reading skills if they know their students. Educators should find out about their students' reading abilities, preferences, and families before planning effective reading instruction (Meier & Freck, 2012). However, they should avoid any bias that background knowledge may create, concentrating solely on the pursuit of informed, effective reading instruction (Limbrick et al., 2012). Reading teachers need to be prepared to utilize all resources in helping their students achieve reading success (Meier & Freck, 2012). Students' needs and abilities, including diagnosed learning

disabilities, are the primary considerations when planning for effective reading instruction, whether students are reading below, at, or above their grade level, or whether they are English as Additional Language (EAL) students, Aboriginal students, boys or girls, or struggling and disengaged students.

With the rise in immigration in the local community, the BSD teachers of reading must be aware of the unique challenges that EAL students face. The most effective reading instruction for EAL students is highly structured and balanced (Rosenman & Madelaine, 2012), with a strong focus on syntactic features and skills (O'Sullivan et al., 2009). When approaching reading lessons, educators need to be aware that phonological awareness, rapid naming and letter knowledge, oral reading fluency, and morphological awareness are good predictors of reading achievement in EAL students as well as other learners (Rosenman & Madelaine, 2012). Whether students are EAL or English first language, average language ability students do better academically than below average language ability students (BSD, 2008). EAL students benefit from regular, organized, well-planned lessons that focus on grammatical features in text, and that consider pre-assessments of language ability levels.

As is the case with EAL students, Aboriginal students benefit from particular considerations by their reading teachers. For effective reading instruction, teachers should engage Aboriginal students by incorporating their interests in using technology, by honouring and accepting their experiences, and by inviting them to use their awareness of literacy (Pirbhai-Illich, 2010). Meeting Aboriginal students where they are in their reading development and scaffolding further development is the most effective approach to supporting their reading progress. Reading abilities in Aboriginal students will grow in a positive atmosphere if the reading instruction reflects Aboriginal language, culture, and identity (O'Sullivan et al., 2009). Guided reading supports the best way Aboriginal students learn, by incorporating storytelling, observation and imitation, community support, scaffolding, and explicit teaching at their pace with visuals in a collaborative small group enhanced by teacher respect and warmth (Kanu, 2002). The most effective reading instruction for Aboriginal students uses technology, honours their experiences and culture, and incorporates their traditional methods of learning.

In addition to culture, many educators and academics believe that gender should be a consideration when instituting an effective reading instruction program. Effective reading instruction, however, is no different for boys than for girls (Early Years Literacy, 2008; Limbrick et al., 2012). Despite apparent differences in achievement, interactions, or preferences, reading instruction is the same for either gender. Boys and girls do equally well with high quality, effective reading instruction, individualized for their specific skill set and preference in kinds of texts.

Struggling or disengaged students require more specialized consideration to benefit more fully from effective reading lessons, particularly when learning disabilities are involved. First, structured, systematic lessons that move along quickly develop self-esteem and familiarity in struggling students who commonly experience a slower pace of instruction (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). Second, including time at the beginning of a reading lesson to read familiar texts, and giving struggling students time for self-selected reading each day, further supports their reading progress (Caldwell & Leslie, 2009). Rereading known texts and being able to choose books according to personal interests builds confidence in developing readers. Third, engaging lessons focus struggling or disengaged students on acquiring or practicing new skills and strategies. Fourth, student engagement and reading level improve through the use of technology such as Kerzweil. Incorporating technology into extending comprehension exercises or word work enhances positive reading development in struggling and poor students who have little access to technology outside of school (Cheung & Slavin, in press). Fifth, making connections with home and parents or guardians, can be an immense support for struggling students and their reading development (Meier & Freck, 2012). Parents and community programs provide opportunities for struggling students to share and practise their reading skills and abilities. Not only does reading improve with community support from parents or tutoring

groups, but small-group effective reading instruction improves classroom behaviour (Early Years Literacy, 2008), which facilitates the learning process. Finally, quality, small-group reading programs influence behaviour positively, cultivate engagement, and boost confidence in reading and talking about reading, which usually result in an increase in reading level for struggling and disengaged students in a few short months (Lyons & Thompson, 2011). Fast-paced, structured lessons, reading familiar and self-selected texts, technology use, home support, and the comfort of working in a small group, produces positive effects in reading skills, behaviour, interest, and confidence in reading for struggling or disengaged students.

Teachers of reading need to consider the needs and abilities (including learning disabilities) of the different students in their classroom, and one way to meet the needs of a student and develop their reading ability is to get to know them. Each student will have unique background knowledge and a unique learning style. Honing their reading instruction by differentiating for the various needs of EAL students, Aboriginal students, boys or girls, or struggling and disengaged students, will lead educators to appraise the various resources available to them.

Quality Resources

As educators focus on teaching all students to become literate, productive citizens, they must seek out and utilize quality print and human resources. Using high quality texts in reading instruction lessons will engage students (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009), and provide opportunities for students to develop their reading skills in a variety of ways (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Using non-fiction texts, in addition to fictional texts, is vital to developing a complete reading skill set in students (BSD, 2008). Texts must always offer opportunities for students to explore a variety of text features, themes and ideas, language and literary features, content, sentence complexity, and vocabulary (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Teachers of effective reading instruction should become familiar with the people and print resources in their school community (Meier & Freck, 2012), which includes employing the teacher-librarian and using the Internet as dependable sources of information about quality resources (O'Sullivan et al., 2009). Educators need to invite all stakeholders in a child's reading achievement to be supportive and be aware of their part in a child's literacy success (O'Sullivan et al., 2009; Reading Rockets, 2011). With the support of families, communities, and colleagues, teachers should continually assess the types of resources available to them, in order to determine which resources contribute to effective reading instruction for their students.

Informed and Ongoing Assessment

Informed and ongoing assessment of students and resources ensures effective reading instruction. Assessment is critical to the set up and continuation of focused, individualized reading instruction (Lyons & Thompson, 2011) in guided reading sessions. Continuing assessment is necessary for ongoing guided reading groups since students develop at different rates, and it becomes necessary to adjust reading groups to reflect variations in reading development (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). The best teachers observe, take notes, analyze behaviours, and reflect to make informed decisions about their students (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). Regular authentic assessment informs instruction and reduces the effects of bias in order to have a clear picture of students' abilities and, together with evaluation, provides evidence of reading achievement (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Feedback of assessment results provides students with an awareness of their skills, challenges, and goals as readers. Assessment focuses individualized instruction, facilitates strategic change in groupings, reduces bias, provides evidence of reading achievement, and helps students to become aware of themselves as readers. Assessment of all aspects of reading instruction also enables educators to incorporate technology, in order to enhance reading instruction.

Educational Technology

Educators of reading should incorporate educational technology from two perspectives. First, educators must teach students how to interpret our ever-changing technological world. Students need to know how to use the Internet to research, how to utilize programs like Powerpoint and Publisher to present information, and how to communicate responsibly through instant messaging and email (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). To improve online or digital reading, students need explicit instruction and guidance in navigating the research potential of the Internet to become more effective online readers and avoid unnecessary risks. Social networking does not improve digital reading as much as information-seeking activities do (Gil-Flores et al., 2012). Second, educators must consider how technology can enhance the teaching of reading skills. On its own, technology does not make students better readers unless those students have had very limited access to technology outside of school (Cheung & Slavin, in press). The greatest effect on reading development is seen with comprehensive programs wherein technology and teacher instruction are used together. Educators should consider technology that enhances teacher instruction as the ultimate way to use technology. SmartBoards, eBook readers, iPads, laptops, and a plethora of reading software are some examples of educational technology that can be used to enhance reading instruction, engage students in their reading development, and teach students how to become literate, productive citizens.

Conclusion

As stakeholders in a child's reading achievement debate literacy development, educators focus on teaching students to become literate, productive, global citizens. Classroom teachers running guided reading programs develop confidence and community among their students. By considering reading instruction components, professional development, the defining characteristics of individual students, quality resources, informed and ongoing assessment, and educational technology when establishing effective classroom reading instruction, educators on the front line augment students' reading development.

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