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Barbara Layfield Busch
University of Northern Iowa

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Instruction-assessment connection of inference tasks for literacy-delayed students

Abstract

The project will explore an instructional program in listening to develop inference abilities, higher levels of comprehension, for second graders who are eligible for a Chapter I reading program. In many cases, children who are not achieving in accordance with their estimated potential are viewed as having lower levels of intellectual abilities. Remedial readers are not necessarily poor thinkers. Usually, their listening ability reflects a higher level of thinking-language ability (Hansen, 1981). Because of the commonality in listening and reading tasks, instruction in listening supports emerging reading abilities (Smith, 1994; Cambourne, 1988). In this proposed project, instruction in inference tasks will be offered through the listening mode as a means of fostering delayed learners' comprehension abilities. The children's progress will be described through exhibits collected in a portfolio for each child.

Instruction-Assessment Connection
of Inference Tasks
for Literacy-Delayed Students

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Barbara Layfield Busch
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This Project by: Barbara Layfield Busch

Entitled: Instruction-Assessment Connection of Inference Tasks
for Literacy-Delayed Students

has been approved as meeting a project requirement for the Degree
of Master of Arts in Education.

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Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms
Director of Research Paper

5/25/95
Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms
Graduate Faculty Adviser

5/25/95
Date Approved

Dale D. Johnson
Graduate Faculty Reader

5/25/95
Date Approved

Peggy Ishler
Head, Department of Curriculum
and Instruction

Introduction

Rationale of the Project

Authentic assessment of reading comprehension is a complex process. Yet, this task must be carried out as part of children's learning experiences in a school program. Because of the trend to extend the whole language instructional concept, qualitative assessment is needed. The whole language concept focuses on learners creating meaning while involved in the language processes; therefore, their progress needs to be described through qualitative means (Cambourne, 1988). In assessing children's involvement in the language processes, many qualitative techniques can be used to ascertain growth and instructional needs. Portfolios is one technique that can provide an ongoing collection of exhibits representing an individual's emerging literacy (Farr, 1992).

Purpose of the Project

The project will explore an instructional program in listening to develop inference abilities, higher levels of comprehension, for second graders who are eligible for a Chapter I reading program. In many cases, children who are not achieving in accordance with their estimated potential are viewed as having lower levels of intellectual abilities. Remedial readers are not necessarily poor thinkers. Usually, their listening ability reflects a higher level of thinking-language

ability (Hansen, 1981). Because of the commonality in listening and reading tasks, instruction in listening supports emerging reading abilities (Smith, 1994; Cambourne, 1988). In this proposed project, instruction in inference tasks will be offered through the listening mode as a means of fostering delayed learners' comprehension abilities. The children's progress will be described through exhibits collected in a portfolio for each child.

Procedures of the Project

The inference tasks that will be taught in the instructional program are those discussed by Johnson and Johnson (1988). The ten major inference types to be included are: location, agent, time action, instrument, category, object, cause-effect, problem-solution, and feelings-attitude. The instructional program will be for second grade children who are literacy delayed. At the beginning of the program, an informal reading survey will be given to ascertain possible negative attitudes toward reading that could be interfering with learning to read.

Quality literature selections for the listening instruction in inferential abilities will be taken from suggestions and bibliographies presented in a graduate course and a workshop in children's literature taken at the University of Northern Iowa.

The selected literature works will have potential for applying inference tasks.

The students who are eligible for the Chapter I reading program will be presented a different story in ten read aloud sessions, followed by interview/discussion periods for each child. From these taped follow-up sessions, evidence of the children's progress in making inferences will be noted through teacher notes recorded on the Student Progress Chart.

Importance of the Project

For children, inferencing acts very much like a catalyst creating what Johnson and Johnson (1988) refer to as the "A-ha" in comprehension. The listener's or reader's excited response is obvious. Inferencing helps to create the element of enjoyment in the reading process. The more a reader understands, the more enjoyment the reading experience provides.

By collecting exhibits in portfolios from these primary-age students' responses to instruction on inference tasks, they can reflect on their progress in developing higher-level comprehension abilities. As this data is organized into portfolios through teacher-student conferences, teachers and students can become partners in the instructional program (Goodman, 1986). The result of this collaborative self-reflection can be a nurturing of literary-delayed children's self concept along with their comprehension abilities. The

children's progress can then be shared with parents and others involved in the school program.

Terms of the Project

Comprehension is an interactive process wherein readers integrate their prior knowledge with the information from a text.

Inference tasks involve readers in making interpretations of a text's meaning based on their prior knowledge.

Portfolio is a collaborative multidimensional collection of exhibits representing an individual student's progress and instructional needs.

Review of Professional Literature

This review of professional literature will focus on the nature of the comprehension process and inference tasks and portfolios as an assessment technique to showcase children's developing inference abilities.

Nature of the Comprehension Process and Inference Tasks

Current discussions of comprehension emphasize the interactive nature of this process (Smith, 1983). Every listener or reader, both novice and expert, brings a background of experiences and language understandings to the comprehension process. Listeners and readers use their existing knowledge to interpret, to determine importance, to draw inference, to elaborate text, and to promote comprehension (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991).

Listeners and readers apply a set of strategies to aid in the comprehension process. These strategies are actions selected often unconsciously to achieve particular goals (Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991). Inferencing is such a strategy. Strategic listening and reading are important characteristics of literacy. These strategies allow learners to have more control over the listening and reading processes. Listeners and readers can elaborate, organize, and evaluate information derived from text.

Developing comprehension strategies coincides and overlaps with the development of other cognitive strategies to enhance attention, memory, communication, and learning (Johnson, 1983). If instruction in these strategies is presented and applied across the curriculum, it is more meaningful to students (Paris et al., 1991).

While engaged in the comprehension process, listeners and readers are constructing meaning. They are connecting with the text by using their prior knowledge to embellish text (Paris et al., 1991). Making, or drawing inferences, can be part of this constructive process. Such construction requires listeners and readers to control their involvement in the comprehension process by doing their own thinking. Engaging in inference tasks involves a higher thinking level than responding to details of the text in a literal sense. Studies have shown that children

have more difficulty answering inferential than literal comprehension questions (Hansen & Pearson, 1983).

Studies indicate that little instructional time is spent in school teaching inference tasks. Yet, Hansen and Pearson (1983) found readers benefited from instruction that made them aware of the importance of making inferences and that instructed them in utilizing prior knowledge and asking inferential questions. In fact, poor readers benefited more from the instruction than the more able readers.

Portfolio Assessment

A portfolio can provide a comprehensive view of student performance (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991). In portfolio assessment, the student can become a participant in, rather than the object of, assessment (Valencia, 1990a). A portfolio provides a forum that encourages students to develop the abilities needed to become independent learners and to participate in goal-setting for further learning experiences (F. Paulson, P. Paulson, & Meyer, 1991). In assessing their inference abilities through portfolio collection, children are engaging in monitoring or self-reflection. Such participation in instruction-assessment can give students a heightened sense of ownership of their learning (Valencia, 1990b).

Johns (1991) emphasizes that teachers and students need to consider instructional priorities before selecting specific

exhibits for the portfolio collection. He suggests many sources of exhibits representing a student's performance. Examples are: audio tapes of student's involvement in the language processes, video tapes of classroom activities, a student-compiled log, written responses to language activities, and a checklist of relevant behaviors for students.

Proposed Project

The goal of this project is to connect instruction and assessment. The assessment technique of portfolios will be used to showcase literacy-delayed children's progress in developing inference tasks through listening experiences.

Not only could this instruction-assessment connection provide authentic information to teachers and students but also to parents. The parents in the writer's school have voiced concern about assessment as the whole language instructional concept is being implemented into the school program.

Introduction to the Project

The second graders who are literacy delayed will be given this informal reading survey.

Informal Reading Survey

1. How do you feel about reading books for fun?

good don't know not good

2. How do you feel when a story is read aloud?

good don't know not good

3. How do you feel when you are asked to read aloud?
 good don't know not good
4. How do you feel about how well you read?
 good don't know not good
5. How do you feel about discussing books/stories?
 good don't know not good

The children will be introduced to the task of bringing one's ideas to a story as they listen to it. A story will be read aloud to the students, followed by a discussion of inferring possibilities discovered as the children listened to it. During the next session, the follow-up interview-discussion which will be taped will be held with each child. Teacher notes will be taken to supplement the student responses. A summary of student responses will be recorded on the Student Progress Chart which is presented below.

Student Progress Chart

Student's Name

Literature Source

Date

Inferential connections from text implications

Change (improvement) in response

Connections from text to text

Enthusiasm for the reading process

The teacher will discuss with each student his/her responses and future instructional needs. The taped interview-discussion sessions and teacher notes will be placed in each student's portfolio as evidence of growth in the comprehension process and/or instructional needs. Instructional lessons, either individual or small group, will follow in the third session. As the literature-based lessons are continued, the student responses and teacher notes will be placed in the student's portfolio to form a collaborative collection of student exhibits. At the conclusion of the outlined project, this collection of exhibits will serve as the basis for the assessment of student progress in reading comprehension.

Literature Selections

The proposed instructional program on inference tasks based on literature experiences is presented in this section.

Literature selections for the lessons represent many cultures and genres. The specific literature works and related inference tasks are presented in the order of their presentation below:

Rylant, Cynthia. (1985). The Relatives Came, Illus. Stephen Gammell. New York: Scholastic.

Summer is a time for travel and reunions. Getting reacquainted with friends and relatives who live a long distance away is not uncommon during the summer.

Inference tasks: Time, action, cause & effect, and feelings-attitude

Brown, Marc. (1982). Arthur Goes to Camp, Boston: Little, Brown, & Company.

As Arthur prepares for his first time at summer camp, he is not at all sure that he is going to like this experience. New friends and new experiences turn out not to be so bad after all.

Inference tasks: Problem-solution, cause-effect, and make believe-reality

McLerran, Alice. (1991). Roxaboxen, Illus. Barbara Cooney. New York: Puffin Books.

Roxaboxen, the make believe town the children have created, is a wonderful place to play.

Inference tasks: Location, location-agent, feelings-attitude

Peet, Bill. (1978). Eli, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Friends come in many shapes, sizes, colors, and ages. Eli discovers that one should not be too quick to judge who are your true friends.

Inference tasks: Cause-effect, problem-solution, category, and feelings-attitude

Polacco, Patricia. (1992). Mrs. Katz and Tush, New York: Dell Publishing.

The boy Larnel and his family, African Americans, befriend Mrs. Katz, an elderly Jewish widow who is lonely. With the help of Larnel and Tush the cat, Mrs. Katz finds a family and happiness.

Inference tasks: Problem-solution and feelings-attitude

Hall, Donald. (1979). Ox-Cart Man, Illus. Barbara Cooney. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

This story describes subsistent farming in early times.

Inference tasks: Time, location and agent

Scherttle, Alice. (1991). Witch Hazel, Illus. Margot Tomes. Mexico: Harper-Collins.

Bill and Bart, Johnny's older brothers, think that he is not old enough to help with planting and harvesting of the crops. To keep him happy, they give him a few seeds to plant. When the seeds begin to grow, Johnny needs a scarecrow to keep the birds away from his special crop. With the scarecrow, Johnny experiences a fanciful harvest moon adventure.

Inference tasks: Time, object, and cause & effect

Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. (1992). Hiawatha, Illus. Susan Jeffers. New York: Scholastic.

A beautiful story about a Native American boy who develops a love for nature through his mother's teachings.

Inference tasks: Location, time, and agent

Robbins, Ruth. (1960). Baboushka and the Three Kings, Illus.

Nicholas Sidjakov. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

A Russian variation of the Christmas story tells of the Three Kings who follow the star to Bethlehem. Baboushka is asked to join the Three Kings but declines and then spends the rest of her life regretting her decision.

Inference tasks: Location and agent

Kimme1, Eric. (1990). Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins, Illus.

Trina Scharf Hyman. New York: Scholastic.

The Hanukkah goblins attempt to keep the village from celebrating Hanukkah only to find out that good conquers all as Hershel becomes the town's hero.

Inference tasks: Cause-effect and agent

Say, Allen. (1991). Tree of Cranes, New York: Scholastic.

A young boy in Japan learns about Christmas in America when his mother shares her experience in this other culture by decorating a tree in the front yard with paper cranes.

Inference tasks: Time, cause-effect, problem-solution and feelings-attitude

Conclusion

Literacy-delayed children often have listening abilities that indicate higher thinking potential than their reading level. Through listening instruction in inference tasks, these children's linguistic abilities can be nurtured. Inference tasks

require children to associate their background of experiences, or prior knowledge, with the author's message. Not only is their emerging literacy supported but also their confidence in their abilities to think and respond.

Through portfolios, an instruction-assessment connection can be made to extend the showcasing of literacy-delayed children's thinking-language abilities. Tapes of children's responses to inference tasks with accompanying teacher notes can become a part of a collaborative monitoring system for children and teachers as they survey progress and instructional needs. These reflections can be shared with parents.

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