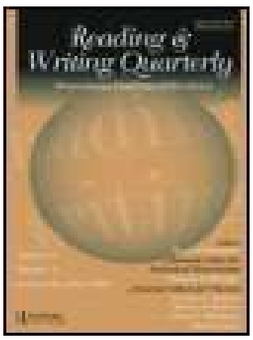

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Effective Reading Instruction for Struggling Readers: The Role of Direct/Explicit Teaching

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Struggling readers are more likely to learn essential reading skills and strategies if the direct or explicit model of instruction is part of the teacher's repertoire of teaching methods. Directly/explicitly teaching reading means imparting new information to students through meaningful teacher–student interactions and teacher guidance of student learning. In this approach, the teacher clearly leads the teaching–learning process. At the heart of the direct instruction method are explicit explanations, modeling or demonstrating, and guided practice. Direct/explicit instruction needs to be an integral part of learning the major content strands of the reading process—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

The most pervasive conclusion of teacher effectiveness studies from the early 1970s was that teachers have a profound influence on how much students learn. Within these studies, research on effective teaching has clearly shown that teachers directly and explicitly teach students what they need to know (Rosenshine, 1995, Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, & Rodriguez, 2002). A number of major studies have demonstrated the importance of direct or explicit instruction to student learning. Explicit/direct instruction has been shown to be efficacious in learning and teaching the major components of the reading process—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency,

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vocabulary, and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Baumann and Duffy (1997) of the National Reading Research Center summarized the key ideas that are instrumental in fostering motivated, lifelong readers. Five years of research on fostering reading growth showed that reading skills and strategies can be taught effectively and efficiently in preschool and elementary school reading programs when instruction is systematic and explicit.

DIRECT/EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION: THE PROCESS

Although it seems simplistic and obvious, teachers of reading "teach"; that is, students do not become independent learners through maturation. Directly/explicitly teaching reading means imparting new information to students through meaningful teacher–student interactions and teacher guidance of student learning. Successful teachers, teachers whose students consistently outperform their peers, rely on instructional flexibility so they can provide explicit instruction to struggling learners who need the additional modeling and support (Villaume & Brabham, 2003). Rosenshine and Stevens (1995) identified the following six instructional functions for teaching well-structured objectives (which form the core of recommended steps for direct or explicit instruction):

1. Review and check previous work.
2. Present new material.
3. Provide guided practice.
4. Provide feedback and corrections.
5. Provide independent practice.
6. Provide weekly and monthly reviews.

The approach brings together many recommended components of effective instruction and of schema theory, including relating new information to past learning, explaining to students why the new skill or cognitive strategy is important and useful, eliciting student interest, providing step-by-step explanations, modeling, engaging in guided practice, and practicing the ability independently in a variety of reading texts and groupings. Several other models of direct/explicit instruction have been developed through the years with similar elements, including those described by Hunter (1982) and Carnine, Silbert, Kame'enui, and Tarver (2004).

The lesson objective or type of learning to be accomplished determines the degree of directness or structure in this approach (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 2002). The majority of learning outcomes in teaching reading can be classified as either skills or cognitive strategies. Both types of learning are important for success in reading; however, they require different lesson

presentation methods in direct/explicit instruction. Skills involve lower level cognitive processing, are specific in nature, and are more or less automatic routines (Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007; Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991). In skill learning, the teacher is in complete control and employs a high degree of structure. Examples of reading skills include the various decoding methods used in phonics, structural analysis, and context analysis; specific comprehension skills such as recognizing sequential development, fact versus opinion, and a stated main idea; and reading study skills such as using an index or interpreting a bar graph. Cognitive strategies require higher level cognitive processing, are less specific in nature than skills, and are anchored by intentional and deliberate procedures under the command of the reader (Dole et al., 1991). In cognitive strategy learning, teacher directness and control is more relaxed than in skill learning. Teaching a cognitive strategy still necessitates that the teacher explain and model what he or she wants students to learn, but it is not a strict step-by-step procedure under the complete control of the teacher as it is for skill instruction (Blair et al., 2007). Examples of cognitive strategies applied to reading include making predictions, summarizing a story, reacting critically to what is read, and inferring main ideas.

The key to direct/explicit instruction is the active communication and interaction between teacher and student. This style of teaching can be well structured or less structured in nature. As noted earlier, the objective students are to learn often requires differing degrees of directness and structure, and it is this dynamic and interactive relationship that mandates flexible and responsive instruction (Villaume & Brabham, 2003). Different types of learning require varying degrees of teacher directness/explicitness and control. Skill learning requires more control and direction by the teacher than does strategy learning, which requires less teacher directness and is more under the control of students. However, teaching is neither wholly direct nor indirect—on a continuum, a given teaching lesson is only more or less direct than another (Blair et al., 2007).

At the heart of the method are explicit explanations, modeling, and guided practice. This stage is founded on modeling or demonstrating a reading skill or cognitive strategy and its use in an actual reading situation, and thinking aloud with students about what the skill is and how it is used (i.e., showing how to apply it in context; Blair & Rupley, 1988). Modeling is a direct/explicit teaching strategy that effective teachers use to help students conceptualize reading skills and strategies and how to apply them. As its name implies, *modeling* is demonstrating for the students how to use their learning. As Dole et al. (1991) noted, modeling varies in relation to how much information is explicitly provided. Explicit types of modeling used extensively in teaching cognitive strategies are talk-alouds and think-alouds. Both of these involve teacher discussion and teacher–student interaction. An important

feature of talk-alouds is the teacher demonstrating the cognitive strategies while discussing the steps in the process.

Think-alouds often involve discussion of the steps used in a strategy, but they also include a description of the reasoning that readers use when performing the task. Think-alouds are intended to help students "get inside the teacher's mind" and begin to understand what strategies they can use when doing similar tasks.

Effective teachers provide varied, meaningful practice to ensure student mastery and transfer of a skill to other meaningful reading situations (Villaume & Brabham, 2003). Directly controlled by the teacher, this practice is characterized by varying degrees of teacher–student interaction. In this process, the teacher acts as a mediator (Rupley & Blair, 1988). Based on Vygotsky's (1962) theoretical work, mediated instruction involves providing guidance to a student in learning a particular skill. During practice, the amount of guidance is great at the beginning; it then declines to little or none. Similar to mediated instruction is "coaching" students. Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) researchers Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (1999) reported on qualities of effective primary-grade teachers. One salient quality of effectiveness was that most teachers taught phonics in isolation. However, they then coached their students and supported their use of the phonics skills in real reading situations.

Guiding and directing students' learning is certainly not new; it has been an effective teaching strategy for years. The renewed interest in it today is the result of new research on the teaching–learning process and the social environment of the classroom. A focus of application for this research is the gradual and guided shift in responsibility for the application of a reading skill or strategy from the teacher to the student. However, it is readily acknowledged that the process of explicit/direct instruction is particularly applicable to the learning of knowledge in an area where there are explicit steps to follow in a step-by-step fashion. The development of many reading abilities falls into this area. However, there are other knowledge areas whose content and skills do not follow a step-by-step explicit style of learning and for which this approach is not applicable and not successful (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1995).

SCAFFOLDS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS' LEARNING

Central to teachers effectively teaching students cognitive strategies is their effective use of direct/explicit instruction that incorporates scaffolds to support students' learning of the strategy. A definition of *scaffolds* was provided by Rosenshine and Meister (1992):

> Scaffolds are forms of support provided by the teacher (or another student) to help students bridge the gap between their current abilities

> and the intended goal. Instead of providing explicit steps, one supports, or scaffolds, the students as they learn the skill. (p. 26)

Scaffolds can be general aids such as modeling or demonstrating a strategy, or they can be specific aids used to teach a strategy. For example, in teaching the strategy of student-generated questions, a teacher may use the scaffold of teaching students to use reporters' questions (Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How?) as they think about what they read. As in teaching any cognitive strategy, the teacher serves more as a facilitator in guiding and directing students to interact critically with text than one who explains the strategy in step-by-step detail.

OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

Opportunity to learn refers to whether students have been taught the skills and cognitive strategies relevant to the areas on which they are assessed. Teachers who specify reading behaviors to be achieved prior to teaching and who teach content relevant to these outcomes often have students who achieve at a higher reading level than do teachers who do not. Opportunity to learn is a variable associated with direct/explicit instruction. Teachers could employ structure and direct/explicit instruction, but if the instruction does not relate to an assessed learning task or a valued benchmark or identified outcome, then students have not had an opportunity to learn the product. For example, students who do well in learning isolated reading skills as a result of intensive instruction but who do poorly in reading text may lack the opportunity to learn how to apply such skills in actual reading tasks (Blair et al., 2007).

Providing students with opportunities to apply their reading skills and strategies in meaningful and varied types of text is extremely important; however, teachers must be sure to use materials that students can handle. For example, informational texts often present unfamiliar content that is focused on complex ideas and relationships represented by text structures that many students are unprepared to read and understand. Informational texts have differing structures, not only from narrative texts, but also within the text itself, such as description, sequence, compare–contrast, problem–solution, and causation (Meyer & Freedle, 1984); therefore modeling and supervised application of skills become of paramount importance. The more a teacher models and then provides scaffolding for students reading text with which they can be highly successful, the more the students will probably learn. However, if students are involved in actual reading tasks that limit success, the less likely they will be to enhance their learning.

Practice activities in reading are of the utmost importance for struggling readers when considering the students' opportunity to learn. Such activities are best designed around three areas: (a) planning for practice, (b) delivering effective practice, and (c) evaluating the effectiveness of practice assignments (Rupley & Blair, 1987). When planning for practice, teachers should ask the following:

- Is the intended practice related to the students' needs?
- Is the level of the materials appropriate, and are the materials interesting?
- Is the content of the practice within the students' experiential background?
- Are different ways of practice provided to meet students' needs and maintain their interest?
- Is the amount of practice appropriate for the instructional period?
- Are directions and examples provided to students to ensure understanding (i.e., are they clear)?
- Is it necessary to vary the type of practice in one class period (e.g., by having students work on two or three different types of materials relating to one aspect of reading), or will one practice activity be sufficient?

When delivering practice, teachers should ask the following:

- Are several exercises completed with the students before they work on their own?
- How will the students' progress during practice sessions be monitored?
- Do individual students know how to get help if I am working with another student?
- What should students do if they finish an activity early?
- Do the students understand how the practice activity relates to reading in meaningful text?

When evaluating the effectiveness of practice assignments, teachers should ask the following:

- Did the practice accomplish its goal?
- What are the students' patterns of correct and incorrect responses?
- How will the results of this practice session modify the next practice activity?

Opportunity to learn is not equal to coverage of materials and topics. Opportunity to learn, progress monitoring, structure, and direct/explicit instruction are related. The reading instruction that is offered must relate to assessment data, desired outcomes or benchmarks, instructional format, and application in actual reading tasks. Opportunity to learn should reflect the desired learning outcomes, not simply cover the content.

ATTENTION TO LEARNING TASKS

Academic engaged time, or *time on task*, refers to the classroom time when students are actually attending to and doing the work at hand. Classrooms in which students are actively engaged in learning for a large proportion of the time demonstrate higher achievement in reading and writing than do classrooms in which students are not so engaged. The use of the direct/explicit instruction approach facilitates active student engagement in learning and promotes time on task. Engagement in valued learning outcomes is the crucial element; merely completing reading activities is not synonymous with learning.

Researchers have modified the definition of *time on task* to include students' success rate while working productively. Fisher, Marliave, and Filby (1979) labeled this concept *academic learning time*, which they defined as "the amount of time a student spends engaged in an academic task he/she performs with high success" (p. 52). A high success rate is considered to be above 80%. Allocated time, student engagement, and student success rate define academic learning time. Collectively, academic learning time occurs when a student has the time or opportunity to learn, is actively engaged with the task at hand, and is succeeding at the task.

Recently, CIERA researchers (Taylor et al., 1999; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2005) studied quality time and reported that effective teachers in Grades K–3 maintained students on task and engaged behavior 96% of the time, whereas students of less effective teachers were on task and engaged an average of 63% of the time. The type of grouping utilized in reading also contributed to the level of student engagement in instruction. Students with the most effective teachers spent considerably more time per day in small-group instruction in reading as compared with students of the least effective teachers (48 min vs. 25 min, respectively).

DIRECT/EXPLICIT WORD IDENTIFICATION INSTRUCTION

Learning the various word identification skills and strategies is particularly suitable to the direct/explicit model. Summarizing the literature on the teaching procedures for direct instruction, Rosenshine and Stevens (1986, 1995) delineated instructional functions for teaching well-structured objectives. Teachers who use these procedures consistently see higher than average achievement among their students.

Research has indicated that good readers are superior at identifying words (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Comprehension involves understanding and interacting with the ideas expressed in text (or decoded text). Obviously, the ability to identify words is necessary for comprehension. Speaking to the importance of word identification in acquiring vocabulary,

word knowledge, and subsequently independent reading, Juel and Minden-Cupp (2000) stated as follows:

> We know that children who learn to read early on read considerably more than their peers who are still struggling to decode, and through reading they learn things that increase their text comprehension. . . . Thus, the critical question is how can teachers help children gain enough skill to successfully enter this world so that, in a sense, children can read enough to become their own teachers? (p. 332)

The beneficial effects of using direct/explicit instruction can be a partial answer to their question. Those features of direct/explicit instruction that move children toward mastery of word identification strategies are the following (Blair et al., 2007):

- Students who receive planned and direct/explicit instruction on word identification skills and strategies in small-group settings are better able to use the alphabetic code than students who do not receive such instruction. This effective instruction guides students to develop flexible, problem-solving attitudes toward identifying words using the available cue systems—whole-word recognition, phonics, structural analysis, and context.
- Good readers are good decoders. Direct/explicit instruction must provide opportunities for students to apply their word identification skills in meaningful or authentic reading situations (Duffy, 1999).
- Although accuracy is important in identifying words, it is important to further develop fluency or the ability to decode a word with relative ease with no hesitation. Fluency is developed through an abundance of teacher-directed explicit practice in reading text (Samuels, 1997, 2006).

The last two points highlight the importance of mastering automatic word identification skills. Without direct/explicit instruction and meaningful practice to the point of overlearning and automaticity, students are less likely to understand and interact with the ideas in the text.

In addition to explicit instruction with an abundance of practice in applying word identification skills, teachers who use assessment strategies that are direclty related to students' application and who intervene when students begin to struggle are more effective than teachers who simply focus on more practice. Recent research from CIERA supports this notion of monitoring and giving help in real reading situations to ensure proper learning and transfer of a new skill or strategy. Taylor et al. (1999) identified effective practices of primary-grade teachers. Important practices included explicit teaching of phonics in small groups, and moreover the nature of the practice was unique. The researchers stated that "what really set the teachers in the most effective schools apart from their counterparts was their use of coaching

children in how to apply the word identification skills they were learning in phonics while they were reading everyday texts'' (p. 158). Effective instruction includes careful attention to both teaching and practice.

Juel and Minden-Cupp (2000) conducted research on the characteristics of successful first-grade classrooms. Children entering first grade with low reading skills achieved the greatest success with the implementation of the following four practices:

1. Teachers modeled word recognition strategies by (a) chunking words into component units such as syllables or onsets/rimes, or finding little words in big ones; (b) sounding and blending individual phonemes; and (c) considering known letter sounds and what makes contextual sense.
2. Children were encouraged to finger-point to words as text was read.
3. Children used manipulative materials to actively compare and contrast sounds in words.
4. Instructional groups were small, with lesson plans designed to meet the specific needs of each child within that group.

Enabling students to decode text and comprehend is the goal of reading instruction. The concept of reading comprehension has been expanded to include background knowledge, text structure, flexible use of knowledge, reader habits, fluency, automatic word recognition, automatic word knowledge, and the orchestration of skills that support one another in a variety of ways.

Gradually turning over the responsibility of comprehending to the students is an important feature of direct/explicit instruction. This gradual shift of control and responsibility for the learning and application of a reading skill or strategy follows the gradual-release-of-responsibility model of instruction developed by Pearson (1983). Instruction in an area of reading comprehension can begin as a series of connected lessons that move from students understanding what they are to learn (modeling that learning), to applying the learning in text with teacher support (scaffolding), to applying the learning in a familiar text (supervised practice), and finally to applying the learning independently. In earlier instructional phases, if the content or strategy is new, the teacher offers more direct/explicit instruction (scaffolding). As the content or strategy becomes more familiar, the teacher transfers more of the responsibility for learning over to the students. What teachers need to keep foremost in their instructional decision making is that if the content is new, they should select a familiar strategy; as the content becomes more familiar, it is time to introduce a new strategy. This balance between familiar and new is a measure against which to evaluate effective teaching using explicit instruction. Instruction should always be adjusted based on the use of progress monitoring to determine instruction appropriate to students' needs and engaged learning.

Scaffolding is direct/explicit teacher support that enables students to do comprehension activities that by themselves would be too difficult. This

support for comprehension and learning can be gradually taken down and ultimately removed as students become capable comprehenders on their own. Scaffolding allows teachers to transfer the responsibility for learning to students gradually and still provide expert guidance. Pearson and Fielding (1991) discussed the role of scaffolding in comprehension instruction:

> In scaffolded instruction, the teacher determines the difference between what students can accomplish independently and what they can accomplish with just more expert guidance, and then designs instruction that provides just enough scaffolding for them to be able to participate in tasks that currently are beyond their reach. When scaffolded instruction operates according to plan, two things happen: first, the tasks and texts of the moment gradually come more and more under the learner's control; and second, more difficult tasks and texts become appropriate bases for further teacher-student interaction. (p. 849)

In direct/explicit instruction of comprehension, it is often the cognitive strategy that serves as the scaffold. For example, if a struggling learner is having difficulty locating or determining answers to questions posed throughout the reading, the teacher may decide to provide direct/explicit instruction for generating and reading to answer the student's own questions. After several models of how to effectively use this strategy, the teacher then provides support on using this strategy during guided reading. Eventually the student begins to use this strategy independently as a means of comprehending texts.

DIRECT/EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION GUIDELINES

Direct/explicit instruction is an essential feature of a reading instructional program to help struggling students become better readers. Direct/explicit instruction is active, reflective teaching in which the teacher recognizes that reading is an interactive process and that students can be effectively taught to become strategic in their comprehension of text.

Direct/explicit instruction will help students interact with, comprehend, and understand written language. Although the instructional methods used will depend on students' capabilities, the text being read, the purposes for reading, and the context in which reading occurs, teachers can provide effective direct/explicit instruction in the critical areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension by concentrating their efforts in the following ways, as noted by Heilman et al. (2002):

- Designing reading programs that allow students to develop meaning vocabulary by using concept acquisition strategies based on the students' background knowledge.

- Concentrating on improved questioning abilities, which include appropriate questions, appropriate feedback to students' responses, and instructional methods (such as reciprocal teaching) that encourage students to develop thinking and reasoning strategies.
- Providing direct/explicit instruction that is appropriate to the type of learning (ranging from knowledge to strategies) and students' background.
- Focusing instruction on strategies for reading comprehension rather than 'skill acquisition, using modeling and scaffolding to enhance students' success in learning, and applying these strategies in authentic texts.
- Helping students establish purposes for reading that encourage them to engage actively in a variety of reading that includes both literary and informational texts.
- Giving students varied opportunities to assume their own responsibility for learning through application of reading comprehension strategies in a variety of texts.

Teacher-directed and -supervised practice is also associated with automaticity and fluency. Research maintains that automaticity and fluency occur through continued practice and successive exposure to print that is based on direct/explicit instruction (Samuels, 2006). In other words, students need to be provided with multiple opportunities to read text at their independent/instructional level (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; Rasinski, 2006). It is recommended that this exposure to print come in the form of teacher modeling and repeated readings. Through a model, the student is exposed to fluent expressive reading that helps ensure comprehension. Through repeated exposures to text, students begin to recognize orthographic patterns in words, enhance their sight vocabulary, and develop a quick and effortless ability to recognize words.

SUMMARY

When it comes to mastering the reading process, the following five instructional tasks or content strands represent the major thrust of reading acquisition:

1. Phonemic awareness
2. Phonics
3. Fluency
4. Vocabulary
5. Comprehension

The premise underlying this discussion is that these major instructional tasks are inseparable parts of one total instructional process. Struggling readers need to learn these tasks with the end product always being reading

comprehension. Each of the above tasks or strands can be developed through direct/explicit instruction and an abundance of practice in a variety of text. As with any teaching method, this approach is not successful with all types of objectives and can be misused. Each step in the direct/explicit approach should be modified to meet student needs and the topic at hand. If the direct or explicit model of instruction is a part of the reading teacher's repertoire of teaching methods, students are more likely to learn essential reading skills and abilities.

One reality that makes reading instruction complicated is that no assessment blueprint spells out precisely where and how much instructional time and effort teachers should devote to each instructional task or strand. Also, no blueprint says which instructional techniques work best with individual learners. Understanding individual differences among learners offers the answers to these questions. Then, using the right amount of direct/explicit instruction in relation to the desired outcomes is the foundation of effective reading instruction.

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