IMPLICIT VS. EXPLICT INSTRCUTIONAL STRATEGIES REGARDING READING COMPREHENSION

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Abstract

There is much debate as to which instructional strategy works best regarding reading instruction. It was my intention to better understand whether using an implicit or explicit instructional strategy is more beneficial when teaching reading comprehension. An explicit instructional strategy is similar to a direct instruction approach where students anticipate a goal to focus on while reading. Implicit instructional strategies use more of an organic approach to highlight comprehension skills as they naturally come up in reading. To answer this question I used a Quasi-experimental design for this Quantitative research. The results indicated when comparing each group's scores (pre and posttest) the implicit instructional strategy resulted in significant numbers and thus proving that this strategy was more beneficial for kids and ultimately answered my question.

Implicit vs. Explicit Instructional Strategies Regarding Reading Comprehension

Given the choice between a small colorful basal reader or a typical trade book (chapter or picture book), most 2nd graders would choose the small colorful book to learn from. But is that choice one that will teach them the most and give them the best skills or strategies to comprehend? That is what I am interested in finding out by asking the question; does teaching comprehension strategies implicitly or explicitly improve students' comprehension ability? According to Pew (2013) reporting from USA Today,

> "Educators have known for decades that learning how to read by the third grade is a critical milestone for children. Students who fall too far behind by the third grade rarely catch up" (p. 2).

When teaching reading comprehension explicitly, curricula (in this case provided by the school district) often suggests the teacher instruct through the use of tools such as Basal readers. This instructional strategy, coupled with the Basal instructional tools front load the objective, outcome and skill for the reader prior to reading.

For these purposes I will use the definition from work by Archer and Hughes (2011) to better define explicit instruction.

> "Explicit teaching uses a direct approach to teaching guided through the learning process with clear statements about the purpose and rationale for learning a new skill, clear expectations and demonstrations of the instructional target and supported practice with feedback until independent mastery" (p.1).

Using the explicit instruction strategy is often in tandem with the use of anticipatory sets. Pat Wolfe defines anticipatory sets in her article *Revisiting Effective Teaching* in the journal of Educational Leadership. Wolfe (1998) claims an anticipatory set is,

> "a way of helping students attend to the relevant data of the upcoming instruction… we should ask focusing questions, have students recall previous information, state the objective, or otherwise assist students in focusing on information that they would need to be successful." (p. 1).

When using anticipatory sets, a teacher is actively engaging students' minds in preparation for the lesson or concept at hand. Using the explicit instructional strategy while teaching reading comprehension requires the instructor to state the goal of the lesson or forewarn students what target strategy or skill they will be using while reading and comprehending.

This approach defers vastly from an implicit instructional strategy. According to Berry and Dienes (1993) implicit instruction is where students can learn to reach and maintain specified levels of target skills without being aware of an intended learning outcome. Through this strategy they acquire the intended knowledge along with other knowledge without knowing the end goal (p. 2).

At Enatai Elementary a school in a suburb of Seattle, our school-wide reading goal as stated in our school improvement plan, created by the staff driven by current data states,

> "As a yearly progress benchmark, by June 2014 100% of all K-5 students will demonstrate at least one year of growth in grade level reading

> common core state standards as measured by TRC, STAR, and the MSP (or standard as determined by ELL Status/IEP plans)" (2012).

To support this goal as a professional it was my inquiry to find the best instructional strategy possible to teach students comprehension skills and strategies while reading. Because I am interested in helping our school this year and every year achieve this goal it is my intention through this work to find out how to best help our readers in second grade so they reach that proficiency milestone by third grade.

When I started teaching in the Bellevue School District we used an implicit comprehension strategy while instructing students how to comprehend. Since then, we have switched our instructional approach to an explicit one. These instructional strategies play out while teaching small groups in a guided reading model. To better define guided reading, I will use the words created by Scholastic (2014),

> "Guided reading is an instructional approach that involves a teacher working with a small group of students who demonstrate similar reading behaviors and can all read similar levels of texts" (p. 8).

There is much philosophical and theoretical debate between my personal and the greater educational community as to which strategy works best. It is my intention to better understand whether using an implicit or explicit instructional strategy is more beneficial when teaching reading comprehension.

Literature Review

Basal curricula

For the initial purposes of the nature of this research, I wanted to take a closer look at basal readers to better understand their makeup, their content and the ways in which they are used. In doing so I found some commonalities between two different studies. Miller and Blumenfled (1993) examined two different reading curricula to better understand if the materials and content eventually taught students to use complex thinking skills independently. After breaking down two comprehension strategies they concluded that students would not be trained well enough to use complex cognitive thinking using solely the basal materials (Miller & Blumenfled, 1993). Similarly, this is what Pilonieta (2010) found when looking at the same basal curricula across grade levels. The findings indicated that basals don't thoroughly teach comprehension strategies like advertised. They tend to be focused on the end assessment goal rather than the process of learning a skill. The findings also concluded that not all basals teach the same comprehension strategy throughout grade levels. Thus, students have a hard time coordinating strategies when applying them year to year (Pilonieta, 2010).

Both of these findings suggest not using basal readers in isolation when teaching comprehension. There are too many holes in the makeup of content and it is not scaffolded well enough to rely on basals alone to teach students how to comprehend while reading. Both findings advise teachers to make their own professional decisions as to what instructional practice and what materials would best serve the needs of their students. The consequence of depending on basal readers alone would result in students not being able to use complex cognitive skills in order to comprehend while reading.

Basal readers related to teachers

The question has been asked time and again if basal readers deskill teachers. Do teachers rely on the structure and support from basal readers to guide their instruction and in the process lose their ability to make informative instructional decisions because they are merely following a script? Both Baumann & Heaubach (1996) and Pilonieta (2010) addressed this in their studies. Both research teams used a qualitative methodology to determine if teachers felt they were deskilled because of the obligation to use basal readers. According to the teachers surveyed in the studies, for the most part they do not feel like using basal readers have deskilled them at all. This suggests that teachers are not feeling reliant on these materials nor do they feel that the use of the basal materials is stunting their teaching ability.

How basal readers are used

There are many ways to use instructional materials, especially basal readers. It is suggested that each teacher use their professional judgment to best determine in which way to use those materials to serve their students' needs. Baumann & Heaubach reported that about 75 % of teachers had flexibility in using the materials they were provided from basals. This supports the fact that teachers are not using basals in isolation. 91 % of teachers surveyed said they don't make instructional decisions based on the structure of the basal. They feel that basals are there to provide ideas not directions (Baumann & Heaubach, 1996). In addition, 96% of teachers are modifying activities to fit students' needs not just doing something or not doing something according to the basal curriculum guide. This research proves that teachers are not deskilled because they are making instructional decisions on their own using their professional judgment.

In contrary numbers, Pilonieta noted that 56 % of teachers used basals, but also supplemented with other instructional tools. 12 % of teachers used the basal reading program solely (Pilonieta, 2010). Although these percentages vary, we can conclude looking at both studies that of those teachers using basal readers and curriculum in the classroom, most are supplementing their instruction with various tools and strategies. There are a small amount of teachers surveyed that are relying solely on basals to teach guided reading.

Instructional methods

Which instructional strategy works? Does using the materials provided to teach a canned curriculum fill the needs of those learning to comprehend? Or does teaching comprehension strategies and skills as they come up in trade books organically work best? Two studies I have looked at test this theory in different ways.

Ortlieb tested this through the use of anticipatory sets. These anticipatory sets explicitly told students what skill they would be working on while reading as well as exposed to them the questions they would be answering after reading. The instructor would go over the anticipatory sets before students read independently. Each group was tested at the beginning and end of a mini unit. The data proved that explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategies through the use of anticipatory sets increased the level at which struggling readers comprehend (Ortlieb, 2013). This was a basal based approach so students were aware of what they were looking for and what they were focusing on, more than just stating an objective. Ortlieb concluded that the method of engaging students in thinking around the text ensures critical connections that might not

occur otherwise. Opposed to this, Popplewell & Doty (2001) found something different when comparing the two approaches. Looking at two schools, one school used a four block model which uses instructional strategies for teaching comprehension that one would use teaching comprehension implicitly or organically. The other school used a basal based approach, using only basal readers and the basal curriculum guide to teach reading. The researchers compared comprehension strategies and then had students apply comprehension by retelling the story. It was concluded that the school that used the four block (implicit) strategy had a higher mean score than the school using the basal based (explicit) strategy (Popplewell & Doty, 2001).

Although each set of results indicates different findings, they both hold merit in the information that they shared. It was interesting to see that the methodology was slightly different as well. Both research groups used quantitative methods to conduct their research, but one used a sample from a single school and the other used a sample from two different schools. Depending on how each group is planning on using their results, it may not matter that they both used different samples.

Knowledge to comprehend

Both Miller & Blumenfled and Pilonieta talked about different kinds of knowledge required to apply certain comprehension strategies and skills. Miller & Blumenfled classified the types of tasks that were required by the basal using Bloom's taxonomy of levels of thinking, specifically using knowledge, comprehension and application (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill & Krathwohl, 1956). Clearly, that is their benchmark when thinking about the range of cognitive thinking and ability related to

Bloom's taxonomy. That is how they guide the rigor of content and thus the level of complex thinking required to answer a comprehension question acceptably.

Pilonieta determined that the range of complex thinking was established using the different types of knowledge. Declarative, procedural and conditional were the different types of knowledge described in their research that represent the range or scale in which a student needed to answer a question or what knowledge was required to answer a comprehension question adequately (Pilonieta, 2010). The gap in research that I see with these two studies and causes me to inquire; what defines complex thinking? Which of these scales of knowledge or any are associated or connected with the true definition of higher level thinking and complex cognitive thinking in order to be able to comprehend?

Regarding my purposes and my experiencing researching this topic, it is clear that there is research that supports both sides of each approach. There is a lot of research that dissects the basal reading program and its contents. Much like the work of Ortlieb and Popplewell & Doty this study will specifically focus on which approach is most effective to increase comprehension of readers.

Ever changing world

Because there are so many different types of basal based curriculums and like all curricula, they change fairly rapidly given the pace of the education world, I did not find one study that has truly exemplified what I am hoping to accomplish. Therefore, I have not found a study that will be using the exact basal I used with my control group. In addition to that, reading strategies tend to also change as a result of research. When

teaching implicitly there are also multiple ways to instruct consequently both ways I am testing through this research will be varied compared to previous studies.

In regards to the nature of the two issues previously stated, time is a huge factor in reading and relying on previous research. Using more current studies will hold more merit and validity as to what I did and how I structured my study. The work of Miller & Blumenfled and Baumann & Heaubach were both published in the 90's. Although that time is not too far gone in a general sense, it is in an education sense. So many things regarding education have changed since then. Just keeping the nature of this study in mind, things have changed so rapidly in this field specifically materials, instructional practice, content and values.

I am working with students that are seven and eight years old. Their brains are still growing and their health could be something that could affect their reading ability. The same holds true for their maturation level. Baumann & Heaubach (1996) state that students need to master basic reading skills before becoming fluent readers. If students are not at a developmental age yet to be able to learn and apply basic reading skills they are not going to be able to comprehend text very well no matter what strategy is used. Additionally, there are some crucial brain development stages that need to happen in a sequential order for a student to be ready to read and most certainly comprehend. For these purposes and the students that were used in this study, this is not an issue. As you will see in my methodology each student was reading on or above the grade level expectation at the time this study was conducted.

Methodology

Research Design

I used a Quasi-experimental design for this Quantitative research. I was targeting the greater population of my students that are on or above grade level at this point in the year. These students were chosen intentionally due to their similar skill level. I chose to target these students in order to find out what is the best instructional method to help them and future students with comprehension. I have chosen this method because I want to be intentional as to who I am trying to help while maintaining a medium of skill and comprehension level. My goal is to find out what instructional method allows students learn comprehension strategies or skills best. Our current literacy curriculum suggests teaching comprehension strategies in isolation (explicit). This is a change from when I first started teaching at this school. We did not have an adopted literacy curriculum and thus embedded our comprehension instruction in a more natural, holistic approach (implicit).

After determining which students are similar in their comprehension ability, I set up a control group who received the same explicit literacy instruction that we have been providing for the past three years. This will be done using the basal readers from the Journeys curriculum by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt publishing company. My experimental group will be taught using implicit instruction using a trade book (chapter book).

Sampling Procedures

This research was conducted at an elementary school in a suburb just outside of Seattle, Washington. With the given population of current second graders there are 96 total students. Of those 96 in our grade level and 23 in my class, eleven are participating in this project. These students represent roughly half of the students in my class and are all on or above grade level according to our district wide comprehension assessment (TRC) and STAR test. This procedure was conducted in May of 2014.

At that time of the year students should be able to comprehend at a level M according the leveling of Fountas and Pinnel (1996). The grade level standard for a second grader regarding reading levels are as follows; level J in September, level L by January and level M by May. This is according the leveling of Fountas and Pinnel measured by the TRC test to measure reading comprehension. The TRC test consists of the student demonstrating their ability to verbally read a piece of nonfiction or fiction text at their given comprehension level, answer varied leveled comprehension questions and complete a written response related to the text they read. The text chosen for a student to read depends on their previous reading level. The verbal comprehension questions that are asked are standard and set by the test maker, not by the test administrator (teacher).

At the start of this study four students were comprehending at a level M, two at a level N, three students at a level O and two students at a level Q. These scores indicate and confirm that each student participating in this project were at or above grade level at this time. The students reading at a level M correlates to these students reading at grade level according to the end of the year bench mark for 2nd grade. Students reading at a level N, O and Q are reading at a third grade level. (Wyman, 2014).

Students were put into two different groups. They were grouped based on ability and comprehension (TRC) and STAR scores. The previously described TRC scores were one of the defining factors as to which group they were placed into; the other deciding factor was based on their STAR score. STAR is an electronic assessment that measures a student's comprehension ability through the use of electronic tools. According to Renaissance Learning (2014) STAR (standardized test for assessing reading) is designed to, "provide the most valid, reliable, actionable data in the least amount of testing time. That empowers educators to focus on what matters most—individualizing instruction to accelerate learning for all students." (Renaissance Learning, 2014).

In this case there were a range of student scores. Taking those two pieces of information into account, I placed students in equal ability groups. The control group and the experimental group were chosen at random. Five students were in the control group. Of these five students, four were reading at a level M and one was reading at a level N. Their initial STAR scale scores varied but there was consistency with answering the comprehension questions. The remaining six students were put into an experimental group. Of these students, two were initially reading at a level N, two at a level O and two were reading at level Q. Like the control group, their STAR scores varied as well, but were still placed together because of their comprehension ability and skills.

Once two distinctive groups were formed the study began. The intention is that the study ran for six weeks as usual guided reading and intervention cycles last. I began this study on May 8th and concluded on June 19th, 2014. The control group read different basal readers as they are used to doing during guided reading instructional sessions. During this time I continued to instruct them using the usual explicit method of

instruction as they were exposed to all year during guided reading. The experimental group read a trade book titled *Be a Perfect Person on Just Three Days* (Manes, 1982). While instructing guided reading with the experimental group, I used the implicit instructional strategy. Both the control and experimental group met the same number of times and on the same days throughout the study. For these purposes each group met at least twice a week.

Regardless of the instructional practice used for either of these groups, students were focused on displaying their knowledge of the comprehension strategies and skills we learned throughout the year. The six comprehension strategies students learned and were expected to apply through conversation and written responses were; compare and contrast, main idea and details, fact and opinion, drawing conclusions (inference), understanding characters and sequence of events. Once the study was completed students were again assessed on their comprehension ability using the measures of the TRC assessment and STAR test.

Results

Throughout this six week study, students in the control group met twelve times, during those times they two read basal readers that focused on each of the comprehension strategies previously stated. Based on students' conversation and written responses in the experimental group, it was clear that they could independently apply all the strategies at this time except fact and opinion. During the use of this trade book and the implicit instructional practice the application of fact and opinion was not evident or witnessed through conversation or written comprehension responses.

Students were assessed at the beginning and end of the six week study. Table 1 indicates each group's respective beginning and end comprehension score according to the electronic STAR test.

Table 1

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pre Test Score		
Experimental	365.50	98.222
Control	394.00	60.062
Post Test Score		
Experimental	452.17	87.755
Control	402.40	98.495

Table 1 also indicates the control group had the highest mean on the pretest, but the difference between the groups' means was not significantly different. However, the control group did not have the highest mean on the posttest.

Table 2 compares the respective group to their pre and posttest. This is again using students' scores from the STAR test.

Table 2

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation

Control Group		
Pre Test	394.00	.765
Post Test	402.4	
Experimental Group		
Pre Test	365.5	.032
Post Test	452.17	

This is significant information regarding the experimental groups' scores. The p value of the experimental group's data from the pretest and posttest declares that the experimental group did significantly better on the posttest than they did on the pretest. The control group did not. The p value regarding the experimental group proves that this data holds merit as to whether these kids performed better as a whole on the post test. Thus, these numbers are not because of chance or the randomness of the group pairs, but in fact because this instructional strategy caused these students to learn more and perform higher on the post test.

As previously explored in Table 1 the data confirmed there was no significant difference between the groups' scores when we looked at the tests one at a time. However, now we see when we compare the amount of change from one test to the other, the control group did not have a significant change, but the experimental group did.

Discussion

The mean score for both the experimental and control group increased after the six week study. The consequence of the sample size used in the research results in no significance, however, the data proves that there is something to be noted regarding the mean of each group. The experimental group's mean score increased 86.64 points and the control group's mean increased 8.4 points. This suggests that for these students the implicit instructional approach was more beneficial in regards to reading comprehension assessed by the STAR test.

Although most of the results suggest that the findings are not significant by definition, I was expecting to see results I did. Focusing in on the actual significant data suggesting that the implicit instructional strategy in this case did create significant number (p value = .32) and thus proving that this strategy was more beneficial for kids and ultimately answering my question. In my professional work the past four years it has been interesting to experience the shift in instructional strategies regarding guided reading instruction and in which in this case lead to a dip in comprehension skills and abilities from what I observed and recorded in guided reading groups. This change was is now a warranted one from what I noted and witnessed and these results support that.

The implications of this finding illustrate that using an implicit instructional strategy while teaching guided reading could cause an increase in comprehension ability for students more so than using an explicit instructional strategy. This begs the question of whether or not teachers can express their professionalism to make the decision on their own to use either instructional strategy depending on the needs of their students. Whether this is a decision driven by data or administration, the results can't be ignored.

It is evident given the mean scores that for this group of students those that participated in the experimental group increased their comprehension score far more than those in the control group. The experimental group of students was forced to think about and apply different comprehension skills independently and in return increased their ability to comprehend.

Recommendations

If replicating this study there are a few questions and avenues I would suggest exploring. Given the sample size I used and lack of participants, my significance was deemed invalid. If I were to recreate this study again, I would consider using more participants. If possible, I would use my entire class of twenty-three students to achieve the significance in my results. To acquire even more significance and accurate results, I would be interested in using students in an entire grade level or even school. It may also be interesting to understand how an instructional strategy may affect students Kindergarten through Fifth grade. Our school is lucky enough to have an assessment that students in each grade level take in order to measure comprehension ability. This could be a beneficial tool to eliminate possible validity issues with the assessment measure.

I would also be interested to see if the same results were replicated if a different researcher used a different set of basal readers for the control (explicit instructional group) or trade book for the experimental (implicit instructional group). I used the materials issued to each teacher from the district for my control group. The Bellevue school district adopted the basal set from Houghton Mifflin. As explored previously,

there are multiple educational publishers that provide basal materials in order to use an explicit instructional strategy to teach guided reading and comprehension.

This also begs the question if novelty played a role in this study. The students who participated in the experimental group were introduced to a new instructional strategy. This caused them to use different skills in order to comprehend. This is something they had not done through this type of instruction the entire school year. The study was conducted in May and by that time the majority of the school year had passed and this was now an established routine.

Because this was such an established activity for the students in the control group it makes me curious if the timing of year had an influence on the results. If recreating this study in the future, I may explore the notion of choosing a different time of year in order to ensure students are not exhausted of the same comprehension practice. On the flip side, by this time of the year all the comprehension strategies and skills that we had learned were solidified in their skills and thinking. Thus, because of the timing and practice throughout the year of each comprehension skill, students were well aware of the skill they were applying while comprehending and in turn able to communicate that via whole group discussion and written responses. These skills were evidently solidified which in turn created ease as the researcher.

This experience was a great start as to my thinking as an educator. I am forever intrigued by the workings of the minds that I teach. The act of reading and the conditional skill of comprehending will always intrigue me and force me to think about how to best serve the needs of my current and future students. This was a great avenue to

start down. I am excited to see where this study takes me as an instructor and future research it may bring.

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