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Donna E. Alvermann
University of Georgia, Athens

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Western Michigan University
Dorothy J. McGinnis Reading Center and Clinic

ADAPTING BASAL INSTRUCTION TO IMPROVE CONTENT AREA READING

DONNA E. ALVERMANN

University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia

Expanding basal reading instruction so that students will develop the ability to read effectively in the content areas is a recognized concern and legitimate goal of middle school teachers. This article offers suggestions on how teachers can achieve that goal by adapting the procedures recommended in their present basal manuals. Specifically, adaptations are suggested in three common basal procedures: setting the purpose, developing a vocabulary, and discussing the selection. Each adaptation can serve as a bridge for helping students apply what they learn in basal reading instruction to content area reading.

Background

Basal instruction typically follows the basic steps of a directed reading lesson. First, the teacher involves students in the lesson by tapping their relevant background knowledge, introducing key vocabulary, and reaching a common purpose for reading the selection. Second, students read and discuss the selection. Third, the techer guides students through a series of skill related activities. Finally, if time permits, students engage in extension or enrichment activities designed to foster independence in applying the information and skills learned in a basal lesson. Setting purposes, developing vocabulary, and discussing selections are three activities common to both basal and content reading instruction. In fact, it is this commonality that makes adapting basal instruction to improve content reading feasible. Making the recommended adaptations calls for minor procedural changes in how students are taught to set purposes for reading, acquire new vocabulary, and discuss what they have read. A discussion of how these changes can be made within the existing framework of a directed reading lesson

follows. Practical suggestions are made for modifying the current practice so that basal instruction can be a bridge to content area reading.

Expanding the Purpose Setting Activity

Reading to determine whether an author had a hidden, or perhaps unconscious, purpose for writing a particular text is considered the mark of a good critical reader (Devine, 1986). This ability to see beyond an author's obvious or stated purpose is especially helpful in content area reading. In social studies classes, for instance, students are required to make judgments or draw conclusions about what they read. Students cannot be expected to judge the validity of what they read unless they have been taught to check an author's credentials, recognize different points of view, and sense when biased or emotive language is influencing their thinking. Traditionally, when these critical reading skills are taught as part of a basal lesson, they are in the section labeled skills development; rarely do they receive the systematic day in and day out attention needed for students to become proficient in their use. By making slight modifications in the basal lesson, however, teachers can ensure that students' attention is focused on the need to read for multiple purposes at all times, not just when the skills development calls for it.

Checking an author's credentials Frequently the teaccher's edition of a basal reader will include for each selection a short description of the author's background and interests. To make this information relevant to students, have them look for certain telltale clues in a selection that point to the author's background of experience. For example, if the author spent her summers along the rocky Maine Coast, have students note the number of ways this experience is reflected in her writing. Making students aware of the need to check an author's credentials is an important step in teaching them to question the authority of their textbook writers. Here, the aim is to produce an attitude of healthy inquiry, not one of negative criticism.

Recognize different points of view. Another way of expanding the purpose setting activity beyond what is presented in basal manuals, involves giving students the task of determining an author's point of view. Once students

are able to master that task, it becomes an easy next step to involve them in comparing two or more authors' points of view.

Determining an author's point of view rests on the ability to identify his or her feelings and ideas about a topic. Because an author usually does not state those feelings directly, it is up to the reader to inver them. Assist students in making the appropriate inferences by having them read to find evidence, or clues, related to how the author feels about a topic.

After students have identified the author's point of view, they should decide whether it coincides with their own ideas and feelilngs. If not, they may want to argue why the author's point of view is acceptable--providing students with opportunities to express agreement or disagreement with various points of view sharpens their skills as critical readers. This sharpened awareness lessens the possibility that students will accept unquestioningly the ideas presented in their content area texts, or in newspapers and television.

Sensing biases or emotive language. Helping students sense when an author is not using language forthrightly is still another way of expanding purpose setting in the typical basal lesson. Teaching students that biased language often belies an author's stated purpose is another way of teaching them to identify hidden purposes for writing.

In basal selections that contain biased or emotive language, teachers can have students note the "charged" words and then replace them with more neutral words. A comparison of the original version with the neutralized version will point out the power of language when it is used to stimulate positive or negative feelings in readers. An exercise in which students note their own reactions to words like scaly or slime will point up the range of individual differences in readers' responses.

Developing independence in vocabulary acquisition

In basal reading instruction, developing vocabulary is a highly structured and teacher guided activity. The key vocabulary that are introduced are rarely technical terms, and more often than not they are in the students' listening vocabulary. That is, students have developed concepts for

the key vocabulary and only need to make the connection between the spoken and written representation of the words.

As structured as vocabulary development is in most basal reading series, it is still impossible at the upper grade levels to teach all the words students will need to know in order to comprehend their content area reading assignments. Students need to learn how to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words independently. One procedure for developing this independence in word meaning makes use of the concept of categorizing. Research (Graves, 1986; Stahl, 1986) has show that categorizing words (e.g., associating the "new" and the "known") along a variety of dimensions is an effective way to increase vocabulary knowledge. Pairing synonyms with their antonyms and using analogies are two types of categorizing activities that can be done as part of the regular basal vocabulary lesson. Although teacher guidance is a necessity at first, over time, students are expected to assume greater and greater responsibility for categorizing the new words they encounter (Pearson, 1985).

Pairing synonyms with antonyms. The idea of pairing synonyms with their antonyms as a way of establishing the meaning of a new word is derived from Carnine and Silbert's (1979) technique of successively presenting pairs of words that differ minimally in meaning. By pairing, instead, words that differ maximally in meaning, as is the case of synonyms and antonyms, Powell's (1986) recommendation to teach vocabulary through opposition is heeded. According to Powell, the power of teaching opposites ". . . distinguishes, intensifies clarity, and controls comprehension" (p. 619). Research (Kimble, 1968) also has confirmed the effectiveness of using opposites to evoke word associations.

Pairing synonyms with their antonyms is a strategy that is easily integrated within the current basal practice of introducing key vocabulary in context. Present the same list of words, but rather than provide clues to those words in sentences, ask students to match appropriate synonym/antonym pairs with the new words. For example, the synonym/antonym pair for the new word submit would be yield/resist. This early recognition task could later give way to the more difficult production task of asking students to supply either the synonym or antonym. This strategy is aimed at helping students acquire vocabulary meaning independently.

It is not recommended as a replacement for current basal practices -- only as a variation on them.

Using analogies. Like the categorization strategy described above, using analogies is most effective when taught in conjunction with the contextual method, popular in many basal series. Analogies taught by themselves typically involve only definitional learning. However, with a slight modification in procedure, teachers can combine analogical reasoning and the contextual method. For instance, using the same words from the paired synonym and antonym example, ask students to complete the following sentence: "Because the thieves refused to yield or __________ to his questioning, the sheriff believed they also would oppose or __________ the lie detector test."
In definitional form, the analogy would look like this:

yield: submit :: oppose: resist

A point to keep in mind when presenting vocabulary through analogies is the need to focus students' attention on the appropriate attributes of the known term (Baldwin, Luce, & Readence, 1982). For example, an analogy that uses the word yield to explain submit will only be understood if students associate the attributes of "giving up" with the word yield.

Making certain that students have multiple exposures to a new word is a critical factor in improving comprehension. In Stahl's (1986) review of the literature, providing only one or two exposures to a word is insufficient. Using analogies embedded within the context of a to-be-read selection is another way of developing students' breadth of knowledge in vocabulary learning. It is also a way of enabling them to derive meaning independently, a skill that is vital to their understanding of content area texts.

Enabling Students to Be Active Discussants. According to the 1984 National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading (see The Report Card, 1985), 40% of the thirteen year olds had not acquired the skills necessary for drawing generalizations about key ideas from content area texts. Even more disturbing was their lack of proficiency in reacting critically to what they read or in questioning their interpretations of text in the face of opposing arguments. The results prompted the authors of The Reading Report Card

to recommend an increased emphasis on teaching comprehension using higher level reading skills. They suggested that classroom discussion was one way of improving those skills.

Reacting to the need for teaching higher level skills, Farrar (1986) noted, "examining one's own opinions, judgments and reactions in relation to what the author has presented and applying that knowledge to new situations marks a qualitative jump from the . . . comprehension of the basal reader (p. 46). Farrar further observed that students benefit from discussions in which they bring text based knowledge to bear on current issues and problems. Following are two ways to modify a typical basal discussion. For a fuller description of how these modifications have been used, see Alvermann, Dillon, & O'Brien (1987).

Issue oriented discussion. The purpose of an issue oriented discussion is to inform students' of others' feelings and beliefs about a particular topic. An issue oriented discussion can also help students analyze, evaluate, or even modify their ideas. Because responsibility for much of the talk lies with the students in an issue oriented discussion, it is necessary to modify the typical basal reading discussion. Instead of discussing segments of the text, as in a basal discussion, students should be encouraged to read the entire selection and then discuss it.

One activity that is appropriate for structuring an issue oriented discussion is Group Reading for Different Purposes (GRDP) (Dolan & Dolan, 1979). The procedure follows:

1. Assign all students the same material to read silently
2. After the students have completed the reading assignment, divide them into groups of four and give each group a task on a 3X5 index card. Tasks might include:
   (a) find three statements of fact and three of opinion
   (b) present an alternative argument to the one given in the text
   (c) test the truth of the author's statements by referring to other sources
   (d) devise a set of questions that can only be answered by consulting additional sources
3. Remind students that although discussion takes place in the small groups, the major forum for discussion is the whole class after the tasks described above have been

completed. A spokesperson may be appointed from each small group to summarize the group's ideas for the class.

Because Group Reading for Different Purposes is a big departure from the way discussion is conducted in traditional basal instruction, students may be reluctant at first to take responsibility for initiating their own small group discussions. This is usually not a problem, however, once students have engaged in the activity and feel comfortable in completing the tasks on the index cards.

Problem solving discussion. To use problem solving in a discussion as it is intended, students must read in depth about a topic or concept. Most basal selections do not encourage this type of reading. However, the enrichment activities for most selections do contain suggestions that can be used to guide small groups of interested students in their search for more information about a particular topic. To prevent these enrichment activities from foundering because of inadequate time to supervise them, teachers may opt to use the development discussion strategy, which was developed by Maier (1963) for the purpose of exposing students to the process of group problem solving. It operates on the notion that students who have a say in formulating a problem will be able to solve it if they break the big problem into manageable parts and work as a group to solve one common problem part at a time. Students work in small groups to find solutions to a problem and to obtain evidence for keeping or rejecting their solutions. They also use higher level thinking skills in evaluating the product of their efforts.

Steps for implementing a developmental discussion involve the teacher directly at the beginning and end of the activity. In the interim, students are expected to work independently as they complete well structured tasks. To use the developmental discussion strategy, begin by reviewing the selection briefly with students and then formulate a problem together. It is a good idea to model problem solving questions in a way that encourages students to use both their background knowledge and the information in the selection. For example, ask, "How does the idea that ______ apply to ________?" It is crucial that students have a voice in formulating the problem they will be solving. It is also

important that they break the big problem into manageable parts.

As students work independently in their small groups to solve the smaller problem parts, they may use the following questions to guide their discussion:

- What do we already know about this problem part?
- How much of what we know is relevant to solving the problem?
- What other information do we need to solve the problem?
- What are some possible solutions?
- Which of these solutions make sense based on what we know or what information we can gather?

After the students have completed their work on the first problem part, the teacher may suggest that they share their thinking, to this point, with the class. Because more than one small group works at the same time on a common problem part, students have the opportunity to observe the different ways a problem can be solved. Eventually, a new problem part is identified, and the process begins again.

Two major limitations of this approach to discussion are evident. First, basal selections do not always lend themselves to a problem solving approach. Second, the success of the developmental discussion strategy rests on an assumption that students have had some experience discussing and working independently in small groups. On the positive side, the benefits students derive from formulating their own problems and then solving them through the discussion process are not trivial, especially when viewed within the context of content area reading. Also, teachers benefit from using the developmental discussion strategy. They learn, for instance, how to change from being information givers to discussion facilitators.

Summary

Adapting basal reading instruction to improve students' critical reading of content area texts is a goal worthy of pursuing, especially among middle school teachers. Fortunately, with only minor adaptations, teachers can help students make the necessary adjustments that are associated

with moving from basal reading to content area reading. Because the demands made on students in terms of working independently are greater in content area classes than in basal reading groups, it is important to help students refine and extend the skills introduced in the basal. Setting multiple purposes for reading, developing vocabulary strategies, and engaging in issue oriented or problem solving discussions are three adaptations that promote independence in learning from content area texts.

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