How Should Competency-Based Instruction Be Used in College Reading Courses?

Wilma H. Miller
Illinois State University

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
**Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic**

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Wilma H. Miller
ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

There are few educators throughout the United States who currently are unaware of the many possible advantages of using competency-based instruction. Competency-based education certainly is one of the most widely-known and potentially promising innovations on the recent educational scene.

The author has been involved in a competency-based secondary school reading program for the past two years. As a result of this experience, she is able to make recommendations as to how competency-based instruction can be used most profitably both in undergraduate and graduate,elementary,and secondary reading instruction.

DESCRIPTION OF A COMPETENCY-BASED SECONDARY SCHOOL READING PROGRAM

For several years now, Illinois State University has been engaged in a competency-based, computer-assisted program which is required of all its secondary education majors. Competencies which are related to secondary school reading instruction are required as one part of the total program. In addition to the competencies in secondary school reading instruction, the students also are required to complete competencies in secondary education and in American public education.

Since it is very difficult to describe briefly all of the competencies in secondary school reading instruction which are included in this program, the interested reader is referred to the article on the program by Larry Kennedy and Howard Getz (2). Some of the areas in secondary school reading instruction which are presented in self-instructional packages are as follows: rationale for secondary school reading, the reading process, standardized survey reading and diagnostic reading texts, textbook readability, improving rate of reading, motivating high school students to read, and reading in the content areas. Each self-instructional package consists of the following parts: rationale, proficiency test, behavioral objectives, questions to be answered, learning activities—required, learning activities—optional, and evaluation devices. Each student can demonstrate his competency on a learning package by using any of the following methods: objective

examination, essay examination, writing a paper, constructing a reading guide, or constructing other types of reading exercises.

Since this competency-based program now has been in use for more than two years, it can be evaluated with some degree of objectivity. The evaluation of the competency-based program in secondary school reading instruction undoubtedly could apply as well to a program in elementary reading instruction.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF USING COMPETENCY-BASED INSTRUCTION IN COLLEGE READING COURSES?

There are advantages in using competency-based instruction in both undergraduate and graduate elementary or secondary reading courses. Some of the lower-level reading skills can be presented very effectively by the use of self-instructional learning packages. The significant content of these lower-level reading skills can be presented by using such means as videotapes, films, audiotapes, tape-slide presentations, or typescripts with worksheets. Such reading skills which can be presented using competency-based instruction are the various word recognition skills, textbook readability, administering and scoring a standardized survey reading test, some aspects of rate of reading, and constructing exercises such as the cloze procedure or a vocabulary overview.

Another major advantage of using competency-based instruction is that each student can pace his own learning. This enables the better students to progress rapidly without having to adjust their rate of learning to that of the less able students in a traditional classroom. On the other hand, self-pacing enables the less able students to progress through the competencies at a slow enough rate with enough repetition to insure mastery of the material. Another advantage is that a student can use any one of several different instructional modes to attain the competencies in reading. If he is visually-oriented, he can view a majority of videotapes, tape-slide presentations, or films. If he is auditorily-oriented, he can listen to a majority of audiotapes. If he obtains information best through the written medium, he can read typescripts. A student also can do the required or optional learning activities at his own convenience. For example, he can do the activities to gain a competency at the time of the day or evening which is most convenient for him.

Another advantage of competency-based instruction is the use of behavioral objectives. When behavioral objectives are used, a student knows exactly what behavior he must perform by the time he has completed any learning package in secondary school reading. A student often does not receive this much specificity in the traditional

classroom. In addition, a student receives almost immediate feedback on his achievement of each competency. For example, he usually receives the results of a computer-scored objective examination the day after taking it, and he receives the results of a hand-scored test or paper only several days after completing it.

WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF USING COMPETENCY-BASED INSTRUCTION IN COLLEGE READING COURSES?

There also are some limitations to the use of competency-based instruction in presenting secondary school reading instruction. It has been difficult to present such higher-level reading skills as those of interpretive comprehension and, critical reading in self-instructional learning packages. It seems more difficult to present important concepts in self-instructional packages than it does to present specific details. It appears that reading skills such as interpretive comprehension and critical reading lend themselves better to presentation by class discussion with much interaction between group members.

Competency-based instruction seems especially weak in the affective area—the development of positive attitudes toward reading instruction and in creative reading. When the author taught a traditional course in secondary school reading, the major objectives were developing in preservice teachers a positive attitude toward reading instruction in content areas and motivating them to learn how to provide for individual reading differences in their content area. If these objectives were accomplished with most of the students, the author was extremely satisfied. It is an accepted fact that many preservice and inservice secondary school teachers are not as aware as they should be of the need for presenting reading instruction and providing for individual reading differences in the content areas.

Undoubtedly the classroom teacher influences the attitudes of the students in his classes more than any other single factor. At any level of education, the teacher-pupil relationship is extremely important. For example, the twenty-seven United States Office of Education first-grade studies discovered that the teacher generally was more important than the reading method used in determining a child's first-grade reading success (1). Probably the same conclusion could be drawn about teachers and teaching methods at any grade level from kindergarten through graduate school. Although the self-fulfilling prophesy theory is not completely accepted in educational circles, it is obvious that many times a student will perform in the way in which his teacher thinks that he will perform. It is equally obvious that the teacher normally does not have as much direct influence on a

student in competency-based education as he does in the traditional classroom. In a secondary school reading program, the lack of the direct teacher-student relationship may be especially significant in determining a student's attitude toward reading instruction in his content area. Without a positive attitude toward secondary school reading instruction, the preservice teacher subsequently may not present the special reading skills in his content area nor provide for the individual reading differences of his students.

Another less important limitation of competency-based education is the lack of self-motivation which some of the students have in completing the competencies in secondary school reading instruction. Although this is not an inherent limitation in the theory of competency-based instruction, it becomes a limitation in its actual implementation. Some college students do not seem to be motivated enough to adjust well to a program which demands so much independence from them. Undoubtedly such students have been conditioned in elementary and secondary schools to depend upon their teacher to be responsible for their learning. If competency-based instruction were begun either in the elementary or secondary school, undoubtedly most college students would be able to operate successfully in the program.

HOW CAN COMPETENCY-BASED INSTRUCTION BE USED IN FUTURE COLLEGE READING COURSES?

It is obvious that competency-based instruction should have a definite place in undergraduate and graduate elementary and secondary reading courses in the future. Perhaps its greatest strengths can be used best by incorporating it into a regular classroom program. In the future each reading course should still be the responsibility of one or more instructors. Thus each student would have one or more persons available who could build in them the positive attitudes toward reading instruction which are so important. There still would be the opportunity to develop the extremely important teacher-pupil relationship.

The instructor or instructors could structure the entire course in advance so that aspects of it are self-instructional. Some regularly-scheduled meetings should be left open so that the instructor could be available for consultation then. Each student could complete the self-instructional packages during that time or at his convenience. A student could complete self-instructional packages in such areas as the word recognition techniques, literal comprehension, and the more basic aspects of the various reading methods. A student could work independently on those aspects of reading which lend themselves to

the learning of specific knowledge and details. A student could complete self-instructional packages which use such media aids as videotapes, films, tape-slide presentations, and audiotapes. Each student also could demonstrate teaching competencies by using videotaped microteaching sample lessons. Most students very much would enjoy the independence they could gain by completing self-instructional packages.

On the other hand, the instructor or instructors should meet with the reading class to present those areas of reading which are not presented effectively by competency-based instruction. Such areas are those of building positive attitudes toward reading, interpretive comprehension, critical reading, creative reading, and motivating students to read widely. The traditional classroom experiences could consist of teacher lecture, class discussion, demonstrations, practicum experiences, and group work.

SUMMARY

The best features of both competency-based instruction and traditional classroom instruction should be combined in undergraduate and graduate elementary or secondary school reading courses. Reading instruction of the future should not be forced into an either/or dilemma. Let's try to improve college reading courses by using the best aspects of both competency-based and traditional reading instruction!

REFERENCES

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2. Kennedy, Larry D., and Howard G. Getz. "A Competency-Based Preservice Secondary Reading Program," *Journal of Reading*, 16 (October, 1972), pp. 15-19.