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## Turning Contemporary Reading Research Into Instructional Practice

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# Turning Contemporary Reading Research Into Instructional Practice

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## **Abstract**

This article highlights four promising areas of contemporary reading research as well as the instructional practices implied by recent findings.



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## TURNING CONTEMPORARY READING RESEARCH INTO INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE

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If the 1960s and 1970s were the years that reading educators discovered that comprehension was really being tested, not taught, and that the "Great Debate" between phonics and whole-word instruction didn't matter much anyway, then what have we learned in the 1980s? Many things, of course, thanks to a quantum increase in the amount and sophistication of reading research. The past era of reading research, which focused on more global aspects of instruction such as the effectiveness of the general approach the teacher used or the books the children read, might be likened to viewing reading instruction with a low-powered objective of a microscope. While this perspective might have been helpful for teachers choosing between instructional approaches which were markedly different from each other (e.g., i/t/a, synthetic phonics, and the linguistic approach), such benefit is now limited because, as noted by Pearson (1985) and Goodlad (1983), both instruction and instructional materials have become homogeneous and eclectic to a high degree.

Contemporary reading research, as through the microscope's more high-power objective, sheds light on finer aspects of reading instruction, providing viewpoints on reading and teaching which teachers can use in making smaller but still significant modifications in their instructional practices. Two of these "finer" aspects, modelling and direct teacher explanation, seem to be the key mediators of research and practice. This article highlights four promising areas of contemporary reading research as well as the instructional practices implied by recent findings.

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### Direct Teacher Explanation

Paris and his colleagues (Paris, Libson and Wixson, 1983; Paris, Oka and DeBritto, 1983) assert that any type of instruction should provide students with three kinds of knowledge; (a) declarative - knowing that a skill works, (b) procedural - knowing how to perform the skill, and (c) conditional - knowing when and why a skill should be used to accomplish different purposes (Paris, Lipson and Wixson, 1983, pp. 303-304). Paris contends that of the three, conditional knowledge is the most important because it provides the metacognitive insight necessary for skill transfer. Since research is documenting that commercial materials teachers use often do not include the how, where, when, and why for skill learning (Hare and Milligan, 1984; Johnston and Byrd, 1983), Roehler and her colleagues trained teachers to use direct explanation as a basis for skill instruction (Roehler and Duffy, 1984; Roehler, Duffy and Meloth, 1984). In addition, students in these studies were asked, what were you learning to do today, how do you do that, and why is it important? Positive results of these training studies suggest that direct explanation fosters greater student awareness for skill learning and nudges the teacher to model and practice a skill before students apply it to a text.

The instructional implications from the previous discussion are evident. Skill instruction should now include the how, why, when, and where of skill learning and application. Contemporary research helps us see that good teaching involves the teacher directly modeling for the students the thinking processes required for a skill. For example, suppose a teacher wanted to determine the explicitly stated main idea of a paragraph. A possible instructional script would be as follows:

Today, class, we are going to learn how to find the main idea of a paragraph when it is stated in a sentence somewhere in the paragraph. The main idea of a paragraph states in a general way what the whole paragraph is talking about. It is important to know how to find the main idea because the main idea tells us the most important information that we should remember from a paragraph. Let me show you how I find the main idea in the paragraph I have written on the board.

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Many kinds of products are made from different parts of the bamboo plant. Paper and animal food are made from bamboo leaves. Buckets, flutes and fishing rods are made from bamboo stems. Medicine is made from bamboo juice.

When I read the second, third and fourth sentences, I see that each of these sentences tells about a specific product made from a specific part of the bamboo plant. These sentences that state specific information are called detail sentences. But when I read the first sentence, I see that it says "many kinds of products", not just a specific product, are made from bamboo. I now see that this sentence states in a general way what the whole paragraph is talking about because the phrase, "many kinds of products," includes animal feed, medicine, etc. Therefore, this is the main idea sentence of this paragraph. So, the most important information that I want to remember from this paragraph is "many kinds of products are made from bamboo." This is how I determine the main idea of paragraphs when I read chapters in my health, science and social studies texts.

But not all main ideas are found in the first sentence of a paragraph. Sometimes they are found in the middle or at the end of a paragraph. Watch as I read the next paragraph that I have written. . . (same explanations but the main idea would be located in another position).

This script makes explicit what is to be learned, why the learning is important, how the learning is acquired, and when/where it is used. Although time consuming, this type of instruction readily demonstrates process as well as relevancy of the learning.

Direct teacher explanation is an instructional practice suggested by three other areas of contemporary reading research: reading-writing connections, top level test structures, and main idea identification. In each instance, both modeling and direct teacher explanation seem to provide the necessary link by which practices recommended by research can become methods which work in classrooms.

### Reading-Writing Connection

Like reading, writing is a language/thinking process

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which involves the structuring of meaning. The movement to emphasize writing concurrently with reading has received impetus from Smith (1982) and Karlin and Karlin (1984), who have shown that acquiring writing skills assists student development of reading comprehension skills. The federal government through NEH grants for integrated language arts projects and the media, through positive reports of successful writing projects (e.g. Time, 1980) have helped to sustain this momentum.

Parallel to developments in content reading instruction, which aims to help students read to learn, research in writing has focused on helping students also see writing as a tool for learning. Studies by Rhea (1985) and Edelsky and Smith (1984) have shown that when students write for "natural" or "authentic" purposes, their writing was more truthful, more varied, and much more satisfying to both teachers and students. Authentic writing can be contrasted to the bland, decontextualized writing that too often goes on in schools in that authentic writing frequently has another audience in mind beside the teacher (e.g., parents, peers, editors, media personalities, etc.). Authentic writing may also be thought of as writing which is done by people in the world of work, from business memos to scientific journals.

Authentic writing seems more likely to occur when a writer has been reading the same type of text s/he is trying to write. Smith's (1982) research suggests that a developmental step of "reading like a writer" takes place before an author can realize and use all the conventions required in producing a certain type of text. Just as children writing "The End" at the conclusion of an original story shows they have been reading or listening to stories, when children write "The End" at the conclusion of a different type of text (essay, poem), it is evident that they have not been reading these types of texts.

To develop this sense of "authentic" writing, teachers need to explain and model the type of writing expected from students. For example, suppose a teacher wanted her students to write fables. Using the direct explanation model, the teacher would read several fables to her class. Following the reading of the fables, the teacher would explain the basic components needed for this style of writing. After the explanation, the teacher would write a

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fable on the board modeling the necessary writing processes. This explanation and modeling should make explicit the critical components needed for this type of writing. The fables previously read should be examined in the light of these critical components to point out the room for deviation from as well as conformity to the pattern. This modeling and analysis can help students view a genre as a set of possibilities for writing instead of a set of limits.

### Top-level Text Structure

Recent research has demonstrated that students who display a sensitivity to a text's top-level structure (e.g., sequence, description), tend to (a) recall more important detail information (Elliot, 1980; McGee, 1982; Taylor & Samuels, 1982), (b) organize their recalls (either oral or written) according to the text's overall structure (Hiebert, Englert and Brennan, 1983; Meyer, Brandt and Bluth, 1980; Taylor, 1980), and (c) show a transfer from text-structure training to their own writing of expository prose (Taylor and Beach, 1984). Since expository prose assumes increased importance as students progress through their school years, instruction regarding these top-level structures should be considered: Description, sequence, enumeration, compare-contrast, and problem/solution.

Text structure training should begin by using "pure" examples of each text structure. If examples cannot be located in texts, then examples will need to be generated by the teacher. Each text structure should be explained by the teacher. The teacher would stress how certain key words in a text (e.g., first, second, same, different, etc.) signal a specific structure, enumeration. Once a text structure has been identified, the teacher would model how she uses this structure to identify the most important information in a text. S/he would then model how s/he rehearses this important information to prepare for class discussions of texts as well as writing research reports. Following teacher explanation and modeling, students would be given another text (same text structure) to practice identifying and rehearsing the most important information.

Once students are familiar with this text structure strategy, they should be expected to apply the strategy independently when reading content-area texts. The teacher should continually reinforce the use of this text structure

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strategy by helping students to organize their writing (papers, essay questions) as well as class discussion and/or questions according to this strategy.

### Main Idea Identification

A text strategy taught throughout all grade levels is identifying the main idea of expository text. Baumann (1982a) suggests that many students find this to be a difficult task. A possible reason for this difficulty is that commercial materials used by teachers seem to vary in how main idea is defined (Winograd & Brennan, 1983).

Hare and Milligan (1984) analyzed four well known basal reading series to evaluate instructional explanations for main idea identification. Although all the series agreed on what main ideas are, where they are found and how they are useful, all the series seemed to avoid the issue of how one determines the main idea of a text. Overall, main idea instruction was characterized by mentioning rather than by true explanation.

Baumann and Serra (1984) analyzed various social studies texts to determine how often main ideas are directly stated in these texts and if most main idea statements are found at the beginnings of paragraphs. They found that for all texts surveyed, 44% of the passages contained simple main ideas, 30% contained delayed completion main ideas, and 26% contained inferred main ideas. Concerning main idea placement, 63% of the simple main ideas were found in the first sentence, 21% appeared in the middle of the paragraph, and 12% appeared in the last sentence. But when all passages were analyzed, only 29% had main ideas stated in the first sentence position.

Because of the many problems inherent in commercial programs and texts, direct explanation of this skill by teachers is crucial. Using natural text (paragraph or passage), the teacher needs to explain how s/he determines if a paragraph has an explicitly stated main idea sentence. Instruction should begin with texts that do have directly stated main idea sentences. Following sufficient teacher explanation and modeling as well as student practice sessions, implicit main idea instruction should be given. Using natural texts also will sensitize students to the fact that main ideas are not always found in the first sentence

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position and many times students will need to generate their own main idea statements.

When students are competent at this strategy, they could then be shown how their strategy assists in writing a text summary, developing a chapter outline and in taking notes for future study.

### Conclusion

The four areas of contemporary reading research which have been the focus of this article--using direct explanation to enhance the reading/writing connection as well as to teach top-level text structure and main idea identification--are not the only promising or interesting ideas under scrutiny by reading professionals. Nor do they offer to reading teachers the guarantee that, if taught, all comprehension problems would be resolved. Rather, the implication is that teachers do not need to substitute one whole approach to teaching reading for another, like phonics for linguistics, as was done so often in the past to improve reading instruction. Improvement will more likely be the result of teachers modeling and giving direct explanations of specific reading strategies which have been demonstrated to be effective for improving comprehension.

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