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TEACHER-SET PRE-READING PURPOSES AND COMPREHENSION

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The move away from oral reading and toward silent reading early in this century emphasized that reading should not be a passive absorption of print but rather that "It must select, repress, soften, emphasize, correlate and organize, all under the influence of the right mental set or purpose or demand." (Thorndike, 1917. [Emphasis added.]

In directed (basal reader) instruction, however, students seldom have self-set reasons for reading the selections as Thorndike envisioned. Instead, an integral part of the Directed Reading Activity (DRA) in nearly all basal readers has been a teacher-set pre-reading purpose for which students are to read; e.g., "Read to find why Marie changed her mind about babysitting her younger brother." The implicit assumption behind this practice is that it will somehow facilitate comprehension. Does it?

A search of the literature (Hawes, 1984) discovered 28 studies from 1920 to the present on pre-reading purposes and related topics and adjunct questions. Some researchers (Wiesendanger and Wollenberg, 1978) found that the no-pre-reading question group scored higher on post-reading comprehension questions than did a pre-reading question group. Others (Distad, 1927) found just the opposite.

Some studies with adults (Anderson and Biddle, 1975; Ackerman, 1977) suggested that pre-reading questions focused attention selectively on the targeted information so that the reader somewhat ignored the rest of the passage and did not retain much of it. If true, in a DRA, this would seem counterproductive.

However, no set of overall conclusions could be reached because of the quality of the research, the disparity of the

subjects, the varying type of material used, and the varying kinds of purposes given. Andre (1979), in a similar review, reached similar conclusions. Particularly dismaying was the fact that few of the studies dealt with or seemed generalizable to elementary school students reading a basal reader selection in a DRA format.

Durkin (1978-79) questioned whether these pre-reading purposes should be in writing. By being only oral, she said, "the children could not refer to them before, during, or after they read. It also meant that they may have been forgotten not only by the children but also by the teacher." (p. 499) Research by Frase (1968, 1975) also raised the possibility that the oral purpose is likely to be forgotten and consequently have little or no influence on comprehension."

Purposes of the Study

Because some basal reader teachers' guides recommend written pre-reading purposes while others suggest only oral ones, the major purpose of this study was to compare the comprehension of stories in the basal reader using three pre-reading purpose treatments: (1) written, (2) oral, and (3) no purpose (control).

A second purpose of the study was to compare intentional learning (information directly related to the pre-reading purpose) with incidental learning (information not directly related to the pre-reading purpose).

Procedures

The pre-reading purpose was a literal, non-detail question written as an imperative statement focusing on the problem in the story; e.g., "Read to find out how Maria delivered the paper so that the dog could not get it." These purposes were stated to conform to Wilhite's study (1982) of the relationship of superordinate and subordinate pre-reading questions to text comprehension.

The stories were read by all pupils in three intact third-grade classrooms. To simulate grouping practices and to approximate pupils' instructional reading level, only the 36 pupils who had scored between the thirtieth and seventieth percentiles on the Nelson Reading Skills Test (1977) given a week before the study began were used in the study.

The three stories used were from basal readers not used in the participating classrooms. Stories were photoduplicated but illustrations were deleted to insure that comprehension was the result of reading and not of looking at the pictures.

Each story had a blank cover page followed by a page containing simple directions. On one set of materials the pre-reading purpose was printed on the direction page and the students followed along as it was read; on another set it was not printed but was read from a master copy while the students listened; and, on the control set, no purpose was given.

A set of six printed questions followed each story. One, an interrogative version of the imperatively-stated pre-reading purpose, was designed to measure intentional learning. The five others were both literal and non-literal and were designed to measure incidental learning.

One treatment was administered weekly to each classroom.

All students received all treatments and all stories in a randomized repeated measure design, in order to establish equivalency of stories, difficulty of pre-reading purposes, and difficulty of post-reading questions.

A one-way analysis of variance for repeated measures, with the .05 level of confidence, was used to analyze the results.

Results

On total comprehension scores, there were no significant differences between the three groups. However, both the written-purpose mean (4.33) and the oral-purpose mean (4.19) were higher than the non-purpose mean (3.83). ($F = 2.03388$, $df = 2, 70$ $p = .138$)

There were no significant differences among the three groups on the intentional comprehension questions. ($F = 1.46829$, $df = 2, 70$ $p = .23732$)

There was a significant difference at the .05 level of confidence on the incidental comprehension questions. ($F = 3.90294$, $df = 2, 70$ $p = .025$)

Discussion

As a result of examining the teacher's guides of five basal reader series, reviewing the literature on the topic, and conducting this study, we reached the following conclusions:

1. Teacher-set pre-reading purposes in a basal reader DRA have a definite value and should not be treated lightly nor implemented casually by teachers as they do seem to facilitate text comprehension. Regrettably, Durkin (1984) found that teachers rarely posed questions before their students read a basal selection.
2. Basal reader teacher's guides should do a better job with regard to such purposes. One, they should provide a clear rationale for them, thereby more adequately alerting teachers to their significance. And two, they might print them in a distinctive type style, thereby calling more attention to them.
3. With third-graders, it doesn't seem to make any difference whether the purposes are oral or written so long as they are definitely stated by the teacher and the students understand that they are to be taken seriously.
4. Purposes that focus on the larger elements of the story, e.g., the resolution of a problem, seem to produce bonus results. Such purposes don't seem to distract from the comprehension of important information that isn't directly related to that purpose. That is, the mental set established by the teacher-set purpose does not seem to focus children's attention exclusively on information related to this purpose. These kinds of purposes may establish a kind of schema prior to reading so that the reader's search is directed to other details as well as to the main character's attempt to solve the problem. Aspects of story grammar and story structure (Rumelhart, 1977) should be helpful in formulating appropriate kinds of purposes.
5. Teachers and authors of basal reader teacher's guides should carefully phrase these purposes. Durkin (1984) found that "manual questions. . . consistently revealed too much about a story's plot." Pearson (1985) has recommended a set of guidelines for developing questions

that invoke prior knowledge and help predict what will happen in the story.

6. Teachers and authors of teachers' guides should follow Pearson's (1982) advice that "There is no reason to give a purpose setting question if you do not follow it up. In fact, if you do not follow it up, students will learn not to take seriously the purpose setting question you give." (p. 10)
7. Teacher-set purposes may not promote the independence which truly mature readers need to develop; they would seem to make the student more dependent upon the teacher than is ultimately desirable. Pearson (1985) has alluded to this and called for a "gradual release of responsibility" from teacher to student. Teacher-set pre-reading purposes have some definite values but equally effective techniques need to be developed that promote reader independence and decrease reliance upon the teacher.

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