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IMPROVING STUDENTS' COMPREHENSION OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN PLAYS

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The direct teaching of thinking across the curriculum is a basic instructional mode that is currently receiving needed attention on a national scale. An obvious area in which to implement the process in reading education is the teaching of reading comprehension (Pearson 1985), and one area of instruction among many in which thinking may be taught directly is the reading comprehension related to plays.

This article is divided into three sections, each a development of theory or practices which relate to direct teaching of thinking in the reading or language arts classroom. These are: 1. the need for a reader to use inductive reasoning when reading a play; 2. the importance of understanding character development in a play; and, 3. the presentation of a method to teach inductive reasoning directly so that students can use the strategy when analyzing character development in plays.

Inductive Reasoning Needed to Read a Play

Several thinking skills are needed for comprehension of drama texts. Only inductive reasoning will be stressed here. The rationale for this choice is that plays demand by their very structure that readers inductively infer character development, plot schema, unstated stage movements, and other non-verbal behaviors. The implicit discourse provided to accomplish these thinking tasks by the author consists in the sum total of lines assigned each character. Secondly, the learning of inductive reasoning strategies relative to reading plays constitutes a set of skills easily transferred by students to those short stories, novels, and

narrative poems which employ the same kind of implicit discourse as the play form; that is to say, development primarily through dialogue.

Character Development and Reading Plays

Inductive reasoning strategies must be applied to several complex meanings structured by the play author through play dialogue. One of the meanings so structured is character development. This, then, is a major comprehension skill needed for reading a play and one that may be more difficult to attain than discovering plot structure or imaging settings. Experience in teaching elementary and secondary students shows that they are apt to offer their personal and subjective interpretations of characters based on tendencies to stereotype, on fulfillment of their own wishes, or solely on their own life experiences. They often fail to take into account the clues to character presented in the text by the author.

A Method for Teaching Character Development Through the Direct Instruction of Inductive Thinking Strategies

Reading a play, one learns about a character from two major sources. One is explicit discourse, offered by the author to introduce a scene or insert parenthetically into dialogue. These lines usually refer to costuming, movement, or reactions needed. They are usually short. The major source for comprehending character development lies in the play dialogue, and this is the implicit discourse.

An analysis of the inductive inference skills needed to handle this dialogue suggests that the reader gathers clues to the personality of each character as the play progresses. Meanings are generally built on the reader's acquisition of answers to his/her questions, such as 1. What does the character frequently say? 2. What does s/he frequently do? 3. What does s/he frequently think (as revealed in asides, soliloquies, or conversation with a confidant)? 4. What do others say to the character? 5. What do others do to the character? 6. What do others think about the character (as revealed in conversations when the character is not present)?

While or after gathering data through this questioning

mode, readers of plays form impressions of the character's patterns of acting, feeling, and thinking, coupled with understandings of the character's related motivations for acting, feeling and thinking. Finally, while or after reading the play, readers tend to "add up" their remembered impressions to arrive at an overall generalization concerning the complexities of the character that has been created.

Students may or may not know the strategies above for inferring the total personality of any character in a play. They may be imposing their prejudices or stereotyped responses on the characters. They may not be monitoring their data gathering strategies for analyzing characters. Or they may be neglecting to see the whole picture because they fixate on only some qualities or negative behaviors of the character in question.

Because of student needs for thinking strategies, the following set of suggestions is offered as a means of direct teaching of inductive reasoning in relation to character development in a play which is read in class:

1. Tell the class directly that the author is limited to presentation of external behaviors through which the reader (and later the viewer) learns about the internal personality of each character. Explain that while reading a play, the reader comes upon clues to character personality in a sequence determined by the author. Thus, each reader must gather clues to each character gradually until the final curtain. This fact means that readers must store clues to each character as they proceed through the text, and finally, they must sum up these clues in order to interpret their meaning.

2. To help students go through this inductive reasoning process, the teacher will offer a grid, and model its use. The grid serves the following purposes: a. The grid fill-ins graphically show the students their personal reasoning processes as they read; b. The filled-in grid is an external manifestation of all the clues which must be considered when the reader tries to summarize the character's personality. c. Because the grid is an externalized revelation of student thinking, the grid may be examined during and after its use for its appropriateness by the student who uses it, peers who review it in a small group, and the

teacher who evaluates it.

The grid may be set up in several ways. The following is presented as a sample:

(.....)
Name of Character to be Studied

External clues to character	My interpretation of clues
-----------------------------	----------------------------

I. Frequent kinds of statements made by this character

A. _____	A: _____
B. _____	B. _____
C. _____	C. _____

My summary of these: _____ Interpretation of statements

II. Frequent actions of the character

A. _____	A. _____
B. _____	B. _____
C. _____	C. _____

My summary of these interpretations of action:

III. Frequent ways of thinking by this character:

A. _____	A. _____
B. _____	B. _____
C. _____	C. _____

My summary of these interpretations of thought:

External clues to character	My interpretation of clues
-----------------------------	----------------------------

IV. What do others frequently say to the character:

A. _____	A. _____
B. _____	B. _____
C. _____	C. _____

Summary of my interpretations of these statements:

V. What do others do to this character:

A. _____	A. _____
B. _____	B. _____
C. _____	C. _____

VI. What do others say about the character:

A. _____	A. _____
B. _____	B. _____
C. _____	C. _____

My final generalization concerning the personality of (---)

The grid should be carefully introduced to the class and used in large group sessions in which the teacher models the use of the grid. It is helpful to point out that the author may not give clues for each section of the grid and that the clues may come in any order, not the order established by the grid. While the students are reading and filling in the grid with the teacher, they will note that their reading is slowed down as they write. The teacher should point out that the use of a grid is temporary. Its purpose is to focus student attention on their thinking processes as they read. As inductive reasoning is improved, need for an external grid diminishes. The automatic and easy use of an "internal grid" replaces the external help.

3. A final summary of the lesson or series of lessons, emphasizing the inductive reasoning strategies used should be elicited by the teacher. This summary may be recorded on the chalkboard, and students should copy the summary into a special section of their notebooks which may be titled, as a suggestion: I KNOW HOW TO. The subsection on reading plays may be headed: Understand Characters in a Play. A sample summary follows: "Authors of plays use implicit discourse in dialogue to reveal the personalities of the characters. As I read or reread the dialogue, I shall look for special clues to the personalities of the characters, record them mentally, and add them together to summarize the general personality of each character. My interpretations of these clues will be influenced also by my knowledge of real life characters, my own experiences in dealing with life, and my knowledge of other characters in history or literature. I have inserted here a grid filled in during class as a guide to my thinking. When I feel ready, I'll analyze characters in a play without the grid, but using what I have learned from the grid."

Conclusion

Recently, the effects of using direct instruction in thinking about text structure coupled with the use of a related grid by students has been researched by Slater, Graves and Piché (1985). While the content of their study is relevant to reading expository prose texts rather than plays, the process of instruction in the experimental mode is similar to the one described in this paper. The important

conclusion from their research is that the groups, which were given direct instruction in the organization of text along with a related grid to be filled in while reading, improved significantly in comprehension and recall of text when compared with similar groups who were exposed to other methods. It is important to note that these results occurred for students in all three competency levels--high, middle, and low levels of reading competency.

The rationale for the success of the instructional method cited in this paper is that it enables students to "own" the instruction; that is, it is metacognitive in nature. Through the use of the grid, students not only monitor what they know but also how and when they know.

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