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TEACHING THE PROCESS OF INFERRING THROUGH A LISTENING GUIDE

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Frequently I observe early childhood education majors who are enrolled in a field-based reading course attempt to help young children learn to infer by the "testing-not-teaching" method. Though well meaning, these soon-to-be teachers are operating under the false assumption that merely asking children enough inference-type questions will eventually result in their ability to infer (cf. Herber & Nelson, 1975). The fallacy of this assumption soon begins to take its toll—both on the teacher intern and on the children. The frustration that ensues is predictable.

On more than one such occasion I have intervened by introducing a listening comprehension guide during our next seminar back on campus. Using a listening comprehension guide to help children learn to make inferences is effective and makes good sense for a couple of reasons:

1) Showing children how to interact with text for the purpose of inferring meaning from it makes more sense than expecting them to improve simply by practicing a skill they've never been taught.

2) "If," as Pearson and Fielding (1982, p. 626) have noted, "we take construction models of language comprehension seriously, then we have to provide children with many opportunities to 'negotiate' a model of meaning for text with the author of that text. Such practice can proceed just as well in a listening as it can in a reading mode."

What follows, then, is a listening procedure for helping even very young children learn how to "negotiate" meaning from an author's implied statements. Before describing this procedure, however, the rationale for selecting listening rather than reading as the preferred mode of instruction is discussed briefly.

Why Listening?

The fact that only a limited number of listening curricula exist in our schools, despite the relatively large amount of time children spend listening, has prompted Pearson and Fielding (1982) to suggest that we consider giving more emphasis to listening activities. Although this is certainly a reasonable suggestion, it was not the primary reason for choosing listening over reading as an instructional mode for teaching young children how to infer.

Rather, it was the preferred language art in this instance because listening comprehension is thought to develop quite naturally in most youngsters (Kean, 1982). Unhindered by the need to concentrate on decoding written text, children who engage in listening activities are free to devote their attention to the inference-making aspects of the comprehension process.

Another reason for choosing listening over reading as a means for helping young children learn to infer is the fact that teachers have the opportunity to select instructional materials without regard for the readability of those materials. This makes it possible to use the many fine trade books written for children, as well as any recordings of those books.

Finally, much of the research on story comprehension (Mandler, 1978; Nezworski, Stein, and Trabasso, 1982) has been conducted with children using a predominantly listening mode. This fact also supports the feasibility of choosing listening over reading as a means of introducing youngsters to the inference-making process.

Getting Started

The first step in planning a listening comprehension guide is to set the purpose for using one. In this instance it will be to involve children in inference-making through a teacher-led discussion. Secondly, it helps to choose instructional materials that lend themselves to the process being taught. Since this article will describe a procedure for helping young children learn to infer, Ezra Jack Keats' The Snowy Day (1962) is especially appropriate.

This well known children's book tells of how Peter awakens one morning to find that a heavy blanket of snow has covered everything while he slept. He goes for a walk by himself and has great fun making tracks in the snow. At one point Peter notices a group of older youngsters who are engaged in a snowball fight. Momentarily, he even considers joining them, but then, sensing that he's not quite old enough, Peter goes off by himself to make a snowman and angels in the snow. He even pretends that he is a mountain climber! Finally, just before entering his warm house, Peter packs a large snowball and puts it in his pocket for tomorrow. Once inside, he tells his mother all about his adventures as she removes his wet clothing. Toward bedtime Peter checks his pocket for the snowball, but his pocket is empty. Sadly, Peter climbs into bed and dreams that the sun has melted all the snow. But the next morning when Peter awakens, he finds that the snow is still everywhere. In fact, new snow is falling! After breakfast Peter calls to his friend across the hall, and together they go out to play.

The Listening Guide

After setting the purpose and choosing the appropriate material, construction of the listening comprehension guide itself can begin. Drawing upon Herber's (1978) concept of the three levels of comprehension, the following guide was constructed to help children identify the necessary information for making an infer-

ence. Although The Snowy Day contains several story segments in which children would be expected to make inferences in order to understand fully the author's intent, only one is illustrated in the guide below. Consequently, only a limited number of statements appear in each of the three levels of comprehension. A good rule of thumb, in fact, is to keep the listening comprehension guide simple, at least initially.

Directions for the teacher "The book that I am going to read to you today is called The Snowy Day. The person who wrote this book is named Ezra Jack Keats. Mr. Keats is an author who likes to write stories for boys and girls your age. Here are some things he might tell you about Peter, the boy in this book."

(Read aloud to the children the three literal level statements below.)

1. Peter took his dog for a walk in the snow. (the distractor sentence)
2. Peter made a snowball and put it in his pocket.
3. Peter went inside his warm house.

"Now, please listen while I read The Snowy Day. As soon as I come to a part that says Peter took his dog for a walk in the snow, or Peter made a snowball and put it in his pocket, or Peter went inside his warm house, raise your hand. Are there any questions about what you are to do?" (Read the entire story without showing the pictures, as they provide too many cues. At some later time, of course, children should be given an opportunity to enjoy the colorful illustrations that accompany this text.)

Commentary. Typically, some children will raise their hands to signify that the author said Peter took his dog for a walk in the snow when in reality, no mention was made of a dog, although Peter did go for a walk by himself. If this misunderstanding occurs it may be helpful to stop reading and briefly discuss what it was that led to the confusion.

A few children may quickly infer (and state orally) that the snowball will melt when Peter puts it in his pocket and then goes inside the warm house. If this occurs, that's fine. It is a natural lead-in to the interpretive level of the guide which is described below. If no such response is forthcoming, the teacher should proceed with the next set of directions.

Directions. "You have done very well to listen for what the author said about Peter. Now, I would like you to pretend that you are detectives. Your job is to figure out what really happened to the snowball that Peter put in his pocket. The author doesn't say, but he gave you some good clues. Tell me what you think the author wanted you to believe happened to the snowball." (Accept all responses; do not indicate your agreement or lack of agreement with any of them at this time. If the following inferences have not been offered after a reasonable length of time, suggest them as possibilities.)

1. Peter's mother found the snowball and put it back outside.
2. The snowball melted in Peter's pocket.

"Good detectives can always describe what clues they have used to solve a mystery. Tell me what clues you used from the story to figure out what happened to Peter's snowball."

Commentary. This section of the listening comprehension guide is responsible for actively involving children in the process of inferring. As they cite evidence from the story and use their past experiences to support either their own hunches or those supplied by the teacher, children are engaged in pulling together valuable pieces of information. For example, children who know that Peter put a snowball in his pocket and also that he entered a warm house shortly thereafter have two pieces of information which, if combined with an appropriate background of experiences, should lead to the correct inference.

The process just described may not occur in some children for any number of reasons. Children, obviously, who lack prior knowledge of the effect of heat on snow will have difficulty making the connection between literal level statements #2 and #3 in the listening comprehension guide.

On the other hand, children who have the appropriate prior knowledge may fail to note the most relevant text data. For example, if the fact that Peter's mother removed his wet clothing had been the focus of these children's attention, it would be reasonable to expect that they might select inference #1 as opposed to #2. According to Nicholson and Imlach's (1981) study of a group of 8-year-olds' ability to infer, "When children do not give the answers teachers expect, it is probably because (some) explicit text data are not as 'competitive' as other, more powerful inferences, suggested by the text" (p. 127).

Directions. "So far you have learned two things to do when you listen to a story. First, you learned to listen carefully to what the author of The Snowy Day really said. Secondly, you learned that sometimes it is necessary to put pieces of information together in order to understand what the author wanted you to know even though he didn't come right out and say it. Now, you will discover how you can use something you already know about to help yourself understand what happened to Peter's snowball. Listen as I read the following sentence."

—Snowcones disappear quickly on a warm summer day.—

"Think about a time when you had a snowcone." (Encourage children to share their experiences. If they don't volunteer information related to the melting and dripping of snowcones exposed to the warm air, bring it up as a topic of conversation.) "Now, tell me how the disappearance of Peter's snowball was like the disappearance of your snowcone. Also, how are the two different?"

Commentary. It is at this third level of comprehension that children are helped to perceive the relevance of what they have inferred from the text. For instance, in the example above the children's knowledge of a common outside-of-school experience was applied to what they had just inferred about Peter's disappearing snowball. Since children rarely relate what they experience on the "outside" to what they learn in school, Herber (1978, p.47) believes that "one value of instruction at this level is that it provides students with a systematic way to incorporate their own experiences and ideas from other sources into what they are learning in school."

Instructional Features

As mentioned earlier, this procedure for teaching early childhood education majors how to help young children learn to infer continues to be effective. In fact, The Snowy Day example provided in this article has been used successfully by undergraduate teacher interns with children as young as kindergarteners. Instructional features that appear to be contributing at least partially to its success are the following three: 1) the flexibility of a listening guide, 2) the substitution of declarative statement for question, and 3) the direct teaching of a listening strategy which actively involves youngsters. A discussion of each of these features, along with some cautionary pointers, is included below.

Flexibility of a guide. As Herber has noted (1978), students' responses to the second level of a comprehension guide—the inferential level—may vary considerably depending on their prior experiences. Because it is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate the influence of prior experiences on the inferences students make, a teacher who is uncomfortable in allowing children to find meanings which differ from his or her own may not benefit from the procedure suggested here. Also, even though the listening guide is divided into three distinct sections, each with its implied order, teachers need to bear in mind that this represents instructional preferences rather than any general principle in cognitive processing. For some teachers' and students' learning styles, for example, starting at the third (applied) level and then moving to the first (literal) and second (interpretive) levels may make more sense (Herber, 1978).

Declarative statements. The reason for using only declarative statements in the listening comprehension guide is based on the notion that it is easier to recognize than recall information. However, as Herber and Nelson (1975) have noted, the use of declarative statements to guide students' comprehension processes initially does not mean that questions should be eliminated once and for all. On the contrary, teachers need to work toward eliminating the need for statements! This can be accomplished over a period of time (differing for the age and ability level of children) by teachers who are sensitive to their students' growth in developing independence.

A final precaution related to using declarative statements is that it is imperative that teachers read the statements to the children prior to reading them the story. To ask students

to react to the statements after listening is to defeat the purpose of a guide. Keeping in mind that the purpose is to help children learn how to infer on their own will help teachers remember that students must be "partners" in the reading/listening process. Sharing with them the reason for using a guide is highly recommended.

Direct teaching. Based on an updating of the research on listening comprehension (Pearson and Fielding, 1982), the direct teaching of listening strategies apparently tends to improve children's listening comprehension. This is particularly true if the children are taught the same skills as those found in the reading curriculum; if they are involved in activities following listening; and if literature is the material of choice. Although no empirical data exist as to its effectiveness, the listening guide described in this article appears to meet all three of the above criteria. That is, the guide was constructed for the purpose of helping children learn to infer, typically a skill taught in the reading comprehension curriculum; it engaged them in active verbal response following listening; and The Snowy Day was a popular piece of children's literature.

Although one might be tempted to conclude that teaching children how to infer through a listening comprehension guide is a skill that will transfer to reading, there is simply no evidence to support such a claim at this time. The jury is still out. However, one can support the use of a listening guide if viewed within the context of one of Pearson and Fielding's (1982, pp. 625-626) recommendations for careful consideration:

We would like to see more emphasis given to listening comprehension as an entity in its own right. We do not think that what is done ought to be very different from good reading comprehension instruction...; but we do think it ought to be done more often as a listening activity. Furthermore, if teachers did this, they would be able to work in more advanced content and skills at an earlier age than they can with reading.

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