

The Teaching of Explicit Reading Comprehension Strategies Improves Reading and More

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Teaching Context

The teaching context for this study was a combined ESL, Skills, and GED class which had a total of 13 students attending Monday and Thursday from 5:00 to 9:00 P. M. Six of those students were ELL learners and the rest were GED and intermediate level skills students. From the skills pool, there were three working on improving their reading ability and one of them needed to get her GED. One student finished a year of work training and worked in the cooking industry. Another was a high school graduate currently working as a cleaning person with an organization that helped her find work. The third one was a stay-at-home mom who had only two years of elementary education. These three students mentioned they had a learning disability, but our site did not have any documentation of this.

The Problem

From the very beginning of their journey with Adult Basic Education, these - students were aware of their reading comprehension problems. Their goals were to: (1) improve their reading comprehension so they could keep the jobs they have, (2) advance their educational level, and (3) obtain their GED. One of them also needed to find a job that fit her profile and would make her feel satisfied and fulfilled in a career.

This problem of low reading comprehension interfered with their performance at test taking time, or at newspaper reading time which was more visible. The responses these students came up with when asked why their test scores had not improved, even after spending the required hours of studying, revealed their frustrations. One of them said the problem seemed to be that as he reads instructions he sometimes does not understand words and just does what he thinks the instructions mean. They also confused words and substituted other words, such as reading “comfort” instead of “concert,” causing them to give the wrong answers at testing time.

Research Question

Thinking that instruction in specific comprehension strategies might help them improve their understanding of reading material and thus improve their CASAS scores, the following research question was developed: **What happens to reading comprehension as measured by CASAS when explicit comprehension strategies are taught before reading?**

Based on this question, four comprehension strategies were taught to guide the students every time they read a passage. This way they could have a concrete base of strategies to follow at the beginning and later on use more automatically. The list of comprehension strategies included: 1. Making Predictions. 2. Establishing Prior Knowledge. 3. Understanding Vocabulary. 4. Asking Questions. By using all four pre-reading strategies, the students spent more time percolating the topic and increased their focus on understanding the content. The strategies were

done verbally and in writing. The students talked about their answers with each other while in class, and wrote their comments on strategy lists. A simple question was added at the end of each reading to make sure they kept thinking about the strategies used and how they benefited them. The questions were: What did you read? What strategy did you use? They continued this during their home reading time and brought their comments, opinions, and answers to class to go over with their peers.

During the practice of the pre-reading strategies, informal assessments such as passage comprehension and story retelling were completed, which showed how much the students had improved. The students were told why we were doing these informal assessments.

By April 30th, which is the end of our ABE year program year, the expectation was that the students would have a better understanding of how to improve comprehension of passage reading and consequently show an improvement in their CASAS test scores. Their self-esteem would also increase as they felt more capable when reading any text and after seeing their test scores increase. Another expectation was that their reading skills would increase by at least one grade level. All of them were at fourth grade level, including the ones who finished high school.

Data Collection

Data collection included the following qualitative and quantitative information:

- (1) Completion of an entrance interview about students' educational backgrounds and personal characteristics.
- (2) Completion of an assessment using the Word Meaning Test.
- (3) Completion of pre and post-testing using CASAS.
- (4) Journaling about students' comments, attitudes, and general approach to reading as they used specific strategies.
- (5) Tracking students' attendance.
- (6) Completion of an exit interview about students' feelings at the end of the research project.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data, consisting of students' attendance, CASAS pre and post-tests, and the Word Meaning test results, were studied and analyzed. The Word Meaning Test was used initially to find the participants' reading levels. Only one participant took the pre-reading inventory, so this data was discounted. The three sources of data used provided information that was easy to see due to their simplicity and the small amount of participants.

The qualitative data consisting of students' reactions and results were annotated in a journal after class time. This data served to identify some conclusions and to give insight on the research question. I feel it also gave birth to new inquiries in relation to the students' academic and social attitudes.

Findings

The research question, “What happens to reading comprehension as measured by CASAS when explicit comprehension strategies are taught before reading?” was answered in a positive way. Two students who remained until the end of the research advanced one educational level in their CASAS test scores. (See below.)

Data Collected	Student A	Student B
Attendance in hours	40 out of 42	36 out of 42
CASAS Reading pre-test	209	215
CASAS Reading post-test	220	221
Word Meaning Test	Level 4	Level 4

This limited study shows that using *before reading comprehension strategies* helps students increase educational levels as measured by CASAS.

The rationale for using *before reading strategies* is that it helps “to establish purpose, activate background, sustain motivation, and provide direction” (Vacca & Vacca, 2005).

The total class meetings were 42; the two remaining participants had an attendance rate of 86 and 95 percent, respectively, during the months of the research, January to May.

Another finding (although not measurable) was a marked improvement in one participant’s attitude and involvement in reading. She used to come to class and sit outside the classroom, excusing herself by explaining that she felt better in the more open space of the cafeteria. The class decided to join her and take their reading to her place. She eventually changed her routine and came to join us inside the small room and acted more assertive when she chose to read articles and book sections by her own will. Post-research note: In fact, I just received a phone call from this student because she moved to a small town near Willmar and she wants the address of the closest ABE site so she can keep on advancing her reading level and receive her GED in the near future. In her own words: “I want to keep on going. I do not want to stop a good thing.” These comments made me feel my efforts were worth it.

Conclusions

In this limited research study, the students involved showed an increase in CASAS scores and in their general attitude towards reading sessions. This occurred in spite of the students’ possible learning disabilities and low reading level as determined by the Word Meaning Test. I was also pleased at the improvement in ownership and community when making reading choices.

Some might argue that there were other variables which influenced the scores; however, I feel that direct and explicit instruction in using before reading strategies positively affected my students’ comprehension scores. Although, generally speaking, adult learners are more aware of their motivation to read, have more interest in reading, and their prior knowledge is more ample, they still need to be guided in using specific reading strategies. This may lead to automatic use of reading strategies and improved comprehension.

The research design did not include a control group. I feel, however, that the results may be generalized to a larger population of like students because the two students had been in my

class for more than a year, and the change in level occurred after implementing the before reading strategies.

Next Steps

As a follow-up to the positive results from this research project, I plan to develop every lesson plan to include pre- reading activities. In addition, I will introduce during and after strategies for my ELL learners as well as the GED and Skills students.

References

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