

Instructional Practices of Teachers Carrying Out Explicit Comprehension Instruction in the Primary Classroom

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Abstract

The academic benefits of explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies are well-documented by studies that showed pupils performed better in standardized testing ([Duke & Pearson, 2002](#); [National Reading Panel, 2000](#)). In addition, other benefits such as the ability to carry out cooperative learning and an increase in self-esteem were observed ([Block, Parris, & Whiteley, 2008](#)). Using classroom lesson observations and group interviews with students, this study examined to what extent comprehension strategies were explicitly taught in the classrooms and to what extent students understood the strategies that were taught. The study found that while teachers taught the comprehension strategies, teachers could model the use of the strategy more explicitly and provide more time for students to practise the strategy.

Introduction

Reading comprehension in schools is often taught in the same way that it is assessed. Teachers go through a text, asks questions and students are deemed to be proficient at comprehending a text. In fact, as data gathered from the School-based Reading Innovation Project ([Shegar, 2009](#)) conducted by the National Institute of Education in Singapore shows, it is not uncommon to see students attaining high scores for decoding in reading assessments but scoring poorly in comprehension.

One of the teaching processes in the English Language Syllabus 2020 is Instructing Explicitly: 'explaining and clarifying a skill, strategy or process directly and systematically, in addition to teaching it in contexts of meaningful use' ([Curriculum Planning & Development Division, 2018, p. 125](#)). However, our inquiry group had noticed, through lesson observations and conversations with teachers from several schools, that teachers did not appear to spend time to model, explain or demonstrate strategies which students could use to comprehend texts. We hypothesised that this might be due to teachers not having sufficient time or knowledge to do so. If this was the case, it would be important to first convince teachers of the efficacy of this approach before structuring professional development sessions to help teachers understand and enact the strategy within the classroom.

Our study sought to examine the effectiveness of the implementation of explicit comprehension instruction ([Duffy, 2002](#)) within the curriculum in a primary school in Singapore and to give recommendations for programme improvement.

Literature Review

In order to situate the purpose of the study, there is a need to differentiate between reading skills and reading strategies.

Reading skills and reading strategies

[Afflerbach, Pearson and Paris \(2008\)](#) put forth a strong case for discussing and clarifying the distinction between reading skills and reading strategies. They proposed to define reading strategies as deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of texts. Being strategic allows the reader to examine the strategy, to monitor its effectiveness and to revise goals or means if necessary. [Afflerbach, Pearson and Paris \(2008\)](#) defined reading skills, in contrast, as automatic actions that result in decoding and comprehension with speed, efficiency and fluency and occur without the reader's awareness of the components or control of them. [Manoli and Papadopoulou \(2012\)](#) attempted to shed further light on the distinction by characterising the differences between skills and strategies in terms of intentionality, awareness and flexibility.

Many primary schools in Singapore utilize the teaching strategies of Shared Book Reading, Supported Reading, KWL and Retelling, in order to aid pupils at lower primary level in comprehending texts. At the upper primary level, teaching strategies focus on reading to learn, and children learn to read a variety of texts with the teacher and engage in discussion.

With a desire to be more explicit in the teaching of reading strategies, our school embarked on a whole school approach for explicit comprehension instruction to complement the strategies taught in the STELLAR curriculum. This was done with the aim of exposing our students to a wider repertoire of strategies for comprehending texts. During the past decade, many studies have demonstrated that deeper-level comprehension strategies can be developed through explicit teaching ([Duffy, 2002](#)). Moreover, the positive effects of such instruction on comprehension performance have been found in a number of experimental and quasi-experimental studies ([Duke & Pearson, 2002](#); [National Reading Panel, 2000](#)).

Explicit instruction of comprehension

Through explicit strategy instruction, teachers intentionally and directly teach comprehension strategies in an effort to help students monitor and build their understanding of text ([Duffy, 2002](#)). By providing modelling and think-alouds, guided practice, direct instruction and independent practice, teachers can encourage students to become proficient and self-regulatory in their use of such strategies ([Block & Pressley, 2002](#)). A key foundation of this process is the gradual release of responsibility model ([Pearson & Gallagher, 1983](#)), in which the teacher gradually transfers the responsibility of a task from himself or herself to the student. Teachers are responsible for explicitly stating the strategy: explaining what the strategy means and modelling the strategy. Students then work collaboratively with others, before proceeding to independent work.

In this study, we wanted to examine if the teachers had applied their knowledge of explicit comprehension instruction in their classroom instruction and the extent to which the students understood these comprehension strategies). This would aid us in our decision on how to refine the delivery of these strategies.

Research Questions

In our research project, we aimed to find answers to these questions:

1. To what degree do teachers in Primary 1 through 5 teach reading comprehension strategies during English lessons?
2. How effective is this instruction; that is, do pupils learn what is taught?
3. To what extent are students able to apply this strategy knowledge to other texts read independently?

Methodology

The study used classroom lesson observations and group interviews with students to collect data to answer the research questions.

Participants

The study focused on four classes, one Primary 5 class (40 students), two Primary 3 classes (78 students) and one Primary 1 class (29 students). The classes were comprised of students of mixed ability. The four teachers involved in the study comprised senior (more than 10 years in service) and experienced teachers (between three to eight years in service). They had all gone through a training workshop of three hours on how to teach comprehension strategies explicitly.

Design of study

Lesson observations were carried out in all four classes during Term 3 in 2016 and were one hour in length (two periods of a reading lesson). When observers were present, an observation protocol was provided to the observers. The responses of students during the lessons were videotaped and transcribed. Eventually, there were video transcriptions for three of the classes. The team did not manage to record the fourth class due to technical issues and so that lesson was omitted from the study.

In order to assess the effectiveness of the strategies carried out in the reading lessons, students from the three classes participated in group interviews about the lessons they had just been in and which had been observed, as well as about their awareness of what they had been taught about reading. Students' utterances in the transcripts of the video recordings were also analysed to see if they could articulate whether the teachers had carried out explicit comprehension instruction and if they could apply the strategies taught during independent reading.

Analysis

The transcribed video recordings of the lessons were analysed by the team to see whether the teachers had made use of the steps outlined for explicit comprehension instruction, by counting the number of times the steps in the explicit comprehension instruction were used. In addition, the students' responses in the group interviews were analysed to see if any conclusions could be drawn in order to shed light on the research questions focussing on the extent to which comprehension strategies were taught explicitly in class, how effective the instruction was and if the students could apply what they had learnt to other texts as they read independently.

Findings

This section presents the findings from the lesson observations and the group interviews of students conducted thereafter.

Lesson observations

Table 1 shows the number of times the steps in the explicit comprehension instruction were used by the individual teachers. Most of the observed teachers spent time explaining what the strategy was.

Table 1

Number of times steps in explicit comprehension instruction were practised

Teacher	State the strategy	Explain the strategy	Model strategy	Work collaboratively with others	Independent work
Teacher A (P1)	1	5	1	0	1
Teacher B (P3)	3	8	3	2	0
Teacher C (P5)	1	20	4	1	0

Other instructional practices were used by Teacher B (recalling prior knowledge, giving wait time and checking for understanding) and Teacher C (questioning).

State the strategy and explain what the strategy means

All the teachers observed stated the comprehension strategy that they were going to teach in the lesson. One of the teachers stated a different strategy; that is, instead of teaching drawing conclusions as stated in the outline, the teacher taught making inferences.

In all the lessons observed, the teachers were able to explain the comprehension strategy that they were going to cover in the lesson. However, Teacher B stated the strategy three times compared to other teachers, who stated the strategy only once. In addition, Teacher C explained what the strategy meant 20 times, whereas Teacher A who only mentioned it five times. These differences could be due to the relative complexity of the comprehension skill that was being taught.

In the Primary 1 class observed, the comprehension strategy taught was identifying the setting, complication and ending of a narrative. In comparison, the comprehension strategy taught by Teacher C in Primary 5 was identifying text organization in an information text, which is a more complex skill. Moreover, the students in the Primary 1 class had been exposed extensively to narrative texts and were able to identify the story structure under the scaffolding provided by Teacher A, whereas the students in the Primary 5 class had received limited prior exposure and instruction to information texts. Thus the Primary 5 students were unable to articulate the structure of an information text and required more guidance from Teacher C (as shown in the transcript in Table 2).

Examining the lesson more closely, Teacher C listed headings and had the students recognize these, then later illustrations and their captions. Teacher C did this through questioning and, because the students did not give the teacher the expected answer, the teacher sometimes veered

off to discuss issues which were not related to the comprehension skill being taught. Teacher C also answered the questions that she asked, without giving the student sufficient time to think about headings and sub-headings, to identify them and then to understand how they helped with comprehension.

The extract from the lesson transcript of the P5 class in Table 2 illustrates the fact that the teacher lists and gets students to recognise headings and later, illustrations and captions. However, students were not given enough time to think about headings and sub-headings, to identify them and then to understand how they helped with comprehension. It would have been easier to get them to apply the same idea to other features of the text if they had been given more time to assimilate and practise what the teacher had taught.

Table 2

Teaching students to recognize headings, illustrations and captions

Transcript		Comments
Teacher	<p>We are going to learn about text organisation on comprehension skill. It is comprehension skill we are going to learn.</p> <p>So, when you read non-fiction text right you need to understand or recognise that authors use special features to demonstrate the organisation of their writing.</p> <p>So, what do they use? There are headings and subheadings. There are illustrations and captions. There are charts and there are timelines. So, I want you to look at your texts now.</p> <p>Can you tell me what a heading is? Give me an example of a heading.</p> <p>S1, what is an example of headings?</p>	<p><i>The teacher states and explains the comprehension strategy using PowerPoint slides.</i></p> <p><i>Teacher attempts to use questions to elicit response from students to identify headings and subheadings in the text.</i></p>
Teacher	<p>Okay, S1 said that the heading is like title.</p> <p>Anyone else has anything to add? No?</p> <p>So, here, okay all three of them are not wrong. They have some logic there, huh.</p> <p>So, like what (<i>name of the student inaudible</i>) said it is like the beginning. It shows what, probably the beginning of the section.</p> <p>Right. And you can identify maybe through the font like what Bryan said. And like what S2 said, it is like a title. Alright, it is like a name for that section. You have headings, you have subheadings.</p> <p>So, you look at your texts. What is an example of headings? Can you find the headings in your texts now? What are some examples? Give me examples. Where is the heading? S2 already said look at the font. S1 already said it has to do with the title. (<i>Other students raised up their hands</i>) Yes, S4? Give me the line number, page number.</p>	<p><i>The teacher explains the use of the comprehension strategy.</i></p>

Teacher	<p>Okay, she is pointing here. (<i>Points out the item on the projector</i>). She said this is a heading here.</p> <p>So, you can see that the font, like what S2 mentioned, yes, very good this example. You see the font. It is a little different. The question here: What is the difference between the internet and the World Wide Web? (<i>Pointed out to the students</i>). So, you see this font is bigger.</p> <p>Then how about the smaller font? (<i>points out another item on the projector</i>) Then what would this be?</p>	
S3	Subheading.	
Teacher	<p>If you have caught it in my slide just now you would realise there is headings and subheadings. So the smaller font, okay, is still in bold is what we called a subheading. So the heading gives you an idea of what you are going to read in the section like what (<i>unable to hear the student's name</i>) said, it is like a beginning. It tells you the beginning of this section and it also tells you okay what you are going to read in this section. And then you see the next heading. Right, you know that it is the end of this section and you are going on to another section of it. So this shows the organisation of how the information is organised. Okay, the information report.</p> <p>Now, what other features are there in non-fiction texts? Go back. Illustrations and captions. Let's write these two big words down. What are illustrations?</p>	<p><i>Teacher explains the strategy. The line between the step of explaining and modelling the strategy is blurred as the teacher chooses to use questions to further illustrate her point.</i></p>

Model the strategy and work collaboratively

The teachers also modelled the use of the target strategy and then instructed the students to do it on their own. The example in Table 3 shows how Teacher B modelled the use of the target strategy and had the students work collaboratively. The lesson required the students to classify facts they had read in the STELLAR text, *Houses of Singapore*.

Table 3

A model given followed by student collaboration

Transcript		Comments
Teacher	We want to classify all the information on huts.	<i>Teacher B restates the objective of the activity.</i>
Teacher	Very good. We will be taking all the information about huts.	
Teacher	Yes. Okay. So, some of you said that the information. (<i>Hands were raised</i>).	
Teacher	I would like somebody to come up and tell me where	

	<p>did you get this information from. <unclear> (Several hands go up).</p> <p>Can somebody please come up? I want somebody to come up and tell me one thing about hut. Understand?</p> <p>Okay, let's get, it can be a word, it can be a phrase. But usually it should be a phrase.</p>	<p>Student goes up to highlight the information on the screen.</p>
Teacher	<p>How did you know that this is talking about huts? And why did you choose this sentence? Why not the first one?</p> <p>How did he know that this part is relevant?</p> <p>Okay, sit. Maybe someone can help you out.</p>	<p>A few hands go up and the teacher calls on a student to answer the question.</p>
Teacher	<p>Ah, these huts.</p> <p>The subject of this sentence is about huts.</p> <p>Very good.</p> <p>Class, any questions? Okay, there is still some more, right?</p>	<p>Teacher points the words out on the screen.</p> <p>A student walks forward to the screen.</p>
Teacher	<p>So, let's look where's the subject. Must be about huts.</p>	<p>Teacher B gives students clues where to find the answer.</p>
Teacher	<p>Okay, do you agree?</p>	<p>Another student goes up to help.</p>
Students	<p>Yes.</p>	
Teacher	<p>Okay, sit down.</p> <p>So far, you see the reference with the huts. Huts will get?</p>	
Teacher	<p>Now, I - there are more. There are more.</p> <p>But I would like you all to go back to your group later and discuss it. I'm teaching you the skill on how to find out, find the information and extract it.</p> <p>Now, I want to ask a question. For the first sentence, the very first sentence ...</p>	<p>Teacher B gives students the opportunities to work on in groups to complete the activity.</p>

The teachers gave students the time to work collaboratively as a group and they completed the worksheets given to them. Most of the teachers were able to practice good classroom management to enable students to get to the stage of working collaboratively.

Group interviews with students

Group interviews were conducted two days after the lesson with selected groups of 5 students per class. During the interviews, questions such as the following were asked:

- What are some key things you learnt during the lesson?
- What are some of the comprehension strategies you have learnt?
- From a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you about doing comprehension components now?

- Do you think you can apply what was taught in your everyday reading?
- What is the difference between reading in lessons and your own choice of reading?

The questions were designed to find out the extent to which students had understood the lesson and their ability to apply what had been taught.

Students expressed confidence in being able to use the comprehension strategies which were taught in class, although sometimes they were unable to explain them. In the P3 Class, most of the students rated themselves highly on their ability to use the comprehension strategies during their independent reading. However, it must be noted that three students could not state the strategy or what it meant. Table 4 shows the number of times the students were able to state when explicit comprehension strategy instruction was used in the different classes.

Table 4

Students' recollection of strategy instruction as determined from interviews

Class	State the strategy	Explain the strategy
P1	5	11
P3	2	2
P5	1	5

Discussion & Implications

The findings from the study show that teachers indeed carried out the steps for explicit comprehension instruction. They were able to state and explain the strategy, model the strategy in some cases and allow students to practise the strategy. However, the findings also show that, during the explanation part of the lesson, teachers spent much of their time trying to elicit responses from the students in order to check their understanding of the strategy. The questioning technique used was that of the Initiate, Respond and Evaluate (I-R-E) pattern identified by [Mehan \(1979\)](#), which resulted in the students guessing the responses that the teachers wanted of them instead of spending time understanding the use of the strategy. It might have been more effective for teachers to explain the strategy and give more time for modelling and collaborative learning.

What was lacking was an attempt to gain an insight into the students' thoughts in applying the strategies in independent reading. Although the interviews gave some insight into the students' understanding of the comprehension strategy that was taught, it would be illuminating to examine students' inner thoughts while reading a text in order to gain insight through more in depth interviews into what they usually do when they comprehend a text. In the interviews with the Primary 5 students, the interviewer had asked the student if the strategy could be applied in their everyday reading. The student remarked that "it's difficult because this is only an activity we are supposed to do [...] and I won't bring this everywhere I go." This was echoed during an interview with a Primary 3 student who said that "Working alone is very difficult so it might take a very long time (to comprehend the text)".

It is important to mention that although the strategies that were taught in the lesson should be highlighted and brought to the foreground during independent reading, other strategies crucial to comprehending a text should be referenced, modelled and encouraged throughout the process of independent reading. Good comprehension instruction should comprise both explicit instruction

in specific comprehension strategies and time provided for the actual reading, writing and discussion of texts. Teachers may need to pay attention to and model the strategies to students that help them to independently understand another text when they read independently.

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