Running Head: Informational Text Instruction

The Effects of Explicit Strategy Instruction for Informational Text Comprehension in a Small
Group Setting: A Literature Review

Katie S. Visaggio

Florida Gulf Coast University

With the recent switch by 45 states to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), there is high pressure on teachers to facilitate meaningful, successful learning and comprehension of expository text. By eighth grade over 75% of standardized test questions in the area of reading involve comprehension of informational text. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) Reading component for fourth grade contains 50% informational text questions. As Moss (2005) stated, "It is clear that the pressure for improved standardized-test performance has helped to drive this emphasis on content area literacy." The need for effective strategy instruction for expository text comprehension is therefore of great concern for today's teachers.

A crucial component to the increase in content area literacy is effective comprehension instruction. The benefits of explicit strategy instruction are well documented and supported. Rupley, Blair, & Nichols (2013) cited the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development stating, "Explicit/direct instruction has been shown to be efficacious in learning and teaching the major components of the reading process—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension." Attempting to persuade content area teachers to realize the vital need for explicit comprehension strategy teaching of expository text, Neufeld wrote, "The phrase *thinking aloud* means the teacher explains her or his thought processes while demonstrating the strategy. In other words, the teacher shows the students *how* to use a covert thinking strategy by expressing her or his thoughts aloud as she or he implements the strategy while students look on. This step is crucial if meaningful learning is to take place" (2006).

Given this new push, there is little debate among current professional educators about the need for instruction of comprehension strategies in regard to content area, expository, and informational text and furthermore that this crucial instruction needs to begin in the elementary grades (Kragler, Walker, & Martin, 2005; Moss, 2005; & Ortlieb & Norris, 2012). Rupley, et al. (2013) concluded that the process of direct and explicit introduction of the comprehension strategy, teacher modeling, guided student practice, and independent student practice is tantamount to successful dissection of nonfiction text. While educators agree that the need for explicit strategy instruction of informational text is vast, the time used in the classroom to do so represents less than 5% of total instruction time (Duke & Block, 2012). One way to allow more dedicated time for explicit instruction of comprehension strategies in expository text is by implementing the use of small group instruction. While there have been multiple peer-reviewed studies for the use of explicit strategy instruction, there has yet to be studies solitarily focused on this type of instruction in a small group versus whole group setting with the sole purpose of informational, expository text comprehension.

The Role of Explicit Strategy Instruction

Components of Explicit Strategy Instruction

According to Rupley, et al. (2013) explicit reading instruction means "imparting new information to students through meaningful teacher-student interactions and teacher guidance of student learning." Teachers repeatedly use methods such as thinking aloud to be a direct example of how to apply comprehension strategies, observe students as they practice giving guidance and assistance as needed, and then gradually release responsibility onto the students' shoulders. The emphasis of explicit reading instruction is clear and active communication with students using

explanations, modeling, and guided practice with talk alouds and think alouds being the most common delivery styles (Rupley, et al., 2013). Duke & Block (2012); McLaughlin (2012); & Rupley, et al. (2013) cite the essential components for successful explicit instruction including modeling, step-by-step explanations, high levels of teacher support, guided practice opportunities, and an eventual turn to independent practice by the students.

Scaffolding of students' learning is a core component that at its basic definition requires teachers to bridge the gap between where a student's abilities currently lie and the intended goal (Rupley, et al., 2013). "What makes scaffolding so effective is that it enables a teacher to keep a task whole, while students learn to understand and manage the parts, and presents the learner with just the right challenge (Clark & Graves, 2004). The end goal of scaffolding is independent implementation of comprehension strategies on the part of the students. The gradual release of responsibility to the students allows teachers to closely monitor progress, give expert assistance, and finally bridges the gap in ability level concerning the strategy in focus (Kragler, et al., 2005; Rupley, et al., 2013; & McLaughlin 2012).

Benefits of Explicit Strategy Instruction

Invisible processes become visible. There has been a multitude of studies on the positive outcomes since the shift teaching reading turned toward explicit instruction of comprehension strategies. Among the positive results is that teachers have been able to take the abstract concepts involved in the reading process and make them more concrete. "When teachers think aloud, sharing their thinking as they read, the mysterious process of understanding becomes visible for children" (Keene & Zimmerman, 2013). During explicit strategy instruction the specific purpose of each strategy is explained, as well as the appropriate times to use it, followed by the teacher modeling: think alouds, where the thought processes behind the comprehension strategy are made clear (Clark & Graves, 2005; Hollenbeck & Saternus, 2013; Keene & Zimmerman, 2013; & Neufeld, 2006). Ortlieb & Norris (2012) summarize this benefit stating, "The think-aloud strategy can be used as a scaffolding model to develop higher-order thinking and learning...[and] the goal of the think-aloud strategy is that eventually students will develop a similar thinking process when they are reading independently, thereby improving their comprehension."

Assessment-driven instruction. A second benefit resulting from explicit strategy instruction is the deep insight into student progress and understanding. Throughout the explicit instruction process teachers have a front row seat to monitor student progress and adjust instruction accordingly. "Explicitly teaching comprehension strategies affords teachers opportunities to monitor students in various stages of learning…this knowledge provides further insights into students' progress, interests, and abilities that can often be used to differentiate further instruction" (McLaughlin, 2012).

 The concept of assessment driven, differentiated instruction is clearly evident when explicit strategy teaching is executed effectively. The key to successful individualized instruction is found in "in-depth knowledge of students' needs—both reading and oral language—as well as their strengths and interests. This includes valid, reliable, and instructionally useful assessments of all children, as well as assessments of how children respond to instruction" (Watts-Taffe, Laster, Broach, Marinak, McDonald Connor, & Walker-Dalhouse, 2012). The goal of effective

reading instruction is for students to grow in the areas of comprehension, understanding, and connection to texts. Tyner & Green (2009) stated, "Differentiation enables us to accommodate the diversity of students' needs and create multiple pathways to learning during comprehension instruction" (as cited in McLaughlin, 2012). The end result is higher reading achievement levels. Students who think better, on a higher level, will in turn test better (Keene & Zimmerman, 2013). Beyond just testing scores rising, students are actively becoming critical readers who can reflect upon, challenge, and connect with a variety of texts (McLaughlin, 2012).

Current Status of Explicit Instruction in the Content Areas

The need for quality content area literacy instruction cannot be understated. Moss (2005) insists that "if today's teachers are to help students meet the literacy demands of the 21st century, it is essential that the elementary curriculum reinvent itself in ways that give content area literacy a place of greater prominence." Neufeld stated the following, "Comprehension strategy instruction will be most effective if it is being taught in context with what the students are learning. If they are expected to read something, then they need to be taught the comprehension strategies that will help them understand this new concept" (as cited in Ortlieb & Norris, 2012).

Because of the higher stress being placed on content area literacy, explicit teaching of comprehension strategies using informational text needs to begin far earlier than the upper elementary levels (McDonald Connor, Kaya, Luck, Toste, Canto, Rice, Tani & Underwood, 2010; Moss, 2005; & Ortlieb & Norris, 2012). Duke & Bennett-Armistead stated "Early exposure to exposition can lay the foundation for student understanding of the expository text that dominates in later grades" (as cited by Moss, 2005). The benefit of early exposure to informational texts is a higher level of background knowledge and gains in comprehension that can be applied in later years. Pardo said "The more background knowledge that a reader has to help connect to while reading the text, the easier it comes to understand what is being read" (as cited in Ortlieb & Norris, 2005). In other words, students need help building a bank of informational background knowledge as early as possible in order to make future, more technical comprehension all that much easier.

When students have been exposed to content area literacy strategy instruction from early literacy on, they become critical readers (McDonald Connor, et al., 2010; Moss, 2005; Ortlieb & Norris, 2005; & Saul & Dieckman, 2005). Students are preparing for a highly technical, information saturated age. The ability to comprehend and even further, judge and evaluate informational text is tantamount to success (Moss, 2005). Saul & Dieckman (2005) stated the following, "The teaching of critical thinking in the reading curriculum and in content area study deserves considerable attention. Competent students must be able to do more than reproduce facts and answer questions accurately."

Challenge to Explicit Strategy Instruction in the Content Areas

  Lack of quality in curriculum materials. As teachers become increasingly bogged down with the need to test students, they are turning more and more to strictly using curriculum materials, i.e. basal readers and teachers' manuals, as the sole source of reading instruction materials (Moss, 2005). Several studies and analyses have quite clearly shown the lack in quality

of these types of materials when compared to evidence-based practices of comprehension strategy instruction. Hollenbeck & Saternus (2013) cited an evaluation of the top five basal textbooks purchased in 2005. All five "demonstrated the consistent omission of essential elements necessary for effective comprehension instruction, with little to no direct explanation of strategies, teacher modeling, or discussions of strategy use in the context of meaning construction (Hollenbeck & Saternus, 2013). The use of trade books and real-life materials such as magazine articles, web documents, and instruction manuals are all far better alternatives to poorly written curriculum materials (Moss, 2005). Instead teachers are bound and keep returning to materials that "do not provide enough practice to ensure that any given skill will be learned…[and] do not provide sufficient support or scaffolding so that students can learn to use these skills on their own" (Dewitz, Jones, & Leahy, 2009).

Insufficient professional development. Teachers who are facing the challenges of reading instruction under CCSS need more professional development if their students are to succeed. "The challenge here is to prepare and—for those already in the field—develop far more teachers who are skilled at improving not only word-reading skill, but also vocabulary, conceptual and content knowledge, and comprehension in their students" (Duke & Block, 2012). Students whose teachers are consistently improving and honing their teachings skills through professional development and professional learning communities are far more likely to be exposed to research-based, best practices including explicit strategy instruction in the content area (D'Ardenne, Barnes, Hightower, Lamason, Mason, Patterson, Stephens, Wilson, Smith, & Erickson, 2013; Duke & Block, 2012; & Podhajski, Mather, Nathan, & Sammons, 2009). Simply stated, "Teachers need to be knowledgeable in comprehension strategy instruction, regardless of the content area" (Ortlieb & Norris, 2005).

Current State of Small Group Reading Instruction

To date the common practice for intervention for struggling readers has taken place in small group settings. The National Reading Panel and Swanson, et al. have shown "the importance of using small groups to provide high-quality instruction to struggling readers" (as cited by Swanson, 2008). Benefits of small group instruction as intervention include more dialogue concerning comprehension strategies, more precise teacher scaffolding and feedback, and higher levels of motivation and achievement gains (Duke & Block, 2012; McIntyre, Kyle, & Moore, 2006; & Swanson, 2008). Kamps, Abbot, Greenwood, Wills, Veerkamp, & Kaufman (2008) found large gains in reading comprehension by students most at-risk when quality instruction took place in controlled small groups.

Due to the closely monitored nature of small group instruction, teachers are better able to scaffold student learning, resulting in higher levels of comprehension and ultimately independent use of reading strategies by students. Unfortunately, even with a great number of studies showing the benefits of instruction in smaller groups, teachers mainly tend to use whole group instruction across the board. Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, Moody & Schumm stated the following, "Whole group instruction remains the dominant choice of teachers regardless of the profile of students enrolled in the class and despite ample research documenting the benefits of collaborative groupings and small group instruction in which student voices are privileged and learning is augmented" (as cited by Tobin, 2008). "Empowering and considerate teacher talk shows a commitment to students' academic growth" (Tobin, 2008). Sadly, the end result of the

predominant use of small group instruction only in reference to intervention is a lack of differentiated instruction for the entire class. In order to effectively differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students, teachers need the freedom to use flexible small groupings.

While the documentation is there for explicit strategy instruction in the content area using informational, expository text, there is virtually no research regarding the strict use of small group instruction in place of whole group instruction. All of the individual pieces are found: benefits of explicit strategy instruction; benefits of small, flexible groupings; & assessment-driven, differentiated instruction. However not a single study has put those pieces together.

Summary

Educators are faced with the enormous challenge today of raising the level of student understanding of informational and expository text to meet the demands of an increasingly high-tech, information saturated world. The benefits of explicit strategy instruction with informational text and in the content areas—making invisible reading processes visible and assessment-driven, differentiated instruction—are well documented and researched.

However there are sizable problems standing in the way of implementing these evidence-based practices. The pitfalls of the high-stakes testing driven instruction from merely basal readers has shown less than significant gains in students' comprehension. Teachers are not receiving the documented benefits of ongoing professional development in the area of reading comprehension.

Even when teachers overcome the obstacles to using research-based instructional strategies, they are still opting out of using one crucial element: differentiated, flexible small groups. This highly effective practice is primarily used just as a tool for intervention. Struggling readers and at-risk students are predominantly the only ones to benefit from this solid, proven methodology for reading instruction.

Conclusion

Given the immense support for the evidence-based practices of explicit comprehension strategy instruction with informational text in the content area and flexible grouping methods, it is highly surprising that researchers have not taken the next logical step: taking reading classrooms, dividing them into flexible groups, and teaching reading solely in those groups with fictional text, informational text and content area texts. Would students who are exposed to explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies using informational and content area texts solely in a small group setting have higher rates of success on the FCAT than those who are exposed to only whole group instruction?

References

Clark, K.F., & Graves, M.F. (2005). Scaffolding students' comprehension of text. *Reading Teacher, 58,* 570-580.

D'Ardenne, C., Barnes, D. G., Hightower, E.S., Lamason, P.R., Mason, M., Patterson, P.C., Stephens, N., Wilson, C.E., Smith, V.H., & Erickson, K.A. (2013). PLC's in action. *The Reading Teacher, 67,* 143-150.

Dewitz, P., Jones, J., & Leahy, S. (2009). Comprehension strategy instruction in core reading programs. *Reading Research Quarterly, 44,* 102-126.

Duke, N.K. & Block, M.K. (2012). Improving reading in the primary grades. *Future of Children, 22,* 55-72.

Hollenbeck, A.F. & Saternus, K. (2013). Mind the comprehension iceberg: Avoiding titanic mistakes with the ccss. *The Reading Teacher, 66,* 558-568.

Kamps, D., Abbot, M., Greenwood, C., Wills, H., Veerkamp, M., & Kaufman, J. (2008). Effects of small-group instruction and curriculum differences for students most at risk in kindergarten: two year results for secondary- and tertiary-level interventions. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 41,* 101-114.

Keene, E. O. & Zimmerman, S. (2013). Years later, comprehension strategies still at work. *The Reading Teacher, 66,* 601-606.

Kragler, S., Walker, C.A., & Martin, L.E. (2005). Strategy instruction in primary content textbooks. *The Reading Teacher, 59,* 254-261.

McDonald Connor, C., Kaya, S., Luck, M., Toste, J.R., Canto, A., Rice, D., Tani, N., & Underwood, P.S. (2010). Content area literacy: Individualizing student instruction in second-grade science. *The Reading Teacher, 63,* 474-485.

McIntyre, E., Kyle, D.W., & Moore, G.H. (2006). A primary-grade teacher's guidance toward small-group dialogue. *Reading Research Quarterly, 41,* 36-66.

McLaughlin, M. (2012). Reading comprehension: What every teacher needs to know. *The Reading Teacher, 65,* 432-440.

Moss, B. (2005). Making a case and a place for effective content area literacy instruction in the elementary grades. *The Reading Teacher, 59,* 46-55.

Neufeld, P. (2006). Comprehension instruction in the content area. *The Reading Teacher, 59,* 302-312.

Ortlieb, E. & Norris, M. (2012). Using the think-aloud strategy to bolster reading comprehension of science concepts. *Current Issues in Education, 15,* 1-8.

Podhajski, B., Mather, N., Nathan, J., & Sammons, J. (2009). Professional development in scientifically based reading instruction: Teacher knowledge and reading outcomes. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 42,* 403-417.

Rupley, W.H., Blair, T.R., & Nichols, W.D. (2009). Effective reading instruction for struggling readers: The role of direct/explicit teaching. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 25,* 125-138.

Saul, E.W. & Dieckman, D. (2005). Choosing and using information trade books. *Reading Research Quarterly, 40,* 502-513.

Swanson, E.A. (2008). Observing reading instruction for students with learning disabilities: A synthesis. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 31,* 115-133.

Tobin, R. (2008). Conundrums in the differentiated literacy classroom. *Reading Improvement, 45,* 159-69.

Watts-Taffe, S., Laster, B.P., Broach, L., Marinak, B., McDonald Connor, C., & Walker-Dalhouse, D. (2012). Differentiated instruction: Making informed teacher decisions. *The Reading Teacher, 66,* 303-314.