DECODABLE AND PREDICTABLE TEXTS: FORGOTTEN RESOURCES TO TEACH THE BEGINNING READER

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Abstract
This review of the literature examined the research on the efficacy of the use of decodable and predictable text to teach beginning readers. The importance of early reading success has prompted educators to re-examine the role curricular materials play in the classroom. Research in regard to text type could yield evidence for practitioners to consider for teaching reading based on text effectiveness. For a study to be included in this review the subjects had to be between the ages of 5 and 8 years of age, have identifiable text types that facilitate reading, and the inclusion of general education students and/or students with learning disabilities. The findings for the studies cited indicate that more research is required to determine the efficacy of the use of decodable and predictable texts. The review concludes by examining the separation of text from instruction and the formulation of a new model for further research.

Keywords: Reading, predictable texts, decodable texts, curricular materials, &teaching reading.

A. Introduction

Reading is a system for understanding or deciphering language through groups of visual symbols (Adams, 1990). The ability to read is a critical function for academic success. Reading is the basic foundation for learning across content areas, from science to social studies, and from literature to mathematics.It is important that students learn to read early (Foorman, Fletcher, Francis, Schatsneider, & Mehta, 1998; Stein, Johnson, & Gutlohn, 1999). According to Stein, et al. (1991) research has demonstrated that the distance between good and poor readers tends to increase as the students progress through grade levels. In addition students who fail to learn to read early risk falling behind in their developmental skills across content areas (NRP, 2000).

In beginning reading, the new reader must reach a level of mastery over the skills that comprise reading (Mercer and Mercer, 2005; McGuiness, 1997). There are two instructional methodologies that are currently in use that form the teaching base for many schools in this countryto help with that process (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The two instructional models are "whole language" and "direct instruction." The desire to find a best approach has created a longstanding debate as to which is the best instructional model to use for beginning reading (Adams, 1990).

According to McGuiness (1997), whole language is termed as "literature based" reading or "real-books." Whole language is based on the concept that students can figure out how to read and spell on their own. The rationale behind whole language is the belief that spoken and written language is closely related and should be learned the same way, that is, naturally. The teacher is perceived as the facilitator rather than the director oflearning in a whole language setting (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Whole language is primarily focused on gaining meaning for beginning reading.

In contrast to this approach, the direct instruction model focuses on the teaching of skills and concepts necessary to promote reading (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The model uses systematic teaching of phonics and language skills for students learning to read. Teachers are expected to deliver clear and sufficient instructions to direct the student toward learning (Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui, 1990). The direct instruction model is highly structured with skills that must be mastered in a logical sequence, starting with print recognition and letter-sound correspondences. Direct instruction places much emphasis on breaking the code in beginning reading.

The decision to choose a particular instructional strategy is a daunting task. Equally important is the selection of text used to foster reading (Walker, 2012; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Students who are on the verge of becoming proficient readers are influenced by the text's illustrations, nature of the language used, and the number of words that they experience (Hiebert & Martin, 2001). The text is a tool used by the teacher and the student to improve and refine the process of reading. Historically, two types of texts, decodable and predictable, have been used to teach beginning reading. Decodable texts support a direct instruction approach by providing a structured format for the application and enrichment of code practice in beginning reading. Predictable texts support the foundational base of whole language by giving the student a context to begin to learn to gain meaning from text using their language skills.

Decodable texts focus on regular letter-sound patterns (Mesmer, 1999). The words used in decodable texts are composed of phonetically common words that have been taught in earlier lessons. The text is designed to help students learn to use phonetic skills to decode (Hiebert & Martin, 2001). Thus, the student's knowledge base is increased over time through the experience of reading the text, as is the ability to synthesize letter-sound associations.

In contrast to decodable texts, predictable texts are distinguished by the repetition of syntactic units that can comprise a phrase or a group of sentences. Illustrations have also been added to the format of predictable texts to create a picture-to-text relationship. The concept of repetitive syntactic units reinforced by illustrations gives the student more opportunities to predict the text (May, 1994). The philosophy behind predictable texts is that students become successful readers from the start by the use of embedded cueing systems within the reading material (Chandler & Baghban, 1986; May, 1994).

B. Purpose

The review of the literature is to examine the research on the efficacy of the use of decodable and predictable text to teach beginning readers. The importance of early reading success has prompted educators to re-examine the role curricular materials play in the classroom, especially the quality of commercially developed texts (Stein, Johnson, & Gutlohn, 1999). Research in regard to text type could yield evidence for students, teachers, and administrators regarding the relative effectiveness of different types of texts as young children are taught to read.

C. Method

For a study to be included in this review, the following criteria had to be met: 1) The majority of subjects in an individual study had to be between the ages of 5 and 8 years old. 2) The research methods were explicitly identified. 3) The study investigated the effectiveness of decodable texts and/or predictable texts in facilitating children's reading ability. 4) The study included general education students and/or students with learning disabilities (e.g., developmental who were delayed in learning to read).

The literature search was conducted on-line using the databases of ERIC, EBSCO-Host, and Wilson Text. The terms "decodable text," "decoding," "predictable text," and "predicting" were used in conducting the search. An ancestral hand search was also performed on references in published literature as databases were found to be incomplete. As a result of the search efforts, 10 articles were identified for the literature review. The following narrative describes and organizes the research findings.

D. Findings

Studies in the area of decodable text were found to be very scarce. The studies that were found possessed acute limitations, as the review that follows reveals.

1. Decodable Text. Juel and Roper (1985) used statistical research methods to conduct a study to evaluate the influence of the word characteristics in two different types of basal series on the acquisition of word identification. The results indicated a significant main effect for the type of text used. The participants were 93 children entering first grade. The children came from 11 classrooms in three schools. The study was conducted over the course of one school year. The data for the analyses were collected using the Metropolitan Reading Readiness Test and the Bryant Test of Basic Decoding Skills. The results indicated that one of the predominant influences on students' word recognition strategies is the textbase for practicing word recognition skills. Texts with regular decodable words were found to improve growth in letter-sound correspondence knowledge. Results suggested that when there is a match between method of instruction (e.g., synthetic phonics) and decodability of words in initial reading texts a more consistent and successful use of letter sound correspondence strategy will result. The results also indicated that the types of words which appear in beginning reading text may exert a more powerful influence in shaping students' word identification strategies than the method of reading instruction.

Mesmer (1999) wrote a review of her experience with teaching a student who had difficulties learning to read. The participant was a second grade female the author agreed to tutor for 4 days a week, over the period of the school year. Pretest and posttest measures were used to analyze academic performance in reading. The findings revealed that decodable text is stage specific in that it provides designated strategies and interventions that respond to a reader's specific need. For example, if a student is identified as lacking the knowledge to correctly apply sounds to symbols, the text can be easily adapted with proper instructions to work as an intervention tool. The author also noted that decodable text offered her multiple strategies that could be used for scaffolding to benefit the student (e.g., phonetically regular text that supports the alphabetic principle). The author concluded that decodable text helped her intervention efforts by providing a forum to practice phonic skills and materials to meet the needs of the student.

Brown (2000) examined the use of textual scaffolding for beginning readers, and the effectiveness of using predictable text, decodable text, and authentic literature. The participants in this intervention were 3 first grade students who began class at very different places in their reading development. The data was collected during the school year using teacher made assessments and reading level tests. The findings demonstrated that

decodable text provided an opportunity for textual scaffolding by using familiar vowel patterns, phonograms, and high-frequency words. The balance of word control and natural-sounding language was also prevalent in decodable text and could be used for transitioning students from predictable text to emergent reading by decoding.

The review of the literature found a limited number of studies that investigated the effectiveness of decodable text on student reading achievement. Some authors have conducted analytical reviews to survey the type of text and curriculum materials that support logical findings on decodable text without statistical or experimental data. The following articles examine speculations from authors that suggest possible benefits from decodable text.

Hiebert (1999) evaluated several types of text used for beginning reading instruction. The author reviewed texts that were composed of high frequency words, phonetically based words, and trade books that are literature based. The author examined the texts by using an analytical comparison of the books. The data was collected by charting the characteristics of texts (e.g., words with rimes-unique, words with rimes-exemplars, high frequency-unique, high frequency-occurrences). The author's analysis revealed that through experience with particular texts, children may be acquiring some skills and not others. For example, if a student is only exposed to texts that support reading through sequential illustrations, the ability to read by decoding letters may go undeveloped. In relationship to analyzing the text the author observed that decodable texts that support reading by allowing the student to concentrate on the orthographic features of a word may help the beginning reader by removing reliance on semantic and syntax cues. The author suggests that the focus be on understanding what the student knows, in this case concepts about words. Decodable text is an applicable tool for that use. Finally, her findings suggest that phonetically regular text (decodable) seems to facilitate word recognition skills better than high frequency texts, but still further research is required to document this assertion.

Stein, Johnson, and Gutlohn (1999) applied research based evaluation criteria in a systematic analysis of recently published curriculum materials. The authors examined first grade basal reading programs adopted by California in December of 1996. The analysis was limited to the basal programs' basic components, supplementary phonics support texts, and stand alone phonics support products. They noted that the type of text (decodable) selection students read could influence the development of phonologically based word identification strategies. The authors' review suggests that initial use of decodable text and prior literacy knowledge may help improve scores on reading tests. Their research did identify the frequency of use, as an important factor in the acquisition of beginning reading skills. The review suggests that further research be given to decodable text. The authors concluded that their analysis supports the use of decodable text as a major contributor to the acquisition of beginning reading skills; however, more research is needed to confirm this assertion.

2. Summary. The findings from the literature review are based on empirical as well as logical evidence. In an empirical study, Messmer (1999), found that decodable text offered multiple strategies that could be used for scaffolding to benefit students in beginning reading. Brown's (2000) research supported Mesmer's findings, as her research revealed that textual scaffolding using familiar vowel patterns, phonograms, and high-frequency words found in decodable text served as opportunities to jump start beginning readers. A final empirical study by Juel and Roper (1985) examined instructions combined with decodable text. These investigators found that when there is a match between method of instruction and the text (decodable), improved letter sound correspondence strategies were demonstrated.

The investigators who did systematic analyses of decodable text found that these texts could be useful in supporting instruction. For example, Hiebert (1999), provided a logical rationale in which she suggests that highly decodable text be used for beginning reading instruction. She found that the texts that support reading by allowing the student to concentrate on the orthographic features of a word may help the beginning reader by removing reliance on semantic and syntax cues. These findings were also supported by Stein, Johnson, and Gutlohn (1999), who claimed that decodable text influences the development of word identification strategies which promote reading.

There were limitations in the research on decodable text which are important to note. The major limitation was a limited number of studies, as only three empirical studies were located for this literature review. The small sample sizes of the studies were another significant limitation. Last, the methodologies for the studies presented a limitation, in that the studies did not separate text effectiveness from instruction. For example, the focus of the review was to look at the effectiveness of text for the beginning reader, but the majority of the findings were related to instruction paired with text. These limitations suggest that caution should be exercised in interpreting and generalizing the results of these investigations.

3. Predictable Text. In the review of literature, information was found that suggested predictable text may be increasing in school use. For example, Hoffman, McCarthey, Abbott, Christian, Corman, Curry, Dressman, Elliot, Matherne and Stahle (1994) examined the first grade reading materials in five new basal programs submitted for textbook adoption. The type of research performed was an analytical review. The analysis focused on features of student texts such as literary quality (e.g., predictable text). The predictable features of the text were analyzed using a features' analysis and an overall holistic rating scheme. The findings revealed that over 50% of the selections in the new basals offered such features as repeated patterns, rhyme, and rhythm compared to less than 20% of older basals. Additionally, features such as a good match between print and text, and familiar sequences of sight words were much more prevalent in the new series than the old. This suggests that predictable materials are included in basals on an increasingly larger scale. The analysis further demonstrated that texts in the new series were much more predictable than their predecessors.

Empirical research in the area of predictable text was found to be very limited. Few studies have been conducted, and those that have been conducted have severe limitations, as the subsequent review reveals.

Johnson (1998) used quantitative research methods to examine the reader, the text, and instructional tasks that facilitate young students' word learning. The participants were 51 children in three first grade classrooms at a U.S. public school, serving low and middle income families. The study began after the first 2 months of school and lasted for 3 weeks. The data for the study was collected using the Early Reading Screening Instrument (ERSI). The findings revealed that predictable text facilitates the beginning readers' effort to identify words, but it may not optimize word learning. General word frequency and repetitions were found to be significantly correlated with word learning in the use of predictable text. The author concluded that based on this research beginning readers will benefit from whole-to-part tasks such as the use of predictable text that increase the students' attention to print.

Chandler and Baghban (1986) used quantitative research methods to test the assumption that students having trouble with reading would benefit from texts whose structure and story line are obvious to them. The groups from the study were chosen randomly from three groups: 10 students in grade one, 7 students in grade two, and 8 students in grade three. The study was started in September and concluded during the last week in March. Academic performance measures in reading were collected in which pretest and posttest reading scale scores were included. The results revealed the students using the predictable books as a supplement improved

significantly over the group that used only the basal reader. The scores at each grade level also demonstrated a significant difference. The differences found support the hypothesis that using predictable texts provides whole units of meaning for the reader and makes the natural prediction of reading easier.

Mefferd and Pettegrew (1997) conducted a study to evaluate literacy acquisition of students with developmental disabilities using assisted reading with predictable trade books. The participants were three 9-11 year olds with developmental disabilities. The study was implemented over a five month period. The data was collected using pretest and posttest scores from the Basic Reading Inventory (BRI). The results revealed that the support and guidance of assisted reading with predictable trade books allowed the students with mild disabilities to engage in "real" reading where they practiced not simply decoding but meaning construction. The students expanded their existing skills as a result of repeated, regular, and meaningful interactions with print found in the text. Further evidence of improvement was demonstrated by the development of skillful strategies for dealing with written language.

Chang and Watson (1988) performed a study that investigated the effects of prediction strategies and predictable materials in teaching 4 kindergarten ethnic Chinese students to become readers. The study was conducted during the winter of 1986 and the fall of 1986. The data was collected by means of audiotapes, videotapes, teacher notes, interviews with students, and miscue analysis. The Literacy Behavior Response Inventory was adapted for use to describe and analyze the students' responses. The results of the data analysis demonstrated the use of predictable materials and predictable strategies resulted in improved reading responses by the beginning readers. The students were able to read the predictable materials in the later classes in which reading was observed. The students were also able to identify characters and phrases and make oral responses when the characters were in context, but they were less successful when the teacher taught the characters in isolation. In addition, the children read syntactic groups of words more proficiently than individual words. The authors believed that this outcome was influenced by the repetitive language patterns used in predictable materials.

4. **Summary**. The findings from the literature review are based on logical evidence as well as empirical studies. The logical evidence by Hoffman et al. (1994) suggests that predictable text has been increasingly used in basal readers in the U.S. over the last several years. In spite of this more widespread use, little research has been done in the subject area of predictable text, as only four empirical studies were located.

The findings of an empirical study by Johnson (1998), revealed that word frequency and repetition in predictable texts facilitate a beginning readers' efforts to identify words. Chang and Watson's (1998) research supported this finding, as they found that students were able to identify characters and phrases from predictable text, and this aided beginning reading.

Predictable text was also found to have empirical support for beginning reading based on its structural use of context. Chandler and Baghban (1986) found that the use of text in which structure and story lines were obvious to the reader facilitated beginning reading. Similar results were found by Mefferd and Pettegrew (1997) as they found that beginning readers were aided by using meaning construction (context) in predictable texts. Finally, Chang and Watson (1986) supported contextual reading as an aid to beginning reading, as they found that repetitive language patterns used in predictable materials facilitated beginning reading.

There were limitations in the research on predictable text that were similar to the limitations for decodable text. The main limitation was a limited number of studies, as only four empirical studies were located for this literature review. The small sample sizes of the studies were another significant limitation. Last, the methodologies for the studies presented a limitation, in that the investigations addressed both text

effectiveness and instructional method (whole language) for beginning reading. Thus, it is difficult to separate the influence of the text used from the instructional method.

Discussion

The findings for the studies cited in this review indicate that more research is required to determine the efficacy of the use of decodable and predictable texts. Few studies have been conducted addressing this topic, and, as previously noted these studies have significant methodological weaknesses.

The key issue concerning methodological weaknesses is the separation of text from instruction. This separation would give researchers the opportunity to investigate the influence of text only for beginning readers. Researchers have not been able to effectively demonstrate a method to document the impact of text apart from instruction. This research review has demonstrated the need to separate the two, if indeed that is possible.

The next logical step in investigating this topic would be to conduct qualitative case studies to examine the relationship between the text and instructional methodology. The investigation of how text and instruction influence student outcomes (reading improvement) may give information on the utility of using decodable or predictable text for beginning readers. This research also could provide insight regarding how to conduct large-scale experimental studies to document the effectiveness of text.

In conclusion, the type of text used in the early grades provide a key building block used to usher in beginning reading. Research evidence to this point has not determined the effectiveness of different types of text. The importance of decodable and predictable text to beginning reading is a topic that merits more research.

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