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# The effective teacher of reading: Considering the “what” and “how” of instruction

*It takes a variety of classroom strategies to be an effective teacher of reading.*

It is generally accepted that the teacher plays a major role in determining the effectiveness of a reading instructional program. Duffy-Hester (1999) perhaps stated it best when she noted the role the teacher played in helping children learn to read: “I am convinced that the teacher is more important and has a greater impact than any single, fixed reading program, method, or approach” (p. 492). Our purpose in this article is to attempt to answer the crucial questions “What teaching strategies must teachers of reading be able to perform and how are these strategies effectively applied in teaching children to read?”

Recognition of the significant role of the teacher is not new. Early studies on effective teaching, however, yielded little specific information about exactly what teachers do in the classroom and how what they do makes them effective. Being a good, decent individual who is interested in students is clearly insufficient. A friend of ours once stated, “Just being a ‘nice’ person doesn’t an effective teacher of reading make, but a nice person doing some important things in terms of the reading process results in good teaching and good learning.” It may seem trite to emphasize the obvious fact that teaching children to read is hard work and demands a great deal of effort, but the ability to put forth effort in the classroom is characteristic of an effective teacher. However, it is not just effort alone. It is exactly on what the effort is

focused and how this effort is expended that makes the difference (Blair & Rupley, 2000). What follows is a brief review of the past 20 years of major investigations that specify what goes on in classrooms of teachers who promote student learning and growth.

## Major findings

In 1985, the National Academy of Education, the National Institute of Education, and the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois published *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). This highly influential book synthesized the research on the reading process and the effective teaching of reading. Highlighting the importance of the teacher, the authors stated, “An indisputable conclusion of research is that the quality of teaching makes a considerable difference in children’s learning” (p. 85).

During the past decade, the American public has been exposed to an intense debate relating to the real and perceived inadequacies of public education and in particular the improvement of reading instruction in our schools (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2005). New legislation is transforming American public education. The federal government passed the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and the Put Reading First program. Influencing these federal and subsequent state and local initiatives was the National Reading Panel’s

report *Teaching Children to Read* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The report was published in response to a mandate from the U.S. Congress to provide scientifically based research to serve as a foundation in the teaching of reading. Emphasizing the importance of teacher quality, the report highlighted that teachers are knowledgeable about the research on the teaching of reading and make informed decisions based on this research data.

Across the United States, a growing consensus of key elements in a successful reading program is being reached. In this consensus, the focus is on the teacher. The quality of the instruction students receive is a major factor in their reading success. The International Reading Association (2000) issued its position statement on *Excellent Reading Teachers*. The statement listed the following research-based qualities of excellent classroom teachers:

1. They understand reading and writing development, and believe all children can learn to read and write.
2. They continually assess children's individual progress and relate reading instruction to children's previous experiences.
3. They know a variety of ways to teach reading, when to use each method, and how to combine the methods into an effective instructional program.
4. They offer a variety of materials and texts for children to read.
5. They use flexible grouping strategies to tailor instruction to individual students.
6. They are good reading "coaches" (that is, they provide help strategically).

## Considering common features and instructional components of effective teachers

An examination of the areas that cut across these research efforts and position papers reveals a set of common, important instructional features associated with effective teachers of reading. These common and repeatedly emphasized features stress

the "what" and "how" of effective reading instruction and include the following:

1. assessing students' reading strengths and weaknesses,
2. structuring reading activities around an explicit instructional format,
3. providing students with opportunities to learn and apply skills and strategies in authentic reading tasks,
4. ensuring that students attend to the learning tasks, and
5. believing in one's teaching abilities and expecting students to be successful.

The use of each of these instructional components and how they contribute to effective reading instruction are discussed in the following sections.

### Reading assessment

The ability to teach students what they need to know requires that reading teachers continually use a blend of formal and informal measures to identify students' strengths and weaknesses in interacting with text (Barrentine, 1999). Without the teacher's pervasive concern for knowing and responding to students' needs, reading instruction can be irrelevant and mindless drudgery for all concerned. This pervasive concern about assessment can be related to the fundamental concept of effective teaching: Teachers should provide instruction that reflects the students' level of reading development.

Recently, formal external assessment has been emphasized. External assessment of reading, such as standardized tests and state-mandated benchmark tests, typically focuses on students' basic skills in reading and writing. Today's effective teachers of reading rely on a variety of assessment tools, including informal tests, interviews, observations, samples of students' work, portfolios, and students' judgments of their own performance. Such assessment procedures when combined with teacher reflection provide teachers with a much more complete picture about their students' reading and help them make informed instructional decisions to maximize their teaching effectiveness.

The use of continuous progress monitoring and thoughtful reflection are integral parts of effective instruction and involve several provisions. First,

effective reading teachers employ informal, ongoing assessment procedures rather than relying on single assessment data such as that acquired from infrequently administered standardized tests. Second, their assessment procedures aim to determine appropriate instructional practices rather than simply identify students' level of performance in comparison to a set of standards. Third, effective teachers use ongoing assessment to evaluate student outcomes regularly in relation to actual classroom reading instruction.

The fact that effective teachers assess students' reading more frequently using a variety of procedures than do less effective teachers should be carefully analyzed. By itself, assessment has no beneficial effects. Therefore, one cannot expect students' reading achievement to improve simply by increasing the frequency of assessment. Yet effective teachers of reading expend considerable effort in developing and using ongoing assessment. It is how teachers incorporate this information into their instruction that is vital to the students' reading success. The knowledge gleaned from assessment is more critical to a learner's reading development than the assessment instrument itself.

Furthermore, effective teachers use assessment to select instructional strategies appropriate to the desired students' learning outcomes in relation to the students' existing reading capabilities. Instructional tasks that are too difficult for students limit their chances of successful learning. Teachers who pace their instruction by progressing in small, closely related steps to maximize students' success in literacy activities increase students' chances of success. Ongoing assessment that focuses on students' literacy strengths and weaknesses enables teachers to identify instructional procedures that increase success.

### **Explicit instruction**

Research on effective teaching has clearly shown that effective teachers explicitly teach students what they need to know (Rosenshine, 1995; Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, & Rodriguez, 2002). Although it seems simplistic and obvious, teachers of reading "teach"; that is, students do not become independent learners through maturation alone. Explicit instruction means imparting new information to students through meaningful teacher-student interactions and

teacher guidance of student learning. The key to explicit instruction is the active communication and interaction between teacher and student. The type of learning to be accomplished determines the degree of directness or structure.

The majority of students' learning objectives, benchmarks, or outcomes in teaching reading can be classified as either skills or strategies for comprehension. Both types of learning are important for success in reading; however, they require different teacher lesson-presentation methods.

Skills involve lower-level cognitive processing, are specific in nature, and "are more or less automatic routines" (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991). Examples of reading skills include the specific elements in phonics, structural analysis, and contextual analysis; specific comprehension skills such as recognizing text sequence, fact versus opinion, and stated main idea; reading study skills such as using an index and interpreting a bar graph; and writing skills such as capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

Strategies for comprehension require higher-level cognitive processing, are less specific in nature than skills, and "emphasize intentional and deliberate plans under the control of the reader" (Dole et al., 1991). Examples of cognitive strategies applied to reading include making predictions, summarizing a story, reacting critically to what is read, inferring main ideas, and revising and editing a piece of writing. Such reading comprehension capabilities benefit from teachers' use of higher-level questioning, modeling, and coaching (Taylor et al., 2005). There is still explicit instruction, but the role of the teacher changes to a facilitator that guides and supports students' reading (Rosenshine & Meister, 1995).

Each type of learning requires a different degree of directness and control by the teacher. Skill learning requires more control and direction by the teacher than does strategy learning, which requires less teacher directness and is more under the control of students. However, teaching is neither wholly direct nor indirect—on a continuum, a given teaching lesson is only more or less direct than another. The teaching of both skills and strategies is important, and both types of lessons should be included in a teacher's repertoire.

At the heart of the explicit instructional model are explicit explanations, modeling, and guided

practice (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 2002). Explicit explanations can include step-by-step details and definitions. Modeling includes dramatizing how and when to use the skill or strategy in authentic reading situations. Effective teachers provide varied, meaningful practice to ensure mastery and transfer of a skill to other meaningful reading situations. Directly controlled by the teacher, this practice is characterized by varying degrees of teacher–student interaction. In this process, the teacher acts as a mediator. Based on Vygotsky’s (1986) theoretical work, mediated instruction involves providing guidance to a student in learning a particular skill. During practice, the amount of guidance is great at the beginning; it then declines to little or none. Similar to mediated instruction is “coaching” students. Researchers from the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999) reported on qualities of effective primary-grade teachers. One major “how” quality was that most teachers taught phonics in isolation but coached students or provided help to students as they attempted to use various phonics skills in real reading situations.

Modeling learning is an important component of explicit instruction and one that effective teachers use to help students understand reading skills and strategies and how to apply them. As its name implies, modeling includes demonstrating for the students how to do learning tasks. As Dole et al. (1991) noted, modeling varies in relation to how much information is explicitly provided. For example, in classrooms with many opportunities for students to read books independently, the teachers’ modeling is the reading of books themselves, thinking aloud about how they select books to read, guiding students through thinking aloud about literacy features (e.g., foreshadowing, flashbacks, and alliteration), and talking with students about their favorite authors.

Explicit types of modeling are talk-alouds and think-alouds. Both of these involve teacher discussion and teacher–student interaction. An important feature of talk-alouds is the teacher dramatizing the application of strategies while discussing the steps in the process. Think-alouds also discuss the steps used in a strategy, but in addition they include a description of the reasoning that readers use when performing the task. This process helps

learners understand what the mentor was thinking while attempting to reach the learning objective. Think-alouds are intended to help students “get inside the teacher’s mind” and begin to understand what strategies they can use when doing similar tasks.

Guiding student learning is certainly not new; it has been an effective teaching strategy for years. The renewed interest today is the result of new research on the teaching–learning process and the social environment of the classroom. A focus of application for this research is the gradual and guided shift of responsibility for the application of a reading skill from the teacher to the student. The importance of thinking both analytically and reflectively in relation to classroom structure and explicit teaching as means for improving reading teaching effectiveness seems clear. The reading program should not be regimented and inflexible. Structure and explicit instruction depend on the desired reading outcomes, grade level, and students’ needs. Analyzing what and how these variables influence students’ reading and making changes when necessary enhance teacher effectiveness and provide a safe environment where successful learning can occur.

### **Opportunity to learn**

Opportunity to learn refers to whether students have been taught the skills relevant to the areas for which they are assessed. Teachers who specify reading behaviors to be achieved prior to teaching and who teach content relevant to these outcomes often have students who achieve at a higher reading level than do teachers who do not (Rupley, Wise, & Logan, 1986). Opportunity to learn is a variable associated with explicit instruction. Teachers could employ structure and explicit instruction, but if the instruction does not relate to an assessed learning task or a valued benchmark or outcome, then students have not had an opportunity to learn that which has been deemed important. For example, students who do well in learning isolated reading skills as a result of intensive instruction, but who do poorly in actual reading, may lack the opportunity to learn how to apply such skills in reading for meaning. Allington (1983) reported that low-achieving readers receive different instructional emphases than high-achieving students. Low-

achieving students spent more time on worksheets rather than whole-text reading and on isolated word-recognition activities rather than comprehension activities.

Providing students with opportunities to apply their reading skills and strategies in meaningful content areas appears to be extremely important; however, teachers must be sure to use materials that students can handle. In addition, students must be willing to read the materials because they find them interesting and at a level where they can succeed. The more time students spend on actual reading in which they can be highly successful, the more they probably will learn; while the more they are involved in actual reading tasks that limit success, the less likely they will be to enhance their learning.

Opportunity to learn is not equal to coverage of materials and topics. Opportunity to learn, ongoing assessment, structure, and explicit instruction are related. The reading instruction that is offered must relate to assessment data, desired outcomes or benchmarks, instructional format, and application in actual reading tasks. Opportunity to learn should reflect the desired learning outcomes, not simply cover the content.

### **Attention to learning tasks**

Students' attention to learning tasks and engagement in pertinent learning materials logically fall under the direct supervision of the teacher. The historic *Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study, Phase II* (McDonald, 1976) provided clear support for the importance of maintaining a reasonably high level of student involvement. Appropriate reading materials alone are not sufficient to maximize achievement. Effective teachers not only use appropriate materials but also attend to actively engaging students in learning from the materials. Simply requiring that all students complete similar learning tasks does not ensure maximum attention, because students approach assorted learning tasks with varying interest, capabilities, and understanding. Effective reading teachers take these factors into account as they attempt to engage students in meaningful reading instruction.

Academic engaged time, or time on task, refers to the classroom time when students are actually attending and doing the work at hand. Classrooms in which students are actively engaged in learning

for a large proportion of the time demonstrate higher achievement in reading and writing than do classrooms in which students are not so engaged. Engagement is the key; merely completing reading activities is not synonymous with learning.

Researchers have modified the definition of time on task to include students' success rate while working productively. Fisher, Marliave, and Filby (1979) labeled this concept "academic learning time." They defined the term as "the amount of time a student spends engaged in an academic task he/she performs with high success" (p. 52). A high success rate is considered to be above 80%. Allocated time, student engagement, and student success rate define academic learning time. Collectively, academic learning time occurs when a student has the time or opportunity to learn, is actively engaged with the task at hand, and is succeeding at the task.

Recently, CIERA researchers (Taylor et al., 1999, 2005) studied quality time and reported that effective teachers in grades K–3 maintained students on task and engaged behavior 96% of the time while students of less effective teachers were on task and engaged an average of 63%. The type of grouping used in reading is related to student engagement. Students with the most effective teachers spent considerably more time in small-group instruction per day in reading as compared with students of the least effective teachers (48 minutes versus 25 minutes).

### **Teacher expectations**

The most pervasive conclusion of school and teacher effectiveness studies was that teachers of reading profoundly influence how much students learn. This influence stems from both classroom actions and belief systems. Effective reading programs have teachers who believe in themselves and expect their students to succeed in learning (Johnson, Livingston, Schwartz, & Slate, 2000). Simply put, students learn more if you hold high but reasonable academic expectations for them. Having different expectations for different students is natural as long as the expectations reflect diagnostic data (such as achievement scores, specific strengths and weaknesses in comprehension, and motivational concerns) rather than socioeconomic status, gender, race, or ethnic background.

How can teachers focus on communicating high expectations? Basing instructional decisions on assessment information, designing activities so all students are involved and participate in learning, avoiding sending negative messages regarding student ability, communicating to all students both publicly and privately that they are to meet high standards in the classroom, and monitoring student work and giving timely feedback—all these are examples of the “how” with regard to teacher expectations in the classroom (Blair, 2003).

In addition to holding high, realistic expectations for students and communicating them, effective teachers have a strong sense of efficacy, or the expectation that their efforts will result in valued outcomes (Fuller, Wood, Rapoport, & Dornbush, 1982). In essence, teachers with a high sense of efficacy say, “I know I can teach these students!” These teachers believe in themselves and believe that investing substantial effort in their work will result in all students learning and that failure is not an option.

## There is still more to learn

Time and time again, research has demonstrated the importance of the teacher in effective reading instruction. But we still have much to learn about what makes an effective teacher. A great deal of the available information regarding the “what” and “how” of reading instruction warrants careful consideration. We know, for example, that teachers who include provisions for ongoing assessment, explicit instruction, opportunity to learn, attention to learning tasks, and accurate expectations are more effective teachers of reading than those who do not include provisions for these practices.

Without the ability to read and write, students are placed at a disadvantage in almost every educational and “real world” setting. In order to better understand how to meet the individual needs of young learners, it is important to understand what constitutes an effective teacher of reading. Effective teachers of reading will not only enhance students’ reading development, but they will also lead learners to a lifelong love of literacy.

Reading is an interactive process, which consists of multiple interactions between variables such as the reader’s background, the classroom

context, reading materials, developmental levels, teachers’ instructional style, and learning goals. Teachers must use a variety of classroom teaching strategies, because no one single method can teach all readers successfully.

Today’s teachers struggle more than ever with how to meet the individual needs of students without lowering their expectations for learner outcomes. Many times, administrators insist that teachers follow the curriculum-pacing guides and standards of learning established for each grade level in order to ensure that all students receive the same instruction, disregarding the diverse backgrounds of the individual learner. The effective teacher of reading must navigate these political waters and yet still be flexible enough to meet the individual needs of their learners. Effective teachers of reading work hard for their success and know where to put their time and effort.

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