THE READING COMPREHENSION LEVELS OF FRESHMAN EDUCATION STUDENTS: A READING PROGRAM DESIGN

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The study sought to determine the reading comprehension level and reading miscues of freshman Education students of Mater Dei College. Using the descriptive method, this study used Jerry John’s Secondary and College Reading Inventory as the research instrument. The study revealed that the majority of the subjects were on the frustration level. As to their common miscues, it has been found out that subjects kept on repeating words in the reading passage. Results were used as bases for conceptualizing the reading program for the College of Education as designed in this study.

Keywords: Reading program, Comprehension skills, Freshmen.

INTRODUCTION

A well defined Reading Program to address the inadequacies in reading comprehension of entering freshmen had to be designed. The English Department of Mater Dei College is strongly convinced that the students’ English language proficiency can be fully achieved if the students’ reading comprehension capabilities will be optimized by designing a reading program which should be implemented in the freshman year. Academic success can only be assured if the students are equipped with reading comprehension skills as they grapple with the rigors of coping with reading assignments of their programs.

Thus, effective first semester, school year 2007, in addition to CHED’S mandate to administer English Proficiency Test (EPT) upon admission, a Reading Inventory is also to be administered to entering freshmen as an institutional policy. Those who flunk in the EPT are to take English Plus (non-credit Remedial English) as mandated by CHED and those who pass are to take English 01 (Study & Thinking Skills), the regular basic freshman course. In all freshman English courses, English Plus, English 01, and English 02, there is a Reading Laboratory component. Basic freshman English may carry only 3 credit units as mandated by their curriculum but a two hour reading laboratory component weekly is made compulsory as an institutional policy in addition to the 3 hour weekly lecture basic component. It is thru the two hour reading component weekly in all the basic freshman English courses that the Reading Program is implemented.

This research, therefore, was made as a springboard to launch a well-designed reading program to be anchored on a data base reading comprehension profile. The micro design for the College of Education was used as a model for the macro institutional full-blown implementation of a Reading Program.
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The conceptualized reading program in MDC is anchored on the Whole Language Approach. Through reading, language skills are learned in their natural setting. Grammar and vocabulary are contextually based. Instead of making students construct invented sentences to suit a grammatical item taught, students would be asked to point out in context from the text the grammatical item at work in the reading selection. Whatever is read, the concept is repeated in writing. Thus reading and writing are in tandem. The printed word is read and written. In context, meaning of unfamiliar words are spontaneously explained and pronounced properly. Spelling and phonics occur in context as well.

This study is also anchored on the cognitivists' theory of Constructivism. The constructivists believe that learning is a process during which the learners interact with their environment and modify their current understandings (Cox and Zarillo, 1993:6).

In reading, when something new is introduced the related mental functions of assimilation and accommodation described by Piaget are at work. Assimilation is a process through which new experiences are incorporated into existing cognitive structures such as schemes and accommodation is a process of modifying existing cognitive structures or creating additional ones as a result of new experiences (McCowan et al., 1996:529).

This theory is being reinforced in the reading lab in vocabulary building. Previous experiences being assimilated expand as new vocabulary words in context are accommodated. The films the students regularly watch show in action and setting, the vocabulary words they have previously experienced in print. They further hear the words enunciated by native speakers of the language. All the language skills being taught are at work in good films so that the target language being taught occurs in its authentic setting.

Metacognitive strategies, in contrast to routine skills, require awareness, conscious thought and reasoning. When beginning to read, the reader uses initiating strategies to activate background knowledge and make initial predictions. Various kinds of prior knowledge provide reader’s ability to comprehend what they read about the topic. This prior knowledge is largely a product of the reader’s previous experiences about language and how it works on different social situations (Pajarito, 1996).

Metacognitive strategies enable learners to reflect on a specific technique and use it on a trial and error method of understanding concepts. Good readers are conversant at designing their own techniques of learning they are most comfortable with. They do a lot of “after thought” as they read.

Prior knowledge has to be activated to facilitate processing, but the fundamental problem lies in the lack of prior knowledge of most of the college entrants, thus, background knowledge has to be built. To gradually build a reservoir of background knowledge, a Reading Program has to be put up. A Reading Program Design should contain a developmental instruction in reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and study strategies (Wepner, et al: 1989). Above all, for the program to work, the motivational component has to be developed and instilled in the clientele. In the local setting where reading is not a habit, motivational strategies have to be promoted to make students read. Einstein (as cited by Flippo and Caverly: 1991) remarked that Western society lives, breathes and thrives on printed matters. In contrast, eastern society relies more on what is presented orally and visually. A typical scenario, children in America and other western cultures are read to by parents at bedtime or by older members of the family. Thus, children of western countries are exposed to reading from the time they are toddlers.
METHODOLOGY

This was a descriptive research. The instrument was taken from the College and Secondary Reading Inventory of Jerry Johns (1990). Form A of this inventory was utilized for the individual reading and was also administered to the whole class in silent reading. The group silent reading inventory was administered first. The examinees were given 5 minutes to read the brief passage (see attachment of the text) and another 5 minutes to answer questions.

The oral reading to detect miscues was conducted one-on-one. The passage was read individually by the examinees. As each student read the passage, the teacher researcher took down miscues in the oral reading.

Results were analyzed and interpreted to determine the reading levels of the students. The findings were then made as bases for the micro reading program for freshman education students where the macro institutional reading program would be anchored.

The research was done in Mater Dei College, located in Tubigon, Bohol founded in 1983 by Rev. Fr. Josemaria Luengo. Mater Dei College is now in its 24th year of operation. The College is headed by Dr. Lourdes H. Torrefranca, its present president. The College of Education was the sole focus of the study.

READING PROGRAM DESIGN

Any program design should have these four components: Objectives, Contents, Organization (Activities), and Evaluation. The four components have to be realigned with one another. The objectives provide the bases for evaluation. The success of any program is determined if the evaluation shows that objectives are achieved. This program is conceptualized for English Plus where the Reading Program component is interwoven. The Reading Program is designed to be sustained all throughout the freshman English courses from English Plus, to English 01 until English 02.

General Objective

The program aims to raise the comprehension reading levels of the entering freshmen with the English Plus as the starting point and improve their general English Language Proficiency.

Specific Objectives

The College of Education Reading Program specifically intends to address the following concerns:

1. To enable students to decode words smoothly with correct enunciation;
2. To raise gradually the reading level of English plus students from the frustration and instructional levels to independent level;
3. To enable participants to answer questions based on selections read from literal to inferential, then critical, and finally to applicative comprehension levels;
4. To enable participants to identify episodic highlights of a story;
5. To determine main idea and supporting details of passages;
6. To enable participants to summarize stories in writing and orally with fluency and understanding giving focus on episodic highlights of the story;
7. To enable participants to read aloud texts with correct enunciation, and expression;
8. To raise participants general level of English Proficiency.
9. To role play some scenes of films watched.
10. To draw out insights or do valuing of certain episodes in the films.
11. To describe scenes from films they like best and state why.
12. To write a reflectionnaire of passages read.

Contents

The following stories are sorted out for in-class and off-class reading assignments. The in-class selections are to be discussed in class for story structure, vocabulary building and contextual comprehension. The off-class reading assignments are selections of various genre chosen by participants to suit their interest. Their reading, writing, and oral interpretations of these texts are supervised by the Teaching assistants in the Reading Lab. The reading done by participants in the Reading Lab is essentially for reading appreciation and comprehension.

In Class Reading Assignments cover the following:

3 fairy tales
3 legends, myths, and fables or parables
3 Reflectionnaire
1 Narrative Poem

Off Class Reading Assignments cover selections of varied genre

10 selections and 10 accompanying writing activities in their journal

Films for Viewing which are to be summarized either orally or in writing

8 – 10 films

5 Sessions in the Speech Lab

Lecture and Lab teachers turn over to the Speech teacher the commonly mispronounced words to be remediated during these sessions. Tongue twisters, poems, orations, short stories, and other forms of genre will be read by the students in the speech lab.

Organization / Activities

The English Plus curriculum has two components: the 3 hour lecture component (Grammar & Composition) and 2 hour Reading Lab component (reading comprehension). The students attend 3 hours weekly for the lecture component under a regular English teacher and attend 2 hour weekly sessions in the Reading Lab under a Teaching Assistant assisted by a student intern as tutor. The Reading Lab component is reinforced by the total 5 hour sessions of speech classes throughout the semester to refine the oral reading skills training.
Evaluation Schemes

For the lecture component, evaluation consists of oral and written exercises, quizzes, mastery tests, and periodic tests to determine progress of English Proficiency. The lecture gives focus on grammar lessons. The journal that each student keeps can also reflect the progress of development. These will comprise 2/3 of their periodic grade.

For the Reading Lab component, evaluation consists of graded oral reading exercises, answering comprehension questions orally and in writing, doing summaries of stories and films and reflectionnaire in their journal entries. Each student also keeps a separate journal for their Reading Lab activities. Their progress can also be monitored through these journals.

All these activities will comprise 1/3 of their periodic grade. Two-thirds performance of the lecture component and 1/3 of the Reading Lab component comprise their periodic grade of the English Plus Course (Remedial English) in preparation for the English 01 (the basic English curriculum course).

At the end of the semester, the post test will be administered and each class presents a culminating activity demonstrating students’ social skills through language in practice.

FINDINGS

The reading inventory revealed that of the 33 subjects, only 2 (6%) were categorized in the independent level, 11 (33%) were in the instructional and 20 (61%) were in the frustration. Only 2 then could read with thorough understanding of the materials presented to them without assistance. Those categorized in the instructional, 11 of them, need assistance in order to understand materials presented to them. On the other hand, more than half of them, these 20 students (61%) in the frustration level are the struggling readers. These are the students who need rigid remedial work and intensive monitoring to be able to come up with the required comprehension level to process information of textbooks and other instructional materials.

As to the common significant miscues committed, repetitions ranked first (49%) followed by omissions (17%), mispronunciations (18%), substitutions (8%) and insertions (8%). These miscues, however, were found to have generally slight effect on the comprehension of the subjects. These data showed almost similar slight effect except for one moderate effect in the percentage in the frustration level.

CONCLUSIONS

The reading inventory could be useful as a diagnostic instrument to determine the kind of intervention scheme appropriate for a particular group of readers. It is easier to design a program to address reading inadequacies once needs are identified. Entering freshmen specifically have to be equipped with the required skills in reading comprehension to be able to cope with academic reading to succeed in their college endeavors. Those in the frustration have to be given immediate assistance otherwise their coming to college becomes a frustrating venture. Those in the independent level would similarly suffer the same fate, that is in the verge of frustration, if the materials given to them are beneath their current level. They need to be provided with more challenging materials that could further enhance their comprehension skills to sustain their interest. Those in the instructional should neither be denied of assistance, otherwise, they cannot
move forward to achieve their goals in college. Instead they would continue to slide back in their attempt to cope with the demands of college reading tasks.

RECOMMENDATION

A major recommendation is the full-blown implementation of a reading program as designed in this study. A Reading Laboratory component reinforced with a Speech Laboratory in the basic English strengthens their foundation in achieving English proficiency. The administration of EPT and reading inventory upon admission to college as shown in this study in the framework of the Phases of Development of a Reading Program will be most useful as the initial step in dealing with reading inadequacies.

It would seem that it has been a given that college entrants are ill-equipped with reading skills as revealed in so many other similar studies. It is therefore, most helpful, for the Secondary Curriculum to enrich their reading activities so that high school graduates do not come to college handicap in reading comprehension. The English Department in College should also be prepared for this kind of clientele. A remedial as well as tutorial schemes in a reading program will always come handy in addressing reading inadequacies. Categorizing clientele into 3 levels, independent, instructional, and frustration enable teachers to deal with inadequacies head on. Forming students into small tutorial groups such as a group of 5 students to have one tutor for intensive assistance can be most expedient.

REFERENCES