

How can I help my ninth grade applied students be more successful readers?

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Biography

Catherine Mills Dailey graduated from the University of Waterloo with a Bachelor of Environmental Studies in 1985. After attending teacher's college at the University of Western Ontario she began teaching Geography and Science at the secondary level in 1986 for the York Region Board of Education. Upon returning to Brantford in 1991, she taught Geography, Business and History at Paris District High School before transferring to Pauline Johnson C.V.S. in 1996 to teach Geography. Catherine is currently the Assistant Department Head of Geography and Family Studies and teaches Geography in grades 9, 11 and 12.

Abstract

This research project explores the use of strategies to develop success in reading for adolescent readers who enter secondary school with reading skills that are below grade level. The concept of front-loading means to activate the process of reading are examined as a means to encourage students to be more engaged in reading and, therefore, be more successful at finding meaning in written text.

Background

Last fall, I attended a PJCVS staff meeting that featured Lynne Abbey as a guest speaker. Her topic was about teaching adolescents to read. She began her presentation, quoting from Kyleen Beers' book When Kids Can't Read: What Teachers Can Do.

I was intrigued by the story of a student named George. George, a middle school student, couldn't read. As I listened to the story about Kyleen's interview with George's parents, about the fact that George couldn't read, and about the fact that Kyleen didn't have a clue as to how to help George learn how to read, I began to think about the students in my own classes.

I thought to myself, "George is in my class! I had George last year. I have had a lot of Georges in my classes over the years, George sits in my class right now, along with Kristy and Nathan and Katie, and I am likely to see more Georges as the years go by." These are the kids in my classroom. These are the ones who can't read, at least not at the level that I expect them to. This paper outlines my attempt to respond to the needs of these students in my classroom.

Finding My Question

At that time I was teaching 43 grade nine students. Grade Nine Applied Geography, two sections, all afternoon. Most of them could not read at grade level. The average grade level, as determined by the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, was 6.85. Scores ranged from as low as grade 3.6 to a high of grade 10.8 in the two classes (Gates-

MacGinitie Reading Test, September 2003). In conclusion, most of these kids could not read at the level necessary to successfully use the textbooks that were available for the ninth grade Geography program.

I have been guilty of saying, “These kids can’t read! How do they get to secondary school if they can’t read?” Fact in point, it doesn’t matter how they got here, but they are here in my secondary Geography classes. It is my duty to try to help them. If they can read better, they will learn Geography and every other subject better. They will be more successful in and out of school. This is truly what my goal is as a teacher.

I do not know how to teach kids how to read. I am a Geography teacher who majored in Environmental Studies and Biology. Teaching reading was not a part of the curriculum in my teaching education. How do I teach my students to be successful readers?

First Steps

As a benchmark, I assigned a “Fill in the Blank” exercise for students to complete using a specific section of a textbook. The sheets were handed out and the students were given the pages that they needed to read in order to complete the task. Without even attempting to read the text, some students initially blurted out “I don’t know where this starts”, “I can’t find these answers”, “this is so boring”, “where am I supposed to look” (Journal, October 2003). Some began to scan for matching phrases and assumed that reading a few words on either side of those phrases would correctly fill in the blank. I realized that these kids could decode words, but did not actively engage themselves in the reading and therefore, could not find meaning. The focus was on answering the questions as briefly as possible. They simply wanted to finish the assessment task and have it off their chest. They did not have an interest in understanding, inquiry or application of concepts. They were not concerned about the evaluation of the task.... many assumed they would be unsuccessful anyway.

So I set out to figure out what I could do to teach these kids to become actively involved in reading and to read for meaning and purpose. I began by reading Kyleen Beers’ book. She made many points that influenced my attitude about my role in teaching adolescents to read. I decided to apply some of the strategies that she suggested to my ninth grade Applied Geography students to answer my question which is “How can I help my ninth grade applied students be more successful readers?”

Implementing Reading Strategies

I was most interested in the concepts of front-loading meaning. Front-loading meaning involves vocabulary building and unlocking prior knowledge that can be connected to a text before the student attempts to read the text itself. I set out to develop reading exercises related to the Geography concepts that I was covering in class that incorporated vocabulary building and pre-reading strategies, reading of the text, and assessment of student comprehension of the text in the form of multiple choice questions. This format was chosen as a model of the method of assessment of reading comprehension on both the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test and the grade ten Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) Literacy Test.

The idea was to activate the process of reading by engaging students with interesting selections of text and introducing pre-reading strategies that students would eventually apply independently upon tackling a reading activity. Vocabulary was developed by identifying new terms or use of language that might be new to students and providing a definition or explanation of the use of each term. Students were directed to examine headings and sub-headings, pictures, tables, charts, maps, marginal notes and captions before reading a text to make predictions about

the content of the text. Discussion of the predictions followed in order to unlock prior knowledge. Students had the opportunity to express personal connections, what they knew about a topic, and what they needed to find out about a topic. Following the reading of the text, the students completed a short, multiple choice exercise so that their comprehension of the text could be assessed by means of a short, specific text-related task. Where available, a short video was used as a follow-up to further students' interest and understanding of content.

The exercises followed similarly to Kyleen Beers' K-W-L (What I Know, What I Want to Learn, What I Learned) strategy where students determine what they know, what they would like to know, and what they learned. The students were directed to follow a number of tips from the "Tips for Reading Informational Texts" from "Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches, Grade 7-12". The tips included looking over a text to see which elements appear, examining a text for words which stand out, looking for words that give clues about how the information is organized, examining illustrations, titles and captions, and recalling what you already know about a topic.

I began by selecting narrative texts that described natural disasters relating to the study of climate. The selections then progressed toward information text case studies from the textbook "Experience Canada". The selections increased in the level of difficulty and length.

Our first exercise was called "The Ice Storm" (Graham and Ledbetter, 2001). It was a narrative story, about a male youth that was initially excited about the prospect of missing school, but ultimately realizes the impact of the weather conditions and lack of electricity on his family and community. I began by introducing the text on overheads where we examined the title and the illustrations to predict what the story was likely about. Students were prompted to share personal experiences with power loss. This was particularly successful because of the power blackout that had just been experienced in Southern Ontario in August 2003. Many students eagerly shared stories about the blackout (Journal, October 21, 2003). They then went on to predict the effects of that blackout had it occurred in winter. A selection of vocabulary was defined before students read the story. By the time that the story was distributed, the students were eager to read the story. No one indicated any reluctance to read the story. The room was quiet, they were focussed and on task. Students quickly read through the text and eagerly completed the accompanying multiple choice questions. The exercise was followed up with a CBC News in Review video about the 1998 Ice Storm in Eastern Ontario and Southern Quebec. The success of this exercise was demonstrated by students' eagerness to receive the multiple-choice exercise back. Most of the students achieved a perfect score on the questions.

A similar format was used on a number of exercises including a story about a thunderstorm called "A Night to Remember" (Graham and Ledbetter, 2001) and information texts about Kensington Market (DesRivieres and Harshman, 2003), Immigration (DesRivieres and Harshman, 2003), Nunavut Territory (DesRivieres and Harshman, 2003), Geothermal Energy (DesRivieres and Harshman, 2003), and the Atlantic Maritime Ecozone (DesRivieres and Harshman, 2003).

The first two exercises met with great success. The students actively engaged in pre-reading discussions designed to unlock prior knowledge, read with interest and enthusiasm, and very successfully completed the assessment tasks. In the next exercise, about Kensington Market, I decided to reduce my role and observe whether or not the students would independently use the strategies that I had previously modelled to them and read with interest and enthusiasm.

For this exercise, I reminded them of the strategies to survey the reading first, looking for cues and clues about the organization and content. I reminded them to think about what they already knew about the topic and what they would like to know about the topic before reading. A list of the definitions for unfamiliar vocabulary was also provided. Students were reminded to read over the definitions before beginning to read. I also suggested that the students use a ruler to assist with focus during the reading.

Very few students looked at the vocabulary before reading, no one used a ruler to focus, and several looked over the assessment questions before they read the text. It appeared that few independently used the strategies that had been modelled (Journal, November 21, 2003). However, many read the text with success, although not to the degree that had been observed in the first two exercises. I believe that this was, in part, due to the fact that they required more consistent modelling from me and that the reading was less personal, a text that had a lesser degree of personal appeal. I concluded that in order for the reading strategies to become an inherent process in the reading process for these students, that they must be repeatedly modelled and lead by the teacher many times over.

Using the modelling approach, I assigned several more reading tasks. Each time I modelled the K-W-L strategy. As a class we discussed the organization of each text, we examined titles, sub-headings, figures and tables. We made predictions about the text, we examined new or unique vocabulary. In each case, the students read with greater attention, and successfully completed the assessment tasks. Students began asking if we would be doing reading when they entered the classroom (Journal, December 2003). This was due largely to the fact that they were experiencing success with the assessment tasks. They were becoming more confident and eager readers.

So, once again, I decided it was time to test their independence. I constructed an exercise, again using a case study from the text, on Geothermal Energy. I reminded students to use the strategies that we had been using in previous reading exercises. I then observed their behaviour upon commencing with the task. Once again, several jumped right to the questions, skipping the vocabulary list altogether (Journal, January 8, 2004). They did not appear to examine the organization, sub-headings or pictures first. They skimmed to find the answers. Results on this assessment task were poor.

In a final exercise about the Atlantic Maritime Ecozone, I modelled each of the pre-reading strategies and vocabulary was developed. This particular text had very little new vocabulary of a technical nature, but it did have some unfamiliar uses of common words. For example, the phrase “rising sea levels would spell disaster for the Atlantic harbours” was used in the text. I used a multiple-choice format to discover whether the students would understand the meaning of the word spell in this context. Most did not attach the meaning “mean” to the word “spell”. This was important to note, as I had not typically selected this type of vocabulary in the vocabulary development in the pre-reading for the previous exercises. It is important to include the development of commonly used vocabulary with content-specific meaning in the pre-reading modelling.

At this point in the Geography course we were examining Canada’s Ecozones. Following the pre-reading modelling for this exercise, the students were given a brief assignment from the textbook and the reading exercise about the Atlantic Maritime Ecozone. It was interesting, and exciting, to note that all of the students immediately set out to read the case study first. They completed the reading assessment task before completing the other parts of the assignment. When asked why they did this, several said that they liked doing the reading part better (Journal, January 12, 2004). Again, most of the students very successfully answered the assessment task questions that demonstrated their comprehension of the text. It was encouraging to observe their confidence in completing the reading task over other types of assessment associated with this topic.

Evaluation

It became very clear to me that when the strategies were modelled and teacher-directed, every student benefitted from the pre-reading activities and their reading was much more focussed and successful. The reading became less mechanical and task-oriented and more process-oriented with much more interaction between the reader and the context. The unlocking of prior knowledge, the vocabulary development and the reading for purpose raised the level of engagement and comprehension of the text to a much higher level.

The students responded in a highly favourable manner to the reading exercises. Each was selected in relation to topics being covered in the Geography curriculum at the time. The readings were short (300-800 words), of high-interest and built upon knowledge gained through personal experience and course content. The familiar structure and format of the pre-reading strategies, text, and assessment task promoted repeated success, which led to greater confidence, motivation and engagement.

In order to test whether or not the reading strategy sessions had any impact on the measurement of reading grade levels of the students, I decided to have both classes repeat the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test. I wanted to see if the students' increased interest in reading was matched by an improved reading level. I hoped that the grade levels for reading would be quantifiable proof that the reading strategies improved reading ability. Unfortunately, the students were highly non-compliant to the idea of repeating the test. Many grumbled and were hostile about writing it again. "This is so boring!" was a common resonance around the room. Some simply filled in the multiple-choice sheet without reading any of the passages (Journal, January 20, 2004). The results showed that although the class averages for grade level in reading did not change, one third of the students' grade levels increased by one or one and one half grade levels, most remained unchanged, while some student's grade levels fell by one to two grade levels.

Upon analysis of these findings, I came to the conclusion that the test design was not conducive to the use of the K-W-L or front-loading strategies. The passages were short texts without titles, subtitles, illustrations or other graphical enhancements. The topics were varied and students would not necessarily have had any prior knowledge to unlock, even if they had attempted to implement the strategies that were modelled in the classroom. The content of the passages may have appealed to some students more than to others. The students simply did not engage in reading the short texts, and therefore, the results showed no conclusive evidence that would support the success of the reading strategies.

However, I decided to further seek evidence of success by using reading exercises and providing opportunities to demonstrate reading skill on the final exam (January, 2004). I included two reading exercises with multiple-choice assessment tasks on the final exam. One was about the greenhouse effect and global warming. It included graphical text and short written paragraphs of information. The other was an information text including a title and photograph. It was about a young woman who had become a refugee counselor after having been inspired to do so by her High School Geography courses.

In the past, I have used short text passages on final exams to give students the opportunity to experience the type of testing that they will repeat on the EQAO Literacy test in Grade 10. Often students will simply skip these activities in favour of other tasks. On this final exam, every student in both of my classes answered both of the reading exercise sections of the exam. Of the 39 students who wrote the final exam, 32 scored 80% or above on these two sections. Ten of these students scored 100% on both sections. Three of the six students who scored poorly, had poor attendance and had been absent from most of the reading strategy lessons (Journal, January 2004).

Conclusion

I believe that these results demonstrate the success of the reading strategy lessons. Either the students had finally begun to internalize the strategies to improve reading, or they had simply gained confidence in their ability to be successful on the reading exercises. They demonstrated a willingness to tackle the reading sections that were set up on the exam in similar fashion to what they had seen in class. The selection of text topics was based on course content. They had prior knowledge of both topics. They were familiar with the structure of the exercises. All of these factors combined, favoured student success on these two sections of the final exam.

Without question, the modelling of the pre-reading strategies to unlock prior knowledge and develop purpose for reading promoted greater success in this group of struggling readers. I feel that with repeated modelling of the strategies, careful selection of text material, and familiar structure of assessment tasks the students will continue to read with interest and successfully comprehend the material. With repetition and modelling, it would be my hope that students will internalize the pre-reading strategies to independently improve their reading skills.

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