High school readers: A profile of above average readers and readers with learning disabilities reading expository text

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ABSTRACT

This study examined above average high school readers and high school readers with learning disabilities in order to better understand the impact of twelve years of formal education on reading skills and strategy use while reading expository text. This study examined reading strategies related to knowledge construction, monitoring, and evaluating using verbal protocol analysis. Twenty-five eleventh and twelfth-grade students participated in this study, which included thirteen students with learning disabilities and twelve students with above average reading skills. The findings suggest that above average readers and students with learning disabilities share some characteristics. Both groups of students used rereading and paraphrasing as their primary mode of knowledge construction and demonstrated similar patterns in their strategy use. However, the above average readers used the strategies more effectively. The data suggest that students with learning disabilities may benefit from continued instruction at the secondary level in effective strategy use.

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1. Introduction

High school students today are faced with many literacy requirements due to the public's demand for tougher standards and more stringent assessments, which ensure that students are able to engage in twenty-first century society (Erickson, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & Thurlow, 2007; Swanson, 2008; Umpstead, 2008; Vernon, Baytops, McMahon, Padden, & Walther-Thomas, 2003). As students leave high school and enter college, post-secondary training, the military, or the workforce, they are expected to have and use a cadre of literacy skills including the ability to read the words on a page along with the ability to interact with text by applying prior knowledge, asking questions, making predictions and understanding the significance of the text (Beaufort, 2009; Conley, 2008; Pressley, 2004). This type of reading puts an emphasis on comprehension over content or word level skills. With growing demands placed on adolescents today on multiple fronts, and with these students poised to be the workforce of tomorrow, understanding how twelve years of formal literacy instruction has manifested itself is an important endeavor.

1.1. Secondary content area reading

Adolescents spend most of their day in content area classes with little time devoted to teaching them how to read at critically higher

levels, however; students are expected to perform literacy tasks that require them to read, write and think critically on multiple topics (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). More students with disabilities are being educated in general education classrooms, which require students to have high levels of independent literacy skills (Jetton & Alexander, 2004; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002). As more students with disabilities shift to general education settings, it is unclear whether their literacy needs are being met. Teachers report using fewer strategies focused on teaching students higher order thinking skills, which is what is needed to improve student achievement in middle and high school (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Volger, 2005).

Comprehension should be the goal of reading instruction. The importance of comprehension and the skills related to comprehension became a focus with Durkin's (1978/1979) study on comprehension. Durkin observed the assessment of comprehension skills, but not much teaching of those skills. For example, students are often asked to summarize, self-question or predict, however they were not taught how to perform those tasks while reading. These same skills are required of secondary students today in content classes on a routine basis.

Good readers must know why they are reading, recognize when they are not meeting that goal, and change gears as needed (Westby, 2004). Metacognition of reading coupled with the ability to change reading strategies as warranted are hallmarks of good readers (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Pressley & Lundeberg, 2008). Teachers are well aware of the need for more comprehension instruction in the content areas; however, reading comprehension is often

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over looked in lieu of content instruction (Pressley, 2004; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

Content area texts utilize expository text structures as well as discipline specific vocabulary (Ciardiello, 2002; Cook & Mayer, 1988; Freebody & Anderson, 1983; Montelongo, Berber-Jimenez, Hernandez, & Hosking, 2006). Students are asked to synthesize information from multiple sources, such as texts, digital media, graphs, and tables. Students find expository text challenging in many areas including, difficulties utilizing text structure to aid comprehension (Ciardiello, 2002; Cook & Mayer, 1988), summarizing main ideas (Afflerbach, 1990), utilizing metacognitive strategies in comprehension monitoring (Duke, Pressley, & Hilden, 2004; Hacker, 2004; Klingner & Vaughn, 1999; Westby, 2004), and effectively using cognitive strategies before, during, and after reading (Klingner & Vaughn, 1999; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Vaughn, Klingner, & Bryant, 2001).

1.2. Framework of reading processes

The framework adopted for this study is based on Pressley and Afflerbach's (1995) framework of constructively responsive reading, which asserts that expert readers engage in three basic processes while reading; constructing meaning, monitoring, and evaluating, which can be captured through verbal protocol analysis. Verbal protocol analysis examines the thinking of subjects as they perform a task such as reading (1995). For this study, the participants performed a think-aloud by reading text aloud and talking about their thinking. The think-aloud affords the researcher a glimpse of the reading processes employed by the reader (1995).

1.2.1. Constructing meaning

Skilled readers are active readers, who employ a multitude of strategies in order to comprehend what they are reading (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Pressley & Wharton-McDonald, 1997). Students often begin by making predictions and tapping into prior knowledge from the moment they read the title of the text or view the text structure (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Sensitivity to text structure in expository text aids students in comprehension, and is an area that some students with learning disabilities may need instruction in to become more proficient (Armbruster, Anderson, & Ostertag, 1987; Englert & Thomas, 1987; Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001).

Good readers engage with the text through making predictions, applying prior knowledge, paraphrasing important ideas and choosing to reread material for further understanding (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). If readers lack the prior knowledge to connect ideas in expository text, it will impact their comprehension of the text (Gersten et al., 2001). On the other hand, it is important for readers to regulate their prior knowledge and not make irrelevant inferences as that could become overwhelming and distracting (Duke et al., 2004).

Constructing meaning from text requires the reader to understand the main idea. The ability to find the main ideas in expository text aids in making appropriate inferences, being able to paraphrase, and knowing the important parts of the text to reread or skim (Williams, 2003). Finding the main idea is a difficult task and is intertwined with the ability to access prior knowledge, make inferences and recognize the text structure (Bakken, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 1997; Williams, 2003).

1.2.2. Monitoring and evaluating

Readers must be able to monitor their reading for understanding and to be able to take actions to regulate their reading and resolve any problems (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Proficient readers are actively engaged and metacognitive in their reading (Gersten et al., 2001; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Often readers will recognize that they have lost their place, concentration, or understanding and will need to go back and reread or skim portions of the text. Readers

monitor their understanding of unfamiliar words and make decisions about whether they should reread, skim, look for context clues, or decide to skip the unknown word. Again, knowledge of text structure, prior knowledge, main idea selection, and vocabulary all play a role in the reader's ability to effectively monitor reading comprehension and make adjustments as needed.

Finally, this framework purports that readers make evaluations at different levels and times while they are reading (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Pressley & Wharton-McDonald, 1997). Sometimes readers will make an evaluation immediately upon reading the title or noticing the text structure. At other times, readers may have a reaction to the text that can take the form of agreement, disagreement or questioning of the content (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Again, evaluation of text is complex and requires the reader to employ many facets of reading in order to make an evaluation.

1.3. Purpose of study and research questions

Adolescent readers must demonstrate high levels of literacy proficiency in multiple areas including high stakes assessments, content course work, and in post-secondary education and jobs. However, literacy scores for adolescents have remained relatively flat over the past thirty years. In a review of reading comprehension studies related to students with learning disabilities from 1966 through 1992, only 23% of the studies examined high school aged students (Talbott, Lloyd, & Tankersley, 1994). While there are clear expectations for what high school students should do when they read, there is also a paucity of research on what they actual do when they read.

In order to begin to understand adolescent readers, this study focuses on what high school readers do in the domains of constructing knowledge, monitoring, and evaluating while reading expository text. The main research question is, what do above average readers and readers with learning disabilities in the eleventh and twelfth-grades do while engaged in reading expository text; specifically in the domains of knowledge construction, monitoring and evaluating. Additionally, this research investigates how above average readers and readers with learning-disabilities are quantitatively and qualitatively similar and/or different in how they utilize knowledge construction, evaluation, and monitoring strategies when constructing understanding through reading expository texts.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Twenty-five eleventh- and twelfth-grade students from the Midwest participated in this study. Twelve of the students (five male and seven female) were above average readers based on their enrollment in an honors English class or membership in the National Honor Society. All of the above average readers scored above 12.2 grade level equivalency on the Gray Silent Reading Test (GSRT) (Wiederholt & Blalock, 2000). Conversely, thirteen students with learning disabilities (ten males and three females) were identified based on meeting the criteria for having a learning disability in reading according to their state definition and scored at least two grades levels below their current grade on the GRST. The researcher administered the GRST. All of the students were Caucasian. The researcher recruited the students through their English classes, and all the students who volunteered participated in the study.

Achievement scores from the students' school files were reviewed. Standard achievement scores in reading for the students in the learning disabilities group on the Woodcock–Johnson III, averaged 79.77, which falls within the low range. Nine of the above average readers took the ACT and three students took the PSAT. Their average scores were 23.67 and 55.3 respectively on the basic reading section.