

Providing Differentiated Reading Instruction

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Differentiated Instruction

A true story that is repeated many times in our schools involves individuals who try their hand at substitute teaching. Invariably for many of these people, substitute teaching does not last very long. The eye-opener, in addition to the obvious concern for discipline and management, is that students are different. This one fact is what makes teaching so intrinsically satisfying and at the same time so difficult. Students differ in a multitude of ways—in intelligence, social awareness, emotional maturity, psychological well-being, cultural backgrounds, thinking abilities, physical maturity, and current performance level or reading level, to name a few. What makes teaching reading so rewarding and challenging is that you must teach 20 to 30 different students, with different instructional needs, in one class at the same time. Thus, differentiated reading instruction is instruction that is adapted or modified to suit a student’s current performance level and specific skill needs in reading, taking into account his or her emotional, personal, and cultural needs. The complexity of teaching reading is quickly realized when one tries to differentiate instruction in the classroom.

Realizing that your instruction will vary for different students depending on their needs, three overriding considerations in delivering differentiated instruction are: (1) opportunity to learn, (2) engaged time, and (3) balanced reading instruction. *Opportunity to learn* refers to immersing students in a literate environment, teaching them what they need to know to be successful readers, and providing multiple opportunities to apply their reading and writing skills and strategies in different reading situations. *Engaged time* means the type of classroom time in which there is a reasonably high level of student involvement or time-on-task. Research on teaching reading clearly shows that the more time students spend engaged in learning, the higher their achievement will be (Taylor et al., 1999). *Balanced reading instruction* means that a variety of teaching approaches (i.e., both explicit/direct and implicit/indirect), strategies, and materials are used to teach students how to read, coupled with opportunities for recreational reading. The emphasis is on the word *variety* because children are different in so many ways that one approach or strategy will not work equally well with every child. Effective teachers of reading focus on the five components of the reading process—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—and balance the teaching of these components based on their students’ needs.

Grouping Students

Coupled with assessing each student’s instructional level and determining specific strengths and weaknesses in understanding text, grouping students facilitates differentiated instruction in the classroom. Years ago, because of the large numbers of students in a class, grouping was thought a necessary evil. Today, the literature on effective teaching tells us that grouping for instruction is a means to capitalize on student differences and increase student achievement. Students learn from one another in a group and are more likely to work productively in groups than individually. Different types of groups—whole, small, partner, and individual—are based, in turn, on reading ability, interest, research, and cooperative learning. Effective teachers use a variety of groupings throughout the year to fit specific objectives and thus provide different instruction to different students. In this way, grouping is an integral part of providing differentiated instruction.

Teaching Reading

Good reading instruction doesn't "just happen" in the classroom but is the result of much teacher effort before students arrive. Your skill at planning will greatly affect both your success as a teacher and your students' learning. How you utilize time for differentiated instruction is the key. The proper use of instructional time cannot be "willed"; teachers must carefully plan how to achieve their instructional goals. Above all else, you must plan a reading program that is enjoyable for children; without this quality, all good intentions will not come to fruition.

From research on teaching reading (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1995), there has emerged a set of procedures that are effective in teaching specific reading skills and strategies to urban children (See Appendix B). These procedures—the explicit/direct instructional model—are embedded in the essential instructional framework and process that follow. Of course, you will need to modify any set of procedures based on your students, their grade and age, and their readiness for a particular instructional goal. Also, there are other important models of teaching to incorporate in your teaching, such as problem-solving and inquiry when fostering critical-thinking objectives.

The basic element of teaching is the individual lesson. This is the vehicle with which you teach students what they need to know. This is the means by which you advance your students' reading abilities. Upon this foundation, you can design a series of activities (or lessons) to attain instructional goals. The next four sections—"Pre-Planning Considerations," "Essential Instructional Components in the Reading Period," "Teacher Behaviors in Effective Reading Programs in Diverse Communities," and "The Necessity of Practice"—serve as your framework for teaching children to read.

Pre-Planning Considerations

Overall reminders:

- You must not only "be there" but also "be on" at the start of your reading lesson. That is, you must be ready to perform immediately.
- All materials must be ready before the start of the lesson.
- Always remember to make your instructional session enjoyable for you and your students.

Importance of Being a Self-Monitor

Each instructional plan is a blueprint for accomplishing instructional goals. Effective teachers self-monitor and reflect on their teaching, and they modify future lessons based on student responses. In essence, effective reading teachers always ask the question, "Why am I doing what I am doing?" In this way, you will grow in your ability and confidence to teach reading. The following are some of the essential questions teachers should ask themselves when implementing any reading lesson:

Before teaching:

- What prerequisite knowledge and skills do my students need to be successful with the present lesson?
- At what pace do I want to conduct the lesson? What will be the troublesome areas for my students?

- How will I tie the objectives of the lesson to previous learning of my students?

During teaching:

- Do my students understand the lesson objectives?
- Do my students need additional explanation and practice?

After teaching:

- Do I need to reteach a part of the lesson?
- Was the time too long or too short for the activity (or activities)?
- What checkup of mastery was made?
- What recommendations can I make to the parents for follow-up at home?
- What did I learn today that will be of help in my next lesson?

Essential Instructional Components in the Reading Period

The typical reading “period” is 1-1/2 hours in duration. While different published reading programs may dictate a specific cycle of activities, most reading programs contain similar emphases or components. Figure 3-1 shows those similar components that are covered during the block of time devoted to reading instruction. Depending on the particular grade, students, and instructional goals, you can expect to modify the components to fit your situation. A brief explanation of each of these components follows.

1. Readiness, Review, and Motivation

At the beginning of your lesson, have a conversation with your student(s) and share interests, weekly happenings, and events; review previous lessons; communicate to them the goals of the day; highlight one or two of the exciting things you have planned for them for the day; and tell them you expect them to do well in today’s activities. If students are returning a book they read, talk about the book, discuss and summarize the book, and ask students whether or not they liked the book and why.

Figure 3-1 Instructional Components in the Reading Period

1. Readiness, review, and motivation
2. Vocabulary development
3. Thinking activity or
Skill/strategy development or
Fluency development or
Coaching for understanding while reading
4. Guided reading and story retelling
5. Read aloud and independent reading and/or writing activities
6. Practice and reinforcement
7. Review
8. Evaluation and reflection

2. Vocabulary Development

For each lesson, teach new words—basic sight vocabulary words, meaning words, or both. Make sure to use each new word in real sentences (orally and/or written), and use these words throughout the lesson.

3. Thinking Activity

Teach a critical-thinking strategy (for example, hypothesizing, criticizing, inferring, looking for assumptions, or imagining) by explaining the strategy and providing supervised and independent activities. Use examples to discuss the strategy with the student, explain how it can be applied to everyday life, and how it might apply to the story to be read. (or)

4. Skill/Strategy Development

Teach a word identification or comprehension skill or strategy using the explicit/direct instruction approach. Coach or assist students in applying the new skill or strategy as they read the story in guided reading. (or)

5. Fluency Development

Provide students with fluency training, using the story previously read or another activity. (or)

6. Coaching for Understanding While Reading

Provide students with open-ended sentences or short paragraphs, and ask them to write the missing part. This technique especially helps students who are word callers or verbalizers to think and to focus on the message *while* they are reading and not to solely focus on the words.

7. Guided Reading and Story Retelling

The centerpiece of your lesson is a story, and the manner or road map you use or follow to teach the story is called the Guided Reading Plan. The story should be on the student's instructional level. Follow the steps of preparation for reading (readiness, motivation, teaching difficult words, and setting a purpose), silent reading, and retelling the story and follow-up activities (answering the purpose-setting question, asking comprehension questions, summarizing the story, meaningful oral reading, and clarifying any points). The "retelling technique" is simply asking students to tell you about the story, discussing what happened first, second, third, and so forth. You can give hints along the way and use a story map or other visual format to illustrate the story structure and events. The vocabulary words previously taught and subsequent reading skills and strategies to be taught can be practiced and reinforced using this story.

8. Read Aloud and Independent Reading and/or Writing Activities

The ultimate goal of your lesson (and indeed the teaching of reading) is to foster in your students the desire and ability to read and enjoy books on their own. To this end, read a story or part of one to your students each day, and have your students complete an independent reading or writing activity (see chapter 16 for ideas).

9. Practice and Reinforcement

This component is optional, depending on time and students' needs. Play games with students to practice any new learnings from your lesson—vocabulary words, word identification, comprehension skill or strategy, or thinking strategy.

10. Review

Recap major goals for your lesson, and highlight progress made with each student.

11. Evaluation and Reflection

After each reading period, evaluate and reflect on your lesson to see if you achieved your prestaed goals. Monitoring and evaluating both your effectiveness and your students' progress should be included in each part of your lesson. If students perform well, you can feel reasonably sure that your teaching was appropriate and that your students are ready for the next step. If students do not achieve the objectives of the lesson, you need to re-examine your teaching procedures and decide how to reteach the original learning objectives. This final reading session appraisal is the best feedback for both you and students because it lets you know how to teach tomorrow's lesson.

Teacher Behaviors in Effective Reading Programs in Diverse Communities

What considerations should guide your teaching in the classroom? How can you teach your lesson efficiently and effectively? The following teacher behaviors are specific courses of action to be implemented into your teaching lessons. These behaviors answer the question, “How do I focus my time and effort in teaching my lessons so as to enhance the quality of life and academic achievement of my students?”

Effective teachers:

- Relate the culture, family, lives, and interests of students to the instructional goals; that is, use what students already know to teach them new skills, strategies, and content.***

Examples:

1. In a third-grade classroom, the teacher and students are reading a story about a character who lives in a predominately Spanish neighborhood. The character is bilingual and is constantly being asked to translate for her neighbors. The teacher can use this story to discuss what it feels like to be bilingual. She can ask students in class who are bilingual to share their experiences.
 2. Through parent conferences, invite parents to come into the classroom and share experiences from their background and culture. A parent who is originally from Greece, for example, could share information about Greek culture by bringing in traditional Greek food for students to sample, photos, or a picture book about Greece.
- Use reading materials that relate to the cultural backgrounds of their students.***

Examples:

1. Use multicultural books for both instruction and for fostering independent reading habits.

2. Create language experience stories, and use the words in the story to develop vocabulary and comprehension.
- ***Capitalize on students' comprehension abilities and background experiences.***

Examples:

1. Based on your interviews with your students, select multiethnic books to match your students' interests.
 2. Ask your students to write an individual story describing their favorite holiday and how it is celebrated with their family.
- ***Use cooperative learning activities to foster academic achievement.***

Examples:

1. Pair students together to complete a crossword puzzle that highlights new words in a story.
 2. Pair students together to buddy-read. Each student takes turns reading a page in the story, and students use strategies to help each other decode words.
 3. Have students work together in groups or as partners to do a science experiment. Each person in the group has a responsibility, and group members work together to explain their thinking.
- ***Promote intensive oral language development.***

Examples:

1. Use an abundance of group discussion for each lesson. Encourage students to explain their feelings and thinking.
 2. Provide meaningful, interactive, vocabulary word lessons. Encourage students to use vocabulary words in their discussions, and reward them when they are "caught" using a vocabulary word.
 3. Provide opportunities for students to act out stories, poems, and plays. Give students opportunities to plan, write, and perform orally in front of the class.
- ***Make an extra effort to use students' existing knowledge and to build prior knowledge and background in getting students ready to read.***

Examples:

1. Use graphic organizers to review and build prior knowledge. One example is a K-W-L chart. Before starting a new unit, the teacher and students make a list of all of the things they know about the subject. This is the K column. They also start another column for what they want to learn. This is the W column. They can add to this as they move through the unit and more questions arise. Throughout the unit, the class also adds to an L column. This is the column where they write what they've learned. Several modifications can be made to this organizer. For example, an H column can be added for how students learned the information. The W column can be changed to N, for what do students need to learn.
2. Use vocabulary words from the unit to introduce the new topic. Teach the vocabulary in a meaningful way, giving many examples and relating the words to students' lives.

3. Before starting a new unit, show students how to preview a chapter or book. Teach them how to read headings and subheadings, look for vocabulary words, read captions under the photos, and interpret graphs or diagrams. This will give students prior knowledge with the chapter or book and with the information.
- ***Get students working on-task quickly at the beginning of the lesson.***

Examples:

1. Teach signals at the beginning of the year to indicate transition time. For example, at the beginning or at the end of each lesson, put up a signal that means “freeze.” Every student then freezes for directions. The “give-me-five” signal also works. Hold up one hand and say, “Give me five.” This is the signal for students to stop what they are doing and listen for instructions.
2. Sing songs to gain students’ attention. Both older and younger students enjoy this. For example, you might sing the following to the tune of Frère Jacques:

*Are you talking? Are you talking?
I hear you. I hear you.
Show me how you’re quiet.
Show me how you’re quiet.
Right, right, now.
Right, right, now.*

- ***Begin each separate lesson with a review of previous material, introduce and motivate each lesson to students, and specify the objectives of the lesson when appropriate.***

Examples:

1. State the objective and rationale for the lesson. Pose a question to students, asking them why they think this skill may be important.
 2. Give students clear directions and expectations before each lesson.
 3. Provide motivational incentives for students who are working on-task. These can be given individually or in groups. Students can work to earn extra privileges, such as lunch with you or extra free time.
- ***Teach new skills and strategies by providing examples, modeling, and demonstrations followed by sufficient independent practice.***

Examples:

1. Display examples of the skill to be taught—for example, posters with the skill displayed or graphic organizers mapping the skill.
 2. Use instructional music to help review and practice skills—for example, the ABC song set to music, or multiplication facts in the form of a rap song. Children respond well to music, and this is a fun way to practice skills.
- ***Carry out each part of the lesson at a brisk pace, slowing only to improve or clarify student comprehension.***

Examples:

1. Use transition words, such as first we are going to do this, then we will do this, after that we will do this, and finally, to set the pace of the lesson.

2. Pause during the lesson to ask questions about the topic at hand. “Reporter questions,” such as who, what, where, when, and why, work well for this purpose.

- ***Summarize the main points of each lesson.***

Examples:

1. Work with students to complete graphic organizers to review material learned.
 2. Ask students in groups to write a summary, draw an illustration, or answer comprehension questions that pertain to the lesson.
- ***Provide constructive feedback regarding the correctness or incorrectness of student work/responses.***

Examples:

1. Review students’ work. Use examples of correct work to set a standard and as an example of what work should look like.
 2. Praise students in specific ways, giving students detailed examples of what they did correctly and how they could improve their work.
- ***Design activities for students to share and use their bilingual abilities and knowledge.***

Examples:

1. Each week, ask a different student to bring in a poster board displaying items about the student and his or her family. The student presents the poster board and answers other students’ questions about it. You might also ask the other students in the class to write the student presenter a letter, telling the student what they liked learning from the presentation.
 2. When relevant to the lesson, ask students to translate whatever word or topic they are learning for the class. This should be done as an example for the class. This will also help relate the word or topic to other limited English-speaking students.
- ***Expect students to achieve, and encourage and reward student effort in each activity.***

Examples:

1. Students of all ages enjoy personal attention and encouragement to achieve from the teacher. Provide motivational rewards for students who meet expectations. Additional rewards can be provided for students who exceed expectations. These rewards can be tangible, or they can be in the form of verbal praise. Some examples include positive notes to students and to parents, words of encouragement, a pat on the back, and a smile.
2. Incentive programs can make learning fun and are also a visual way for the student and the teacher to measure progress. Some examples include posters or charts highlighting progress and/or where students earn stickers for meeting goals.

The Necessity of Practice

The best readers are fluent and automatic; they read quickly, purposefully, and strategically to fulfill their goals without stopping to figure out how to pronounce words or to determine the significant details or main ideas. Such behaviors are not innate traits. This ability to read quickly, purposefully, and strategically without effort is the result of receiving much explicit/direct instruction from teachers and much varied, interesting, and meaningful practice on important reading skills and strategies from teachers. The same can be said for the star quarterback on the football team or the scratch, top-notch golfer. Each is able to perform his or her sport at a high level due to excellent instruction and practice.

The focus here is on practice. Many times, teachers shortchange this crucial step in the teaching-learning process. In life, as in learning to be an effective reader, there's no substitute for interesting and meaningful practice. Ben Hogan, the famous golfer, once said, "Every day you miss playing or practicing is one day longer it takes to be good." The same can be said regarding becoming a strategic reader. Without an abundance of practice, the best explicit/direct instruction is rendered useless. This practice must be done on a daily basis.

One possible explanation for students struggling in reading is that their skills and strategies were only "half-learned," and automaticity or complete transfer was not made. As a result of accumulating "half-learnings" throughout the grades, there are gaps that interfere with reading comprehension. Learning anything, and especially how to read, would be so easy if one only had to be shown how to perform a particular skill or strategy just once. For students to become fluent in their decoding abilities and master their comprehension skills and strategies, however, they not only need to be shown the "how-to's" but also need to practice and practice. There is no shortcut. Reading skills and strategies must be practiced in varied reading situations to achieve fluency and mastery. This fluency and mastery implies transfer; that is, students can now use their abilities in reading in new and different situations.

Practice must be:

- related specifically to what students need,
- on an appropriate reading level,
- abundant,
- interesting,
- monitored by the teacher by circling around the room and checking out how students are arriving at answers, and
- evaluated to determine the depth of students' understanding of the task.

If these conditions are met, students will become fluent and automatic readers. Without an abundance of meaningful practice, students will most likely fail and have lowered self-esteem. Many commercial and informal materials are available for practice. The crucial point is to use them effectively with your students.

Personal Observations: Students

What do you like about your teacher in school?

“She is very nice and does not scold me. She is respectful and fun.”

“She is nice and lets us help people. She sings songs with us and lets us go to different centers.”

“She teaches a lot to us, and she’s fun and friendly. She does different activities and teaches us how to read a book.”

“My teacher spends a lot of time helping me through stuff I don’t understand.”

“My teacher is nice to me and everyone else in my class.”

“She is nice and laughs a lot. She gives us things that we can’t do but then helps us do them. She helps us write because we don’t know how.”

“We have lots of fun everyday.”

“She has long hair and beautiful eyes. She is great at reading and makes me laugh.”

“I like my teacher because he gives us many chances to do things and he understands us. Most of all, he knows how it feels to have a bad day.”

“He makes reading interesting and fun to be in class.”

“She never picks favorites. She is a good explainer. She is also nice and loves to compliment us on our singing.”

“She lets us read and is interested in the book I am reading.”

