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THE USE OF LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES IN TEACHING READING TO STUDENTS WITH SEVERE LEARNING DISABILITIES

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Abstract

This article presents a reading intervention for students with severe learning disabilities based on the use of their language experiences. Learning to read for students with severe learning disabilities can be extremely challenging and often discouraging. However, by capitalizing their interests and experiences, a practitioner can systematically guide these students in building their literacy foundation and confidence as a reader. This intervention method incorporates essential components in literacy instruction and emphasizes the construction of students' successful experiences as a reader through steps that ensure student success.

Introduction

Even in a school such as ours, where literacy development is highly emphasized, the low performing, struggling readers, including those with severe learning disabilities, linger behind. In our first grade classrooms, it is not unusual for 6 pupils in an average class of 21 to be considered "struggling readers." Of the six, typically 5 would eventually be identified as having severe learning disabilities and requiring resource specialists' intervention. I am writing this article as a former resource specialist who provided students with severe learning disabilities and mental retardation interventions both academically and in functional life skills. The following paper describes the use of language experience based intervention with five students with severe learning disabilities and one with severe autism.

It may seem to teachers that the struggling students choose not to sound out words, or pay attention to and track words they read. However, the lack of success in reading may due to factors beyond the control of these students. After hearing about and observing my students' reading difficulties in the school based reading program, I selected a language experience approach to facilitate my students' learning to read. Because, in my early teaching career as a regular educator, I successfully used the approach in my intervention with a 5th grade bilingual student with severe learning disabilities, I was confident that the approach would hold promise for my students.

The Language Experience Approach (LEA), developed by Russel Stauffer (1981), is a method that focuses on meaning construction in reading (Holdaway, 1979). Even though the prior knowledge of these students tended to be limited, it was acquired through their experiences and represented what mattered to them, relative to the reading curriculum (Cooper, 1993; Hall, 1981; Nelson & Linek, 1999 ; Stauffer, 1981). It emphasizes literacy development through

building language experiences. It centers on the development and utilization of a child's own language and experiences for his/her acquisition of reading abilities. The text used for reading is constructed in meaningful, uncontrolled vocabulary and texts that are of topics of students' interest, direct experiences, and needs for communication. Because it is grounded in students' experiences, it naturally provides scaffolds for students' learning to read. In other words, the reading texts, drawn from the students' own words, are comprehensible to the students and helps them see the relevance of written language (Nelson & Linek, 1999 ; Stauffer, 1981). The reading vocabulary, derived from the child's speaking vocabulary, allows a rapid acquisition of sight words and natural semantic and grammatical structures. This approach is typically used in a group setting and has consistently been found useful in early literacy development and is often a part of a reading program, e.g., guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Fountas & Pinnell, 1999; Gambrell, Morrow, Neuman & Pressley, 1999).

I used this approach over two years. In the first year, of the three students with severe learning disabilities, two learned to read text at first grade level with little support and write 3 to 4 sentences with minor support. Even though the prior knowledge of these students tended to be limited, it was acquired through their experiences and represented what mattered to them, relative to the reading curriculum (Cooper, 1993; Hall, 1981; Nelson & Linek, 1999 ; Stauffer, 1981). As the result of my intervention, they could, upon request, read and write about 60 words independently, including 50 of that were considered high frequency words. In the second year, I used the approach with one student with severe autism and one with learning disabilities who also had autistic tendencies. Neither had print awareness when I first worked with them, yet learned to read at the end of the school year. The child with severe autism was reading at grade level, the one with learning disabilities progressed to recognizing about 60 words and writing 3 to 5 sentences.

Student Characteristics as Readers

My students all were served by our speech therapist in addition coming to the resource room for reading, writing, and math intervention. Typical reading problems these students had ranged from not being able to discriminate letters or produce letter sounds to having moderate to severe reversal problems in writing letters and numbers beyond the school norm. Some had difficulties in blending letter sounds, while others could identify letters but had no concept of words. As a result of their extreme difficulty in understanding print, they had no interest in literacy activities.

Using Language Experiences in Literacy Development

Using the language experience approach with students with severe disabilities followed the same general steps of the approach with modification to meet severe needs.

Gather information about the prior experiences. In my facilitation of students in learning to read, I typically capitalized upon their language experiences. For them, these experiences are limited to daily living and interactions with family members. These experiences can be chaotic, vague and confusing. They are, nevertheless, these students' own experiences.

I began my interventions by visiting with each of the students, their parents or other significant adults so that as I interacted with the students, I was able to help them make

connections. Two students, who were drawn to cartoons, were motivated to tell and write about these subjects. One had nursery rhymes said to him, which I found useful for introducing rhyming.

As I gathered information on students' prior experiences, I also assessed my students based on literacy benchmarks. This allowed a clear understanding of what they knew before intervention.

Analyze students' learning needs. My students all were found to have speech and language disabilities with learning disability being the primary disability. They began receiving the resource support after six months or more in the regular classroom and could not benefit from the regular reading instruction. "Lazy, disruptive, unmotivated" were the common descriptors of these students from their frustrated homeroom teachers. One was thought as "sweet and tries hard" but made no progress.

Begin intervention. My purpose at the beginning of the intervention was to help my students:

- Learn letter-sound association,
- Recognize letters,
- Make words with letters,
- Establish a command of basic vocabulary and
- Develop their oral /written language.

I utilized the students' prior language experiences and provided opportunities for acquiring experiences. A position I took in this approach was one of a facilitator. Since I participated in the writing process, I also took turns with the students in writing down my ideas. The following was what I did routinely.

Selecting and discussing themes for learning. Different themes were chosen based on my understanding of students' interests and experiences. For example, trains fascinated two boys. We found "train" books and looked through the pictures of different types of trains. Parents helped out by letting these children observe the freight train that came through town and identified cars of these trains.

- Writing on chart tablet. Students first drew on the chart tablet a picture of what they wanted to say. Then, I wrote what they said, even if the language production did not agree with writing conventions or language structure. Some examples are: "He my friend" "A Pokemon is name Pichachu." During this stage, I also used different motivating objects and materials to help students develop their language. For instance, when the weather was cold, I brought in a musk ox fur for students to feel, touch and talk about. Words such as "thick, long hair animal" were learned quickly. Our Friday fun activities, such as blowing bubbles, playing soccer, flying kite, and playing with play dough became themes that were talked about and written about. Eventually, whatever vocabulary used became the students' reading vocabulary.
- Reading what had been written. Routinely, my students and I read our reading journal and identified words they could recognize. During this language experience, students tended to perform well. Positive reinforcements were used to celebrate their success in reading.
- Storing recognized words in word bank. Once a word was recognized successfully over a week, I copied the word on an index card and had the students store the card in their word bank. Putting the cards on a ring was also a good way to store and review students' vocabulary.

- Displaying recognized words on a Word Wall (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). The known words were also displayed on our Word Wall for use in developing students' letter-sound association and word use.
- Constructing and playing games using the known words. This was essential in that my students tend to require a good number of repetitions in order to retain any written symbols. Different game activities allowed for the repetition of learning without boredom.
- Selecting sentences that were correctly said and written as content for games for practicing word order, cloze procedure, and spelling.
- Reconstructing sentences and increasing students' vocabulary. Perhaps this is an area in which I differed my intervention from the typical LEA. To ensure readability of the text, when I took my turn to write, I created a writing product that used 93% and above of what the students knew and 7% or less of new ideas and new words. I also reconstructed my students' sentences into part of my writing. Since I created my writing from their writing, they were able to make connections to my writing; hence, my writing was readable to them. This is where I took my students away from their original oral language mode of reading and onto learning to "learn to read".
- Teaching word solving using words unfamiliar to the students (Pinnell & Fountas, 1999). Students developed strategies in encoding and chunking of words. For example, the word "and" was taught with hand, land, sand, and band.
- Modeling writing. I used webbing, listing, graphing and charting to help students understand the communicative purpose and forms of written language.
- Structuring journal writing into daily routine. After a period of writing with my help, students tended to begin writing on their own. Invented spelling is typical. As the students attempt to sound out unfamiliar words, I often used the opportunities to teach word structure. Later, students were reminded of the word structure when they experienced difficulties in recalling the words.
- Including spelling. To increase students' word power, spelling bee and hangman games were included weekly.
- Intensifying literacy activities. As the students began the actual writing in their journal, I intensified literacy activities and increased their opportunities to retell stories. By this time, students were able to narrate a story and their oral language production again was incorporated into the learning of reading and writing (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999).

Reflections

In my work as a resource specialist, I found that language experiences help students develop the understanding of reading and writing and should be a bigger part of early literacy development programs. This approach helps students develop confidence in their connection to print and motivates them to take up the challenges of reading texts later. While reading and writing require competencies, e.g. phonemic awareness, beyond language experiences, these competencies can be developed through the use of students' language experiences. Thus, language experiences, constructed by teachers intentionally or acquired through daily living, should serve as a bridge to the literacy acquisition of students with severe learning disabilities.

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