

Title: “An Instructional Study: Improving the Inferential Comprehension of Good and Poor Fourth-Grade Readers”

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Subject(s): Comprehension

Grade Level: 3–6

Synopsis: (Abstract) Four classroom teachers provided instruction to improve the inferential comprehension of good and poor fourth-grade readers. The experimental treatment consisted of three parts: (a) making students aware of the importance of drawing inferences between new information and existing knowledge structures; (b) getting students to discuss, prior to reading, something they had done that was similar to the events in the text and to hypothesize what would happen in the text; and (c) providing students with many inferential questions to discuss after reading the selection. The results showed that poor readers benefited significantly from the instruction, but good readers did not. This differential effect was attributed to the dissimilar aptitudes of good and poor readers and the dissimilar instructional methods that are used with good and poor readers in our schools. Conclusions focus on the positive prospect of modeling successful instructional procedures on theoretical, basic research.

(Further Detail) The discussion questions for the control groups were both literal and inferential in the ratio of four literal to each inferential question, reflecting the questioning pattern found in reading discussions. One reason poor readers may have benefited more than good readers from the instruction is that, as research has shown, poor readers often are not asked to make inferences in the classroom and “receive even less instruction in inferential thinking than good readers.” (p. 821) They responded well to the increase in instruction in inferential thinking. Another reason for the difference may be that the good readers were, on average, reading at a sixth-grade level, but the materials used for all the students was fourth-grade text. The good readers might have benefited from the instruction if they could have applied it to more challenging material.

Quote(s): “It is more difficult for children to answer inferential than literal comprehension questions. This assertion has been validated in a wide range of studies and reports using a variety of measures.” (p. 821)

“Evidence indicates that inference is not an inherently difficult task. . . . Children infer regularly during their non-school lives. . . . However, other evidence indicates that classroom instruction frequently does not provide for the use of inference skills. . . . Students are not asked to infer regularly during their in-school lives.” (p. 821)

“This instruction in inferential comprehension is well suited to poor intermediate-grade readers.” (p. 828)