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Enhancing Summarization Skills Using Twin Texts: Instruction in Narrative and Expository Text Structures

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ABSTRACT

This action-research case study endeavors to enhance the summarization skills of first grade students who are reading at or above the third grade level during the first trimester of the academic school year. Students read “twin text” sources, meaning, fiction and nonfiction literary selections focusing on a common theme to help identify and understand narrative and expository text structures. Four first grade students reading at or above the third grade level were exposed to the six comprehension strategies outlined by Barton and Sawyer (2003). Students used distinctly separate graphic organizers to record information and subsequently organize and structure their paragraph summaries within each genre. One common grading rubric measured ideas, word choice, smooth sentences and current copy. After a three-week intervention with three sets of twin texts, the average retention scores reached 94.2% and 96.2% of total points for narrative and expository texts, respectively. Based on selected student improvement, the teacher expects to apply the instruction of summarization skills in both genres to the remaining students in the first grade classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Many students enter first grade with alphabetic knowledge and limited ability to blend short consonant-vowel-consonant alphabets to form words. The year-end expectations require students to become independent readers, write a short narrative (descriptive) paragraph, and identify narrative story elements such as plot, setting, and character. This study focused on teacher-directed explicit instruction in fiction and non-fictional text structure, and the teaching of summarization skills through graphic organizers, questioning strategies, and teacher modeling via the examination of twin-text sources. It is expected to result in the improvement of student summarization skills in both genres.

Children's Sensitivity to Primary Writing Structure

Based on the belief that students' writing must develop from an internal perspective and prior knowledge and then expand outward to a conceptual/objective perspective, it has often been thought that children produce "I" writing prior to expository writing (Stotsky, 1995). Researchers like Avery (1993), Calkins (1986), and Graves (1983) propound the 'process approach' that emphasizes expressive writing, particularly personal narrative writing more than expository or informational writing. Thus, narrative writing has traditionally been the focus of early primary writing instruction for children (Read, 2005). In fact, a large majority of primary students are essentially taught the elements of expressive story writing only, yet they are expected to know expository writing structure by third grade. This emphasis underestimates the ability of primary grade students to comprehend and produce informational texts (Read, 2005).

However, research has found children to be sensitive to text structure as early as second grade, and new evidence shows first and second graders can produce lists, labels, and attribute sketches (expository structures) even prior to narrative structures (Dymock, 2005; Williams, Hall, & Lauer, 2004). Several other scholars document how children become familiar with, and have fluency in many, genres of reading and writing from an earlier age than previously believed (Moss, 1997; Pappas, 1991); and that "interacting with non-narrative texts may be the best path to overall literacy, particularly for boys and struggling readers and writers" (Read, 2005, p. 36).

Teaching Twin-Text Structures to Young Readers

Teaching units of study that contain fictional and information books on the same topic can "build knowledge, develop text-related vocabulary, and increase motivation to explore the topic under discussion" (Soalt, 2005, p. 680). This use of both fiction and non-fiction sources to explore a theme is commonly called *twin-text* teaching. Focusing on a common theme helps students identify and understand the text structures of both fiction and expository text. Twin-text teaching assures teachers to motivate students on the joys of reading while expanding on the students' interests on facts. Camp (2000) argues that "[w]hile the non-fiction book answers questions in a more straightforward manner, the story structure of a fiction book may be less difficult for children to comprehend" (p. 400). Both scholars, Camp (2000) and Soalt (2005) equally affirm a heightened interest and increased attention among students when informational texts are read with comparable fictional texts. More precisely, Soalt (2005) states that "[t]his disjunction between informational and fictional texts on the same topic and the gaps between truth and artifice....provide rich ground for developing students' higher order comprehension abilities" (p. 682).

There are various comprehension techniques that can be employed in teaching text structures to young readers. Barton and Sawyer (2003) outline six comprehension strategies that are more successful for young students and include (1) repeated exposure to different kinds of writing; (2) reader-text connections; (3) focused student responses; (4) direct instruction in using comprehension strategies; (5) visual structures to support comprehension; and (6) awareness of the comprehension process. Consequently, teachers can integrate science, social studies, language arts, and other content areas by using children's literature as a springboard to help students develop reference skills, ask questions, and present summaries.

THE STUDY

Through action-research and a reflective inquiry process, the teacher focused on the improvement of students' summarization skills. A three-week adaptive instruction was conducted to fulfill the requirements of classroom action-research.

Students

The four students selected for this action-research case study were capable of writing a five-sentence summary paragraph during the first trimester of first grade. They were all male, six-years old, and currently read at or above the third grade reading level in a Southern California public school in America. Their writing ability varied from two students who could write a seven-sentence paragraph with topic and concluding sentences and relatively few errors in conventions and spelling, to one student who struggled with letter formation, printing on line, spelling, and grammar, but who provided insight, descriptive detail and deep comprehension of text. All students spoke English as their primary language and no other students in the class were reading and writing at a level to support paragraph summarization writing at the first trimester of classes.

Comprehension Strategies

The research reported here used Barton and Sawyer's (2003, pp. 335-338) six comprehension strategies (see Table 1) to direct the explicit teacher guided instructional activities. Repeated exposure to different text structures was achieved by using three sets of twin texts. The selected six texts complied with school district standards and the most commonly used reading material for grade-one readers. Working with four advanced readers allowed for focused student response and direct instruction of material and style. Visual structures included the creation and use of two distinctly different organizers (different items and a different scoring structure) covering the story elements for narrative text and descriptive detail instruction for expository text.

Awareness of the comprehension process included a common summary rubric. The district-mandated first-grade writing rubric has six measures (see Table 2). The teacher dropped personal voice and order, and chose the remaining four measures of ideas, word choice, smooth sentences, and correct copy. The teacher knew that all four students knew order and eliminated personal voice to focus on enhancing the summarization skills. Two teams of two students each were used to encourage group work to solidify the awareness and use of both comprehension strategies.

Prior Knowledge (First Week of Study)

To assess students' prior knowledge with text structures, the teacher first initiated a reading session and tested their summarization skills. Students read the narrative text *Froggie Plays Soccer* by Jonathan London, and a Nature's Children-Scholastic expository text on frogs. They completed a book report form for their narrative summary and a book report outline for their expository text. Both form and outline were familiar to the students from prior class assignments, and they were completed with minimal intervention from the teacher. The students then read each of their reports aloud to their peers and were asked to comment about each other's papers.

Table 1. The Instructional Activities Developed within Barton and Sawyer's (2003) Six Comprehension Strategies

1. Repeated Exposure to Different Kinds of Writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Three sets of fiction and non-fiction books were read over three weeks. ▪ New and different organizer rubrics helped differentiate the texts.
2. Reader-Text Connections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All six texts are standard material for grade-one readers.
3. Focused Student Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Four advanced readers with writing summary skills were selected. ▪ Four students worked in teams of two and helped each other.
4. Direct Instruction in Using Comprehension Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The second week intervention taught students twin text. ▪ Three tests after each week helped students acquire and retain new comprehension skills related to narrative and expository texts.
5. Visual Structures to Support Comprehension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Two distinctly different organizer rubrics were introduced. ▪ The narrative organizer had eight items and a score of 10 points. ▪ The expository organizer had six items and a score of 6 points.
6. Awareness of the Comprehension Process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Test scores made students aware they would be graded on both their organizers and their summaries. ▪ The summary rubric concentrated on four areas: ideas, word choice, smooth sentences, and correct copy. ▪ Teamwork in discussing the texts helped students see new and different perspectives of the texts.

Table 2. District-Mandated First-Grade Writing Rubric

Ideas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The writing has a main topic or idea. ▪ The writing makes sense.
Order
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The writing has a beginning, a middle section, and an end.
Personal Voice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The writing shows the writer's interest in the topic. ▪ The writing is fun to share aloud.
Word Choice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The writing uses words correctly. ▪ The words go with the illustration (if there is one).
Smooth Sentences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The writing uses sentences. ▪ The sentences are easy to read.
Correct Copy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The sentences begin with capital letters and end with punctuation. ▪ Simple words are spelled correctly.

Organizer and Summary Rubrics (Second Week of Study)

Narrative Text Structure

1. The teacher first presented a new graphic organizer that had eight items: title, author, setting, characters, problem, important events, outcome and theme/message (see Table 3). All, except the characters and important events (two points each) are worth one point each to be added to a score of 10 total points.

Table 3. Narrative Organizer Rubric

Name	Points Possible	Points Earned
Title	1	
Author	1	
Setting	1	
Characters (2)	2	
Problem	1	
Important Events (2)	2	
Outcome	1	
Theme / Message	1	
Total Points	10	

2. Next, using the ‘think-aloud’ strategy, the teacher introduced the topic mice and asked some predictive questions about the narrative text, *Frederick*, by Leo Lionni.

3. Highlighted vocabulary from the text was written on the blackboard, and with the help of a *four-square activity*¹ the students and teachers collaboratively defined the words. As the students read, the teacher stopped at critical points to focus on these particular vocabulary words.

4. The students then used the information in the organizer to work in pairs and write their narrative paragraph summaries. They read their summaries aloud and made comments on what they liked best in each other’s writing.

Expository Text Structure

1. A different graphic organizer for the expository rubric was introduced containing six items (one topic and five separate, supporting detail lines), each item worth one point and totaling six points (see Table 4). The purpose of this rubric is to help students differentiate between narrative and expository text structures. Here, supporting detail from non-fiction texts differ from the eight components used for narrative texts (see Table 2).

Table 4. Expository Organizer Rubric

Name	Points Possible	Points Earned
Topic	1	
Supporting Detail 1	1	
Supporting Detail 2	1	
Supporting Detail 3	1	
Supporting Detail 4	1	
Supporting Detail 5	1	
Total Points	6	

2. The expository twin text, a Nature's Children-Scholastic text on mice was introduced with a K-W-L² chart written on the board.

3. Again, a four-square activity helped clarify certain vocabulary words, and questioning, predicting and modeling strategies were used to guide students in their approach to the text.

4. The students then read the text, and observed the teacher fill in the organizer.

5. After learning how to use an expository organizer, students recorded the information onto their forms. The four students worked in pairs to use the organizer to help them complete expository summary paragraphs. Finally, they read and commented upon the summaries produced.

Retention and Recall (Third Week of Study)

The final phase of this project was introduced with the teacher reading the text along with the students, but they worked individually to complete both the organizer and the summary. The students looked through the text for unknown vocabulary with limited teacher assistance. The four square approach was used to clarify vocabulary, ask questions, make predictions and then write a K-W-L chart on the board prior to reading the expository selection. The twin-text sources used were *Stellaluna*, by Janell Cannon, and Nature's Children-Scholastic text on bats. The students completed their summaries independently and then read aloud and commented on their finished work.

Measurement Rubrics to Score Student Summaries

A common rubric measured four of the six district-mandated rubrics (Table 5). Five points each were provided for ideas, word choice, smooth sentences, and for correct copy. Each of these four is described in Table 2. For example, ideas must reflect that (a) the writing has a main topic or idea, (b) the writing makes sense, (c) the writing uses words correctly, and (d) the words go with the illustration (if there is one).

Table 5. Narrative/Expository Summary Rubric

Name	Points Possible	Points Earned
Ideas	5	
Word Choice	5	
Smooth Sentences	5	
Correct Copy	5	
Total Points	20	

Data Collection and Scoring Results

Data was collected over a three-week period, and the group met four days a week for twenty minutes during rotation reading time. The students summarized one twin-text set per week, averaging two sessions for each text. The teacher recorded questions and observations of student attitudes, motivation, interests, strengths, and difficulties. Results cover the changes in student scores from prior knowledge to intervention and from intervention to retention.

Prior knowledge scores are from the tests taken in week one using twin texts, but before introducing the new organizer and summary rubrics. Intervention scores are from the tests taken

at the end of week two and after one week's teaching of the twin-text system under the new rubrics. Retention and recall scores are from the tests given a week later at the end of week three.

Analysis of Individual Student Summarization Scores

Narrative Texts

The prior knowledge score average of 17.75 points is 59.2% of the total possible 30 points (10 for Organizer and 20 for Summary). Following the twin-text intervention in week two with the new metrics, the average score reached 24.50 or 81.7% of the total possible points. Teaching this new approach allowed students to reach a further 22.5% of the total possible points. The percent change in average scores is a 38% increase. The average score for retention in week three increased to 28.25 or 94.2% of the total possible points, thereby showing clear progression in meeting the teacher's goals from the narrative text perspective (Table 6).

Table 6. Narrative Test Results

Student	Prior Knowledge Score	Intervention Score	Retention Score
Student 1	18	26	29
Student 2	24	27	30
Student 3	18	25	26
Student 4	11	20	28
Average scores	17.75	24.50	28.25
Average as % of total	59.2%	81.7%	94.2%

Expository Texts

The prior knowledge average score for students with little exposure to this text form is 19.25, which is 74.0% of the total 26 points (6 for Organizer, and 20 for Summary). Following the twin-text intervention in week two with the new metrics, the average score increases to 23.75 points or 91.3% of the total possible points. This is a 23.4% increase in performance and is lower than the narrative increase of 38% because of a higher prior knowledge average score. Finally, the retention average score in week three reaches 25 points or 96.2% of the total possible points (Table 7). Here too progress is made in meeting the teacher's goals from the expository text perspective. This high scoring could have several reasons, including the above-average reading abilities of the four students. But the results expand on what many scholars like Moss (1997), Pappas (1999), and Read (2005) have been propounding: Expository texts are as readable as narrative texts, and students can benefit from twin-text reading from grade one.

Table 7. Expository Test Results

Student	Prior Knowledge Score	Intervention Score	Retention Score
Student 1	21	25	26
Student 2	23	25	26
Student 3	17	22	26
Student 4	16	23	22
Average scores	19.25	23.75	25
Average as % of total	74.0%	91.3%	96.2%

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The narrative summarization skills average for the group increased by 59.2% and the expository summarization skills average for the group rose by 29.9%. All four students stated they preferred the expository text selections. Many times students were unable to clearly state the theme or message on the narrative graphic organizers but developed the ideas more clearly through the writing process in their written summaries. The process became more automatic as student questions regarding directions decreased over the three weeks. Word choice, smooth sentence, and correct copy categories improved as students became more confident about the content required in the written summarization format. While not specifically analyzed, the length of students' summarizations consistently increased throughout the study. Student writing included more than the required number of descriptive details and increased paragraph length.

While this research only had a sample of four students, the variation in scoring implies independent observations that neither clustered nor biased toward the mean. The results show that each student progresses independently of the other. Second, the percentage score changes are different between the narrative and expository structures for each student. Finally, the retention scores solidify the learning experience for these four students.

Teacher's Observations and Reflections

This section presents teacher reflections recorded during the action research project. Recording and reflecting on student behavior can guide the teacher to document feelings and attitudes. This helps the teacher focus on *why* change is being undertaken. Four themes highlight these reflections and they are:

1. Students' curiosity is peaked with this "special project."
2. Students enlighten the teacher with their viewpoint.
3. Teacher views students in a new perspective and understands student feelings.
4. Teacher gains confidence in the results, and desires to expand this "new" teaching approach. (Student names are pseudonyms).

1. Students' curiosity is peaked with this "special project."

The students asked to see the narrative and expository texts together. Alan initiated a discussion about how they might be similar and different: "I think people think bats are mean but they're really not." When I asked if they thought that Stellaluna was going to be bad (trying to redirect their attention to the fact that we would be looking at a narrative text first), they said no. Bill said you could tell by her name that she was a girl, and if girls were going to be mean in a story, then they would have a name like "Cruella DeVille" so you would know.

An unplanned but important final activity in this process is to have students analyze why the author chose a particular animal to tell a narrative story. When I asked them why they thought the Frederick story used a mouse, Alan, said, "It is because everyone thinks mice are very busy, but they can be busy doing different things. *It is for these moments that I teach.*"

2. *Students enlighten the teacher with their viewpoint.*

I found it very interesting that the students were more confident in telling me what the author meant than what they have learned (i.e., the author's voice was stronger than their own). To this end, I encouraged each student to give an example of this theme from their own lives. They seemed to relate to Stellanuna's feelings of "difference," and volunteered ways that they would help out a friend in a similar situation. Overall, I felt that their oral and written comprehension had greatly improved.

3. *Teacher views students in a new perspective and understands student feelings.*

I was astounded by how much they had actually improved. I graded each paper and made observations on the rubric. Remembering how anxious Jim was during the final phase (which is evident in the scribbling and multiple writing of the word *mice* on his graphic organizer), and then comparing the written results of his summary to his efforts was tremendously encouraging. While still jumbled and full of printing irregularities, his comprehension of text, inclusion of details, and voluntary insight and connections with the material was completely unexpected.

4. *Teacher gains confidence in the results and desires to expand this "new" teaching approach.*

Making connections between text genres and helping students in their analyses appears to be effective. It also helps students make the appropriate inferences about what the author's purpose might have been in the story as a whole. When asked, "What do you think the author was trying to say?", they all had ready responses to this prompt. For example, the author used a bat to tell a story because bats are misunderstood just like Stellanuna—a *most wonderful analogy to my ears*. Even more importantly, such insightful responses have encouraged me to extend this project to other students in the classroom. I plan to introduce this unit to my two middle groups as they are reading at approximately the same level. The indisputable evidence is that expository text is not difficult for students at this age to master. In fact, these students (all boys) exhibited greater enthusiasm for the expository selections.

CONCLUSION

Twin-text teaching was used as an action-research project by the teacher with four accelerated readers. A new organizer rubric and expository texts were introduced to these four students. After a three-week intervention, students were found to achieve high and relatively similar, average scores for summarizing narrative and expository texts. Implementing twin-text reading for the entire classroom that has a wide variation of readers with different reading and comprehension skills is the next, and possibly, more challenging assignment. Using appropriate reading levels, the teacher can read the more difficult sections of text and still have students learn how to fill out graphic organizers. As different groups are challenged to write three to four sentences, the teacher can then use different paragraph formats, and design separate rubrics to help assess their progress.

All levels of readers can engage in learning to make comparisons between the two text styles. An anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft used the technique of twin text with students

from Kindergarten to Grade 8 and noted that many textbook companies sell twin-text sets complete with instructor guides and activity books. Implementation is often a challenge for the teacher. In this study, the teacher selected the highest-reading students as no other students had the ability to write summaries. Following the intervention, however, the teacher is now motivated to include all students with different levels of measures and texts.

In closing, action-research projects can be frustrating to some teachers, but can motivate those who see successful results from implementing targeted interventions. It is hoped that more teachers in Grade 1 will be motivated to initiate such interventions and contemplate the implementation of specific instructional practices to increase the comprehension and summarization skills of their students for different achievement groups.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For a four-square activity, divide an index card into four squares, write the target word in the upper left side, write the definition in the lower left side, write a personal association in the upper right side, and draw a picture in the bottom right side (Brunn, 2002).

² K-W-L is a method of graphically organizing information based on what readers *Know* about a topic, what they *Want* to know, and what was *Learned* after reading (Camp, 2000).

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