

BASAL SIDENOTES: DO THEY EFFECT THE COMPREHENSION OF POOR READERS

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The purpose of this investigation was to evaluate the effectiveness of "sidenotes" designed to improve reading comprehension and foster self-independence among poor-ability readers. Sixty-one eighth grade students read sixteen passages under two conditions: eight passages "with sidenotes" and eight "without sidenotes". The results were analyzed using a dependent t test of significant difference. Statistical data revealed no significant effect associated with passages containing "sidenotes". Therefore, the conclusion is drawn that the use of "sidenotes" in reading basals as an independent educational vehicle for improving comprehension should be re-examined.

Basal readers have been part of our classroom reading instruction for a very long time. These basals are in most cases, the main source of reading instruction. The best known analyses of basal reading programs have been conducted by Durkin (1978-79, 1981, 1984, 1986, 1987). In her extensive research, she raised questions about the pedagogy and practice supplied by basal programs. Durkin further noted a vital limitation of basal publishers: textbooks on reading offer little guidance to the student, and teacher's manuals are often deficient in providing instructions in how to teach or improve comprehension.

Recent studies (Davey, 1988; Morrow, 1987) concluded that most content teachers are unable or do not have adequate time to use their books in an effective manner with students. Specifically, teachers feel they do not have enough time to explain or canvas each story with their students. Thus they rely on the textual instructions provided for their students. Furthermore, students are often given a preliminary directive to "look for the main idea as they read, but are not shown how to do it". As a result, students often do not make any connection between

instruction and application.

To aid students in comprehension and critical thinking, many publishers have supplied basals containing "sidenotes". One such publisher is McGraw-Hill, whose educational series (1989), uses "sidenotes". The application of "sidenotes" is placed where the use of this strategy for overall comprehension can be easily demonstrated, calling attention to critical points in reading selections. As students read, "sidenotes" direct them to apply the strategies and skills they have learned and to help them become self-monitoring readers. "Sidenotes are isolated directives located to the left/right of the main text. The premise here is that "sidenotes", in effect, enable a teacher to be with every student as he/she reads a passage.

Since previous literature tends to indicate that little comprehension instruction is found in teaching manuals, it seems logical to examine reading methodology basals to learn whether they provide significant help for teaching independent comprehension. Thus the present investigation was conducted to determine if the employment of "sidenotes" contained in a standard reading basal would improve the inferential compre-

hension of eight grade students who were designated as poor readers.

METHOD

Subjects

The sample consisted of 61 eight grade students (33 girls, 28 boys) attending a public school whose students are mainly middle to lower middle class and Caucasian. subjects were identified on the basis of stanine scores obtained on the reading subtest of the California Achievement Test (CAT), Form C (McGrawHill, 1979). Students were defined as being below average in reading achievement if their stanine score on the vocabulary and comprehension reading subtest of the CAT was 3 or below. Chronological ages ranged from 12 years, 8 months to 15 years, 1 month.

Materials

Materials consisted of sixteen narrative passages, eight presented with publisher's "sidenotes" (A) and eight presented without (B). Since all passages from the publisher's basal used in this study contained "sidenotes", eight control passages had to be modified by deleting the sidenotes from each passage. Passages were approximately 1700 to 2100 words in length. An example of a sidenote is:

"Think about what might have caused Dad to deny giving Douglas the money for the new shoes.

Notice the effect Dad's denial has."

The passages used in this investigation were selected from the standard basal reader, *Crystal Stair*, Level 8, McGraw-Hill Reading Series (Sulzby et al., 1989).

Procedure and Design

Subjects participating in this investigation were familiar with the importance and the usage of "sidenotes" as contained in their basal since they were using this type of basal prior to this study. The distribution of

passages and testing was administered as follows: Subjects were randomly placed in one of seven sub-groups (for better testing conditions) and were asked to read a single passage and answer 10 inferential questions in written discourse during one class period. Students' response to the comprehension questions were scored on the following criteria: answers included all basal information necessary for a complete written response and provided connective and casual inferences. To help establish favorable conditions during testing, subjects were told that their scores/grades would be part of their reading classes.

The students first read a passage containing "sidenotes" (level A), and at the next class period read a passage "without sidenotes" (level B). This procedure was repeated until each subject had read the sixteen required passages. For each subject, 8 passages with supportive "sidenotes" were tallied against 8 passages "without sidenotes". Students' test data was evaluated in terms of correct written response to each inferential question. Answers were judged on the basis of semantic content and no points were taken away for punctuation problems or grammatical errors.

The dependent measure of interest was the number of inference questions scored correctly. The independent variable was passage type: with supportive "sidenotes" or "without sidenotes". Answer sheets were unmarked with respect to type of treatment, and placed in folders labeled A and B. We then judged the adequacy of each set of the inferential answers in a double blind procedure. Neither of us knew the scores assigned by the other, or which condition was being graded until testing was completed. All responses were scored as either 'right' or 'wrong' because the focus was on the semantics of the inferential answers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The group means for treatment conditions reveals that reading comprehension response for passages supported by "sidenotes" $M = 51.21$ ($N = 61$, $SD = 14.97$); was better than comprehension of passages without the accompanying "sidenotes" $M = 49.82$ ($N = 61$, $SD = 15.84$). However, this difference was viewed not to be significant, $p = .07$. The results were tested for significance using a dependent measures group t test (Glass & Stanley, 1970).

Reading comprehension was better in some subjects whether passages were presented "with sidenotes" or "without sidenotes". Thus, the different themes contained in each passage did not produce significant differences in comprehension. In addition, accompanying passages with "sidenotes" or "without sidenotes" did not significantly effect reading comprehension in terms of specific themes represented by each of the sixteen passages.

The major conclusion from this study is that there is minimal difference in results obtained from text-material (passages) presented with publisher's "sidenotes". Although poor readers fared somewhat better when reading passages containing "sidenotes" than when reading parallel passages containing no "sidenotes", this difference was judged not to be educationally significant.

While evidence presented in this study does not support the effectiveness of basal "sidenotes" as a significant aid for comprehension improvement among poor-ability readers, there is some evidence to suggest that "Sidenotes" could possibly improve comprehension as previously noted.

However, if basal "sidenotes" are to be an effective tool in improving comprehension of readers, teachers must become more involved in their application. That is, "sidenotes" alone should not be relied on to improve reading comprehension; the teacher must remain the center of classroom instruction. For example, teachers should start each lesson by discussing the usage and

importance of "sidenotes" and their relationship to the lesson.

Further studies are needed to address factors not adequately addressed in this study that may affect student performance. Questions to be considered are: Will good readers' performance profile differ? Will the poor readers' performance change if given easier texts to read? Will students' performance vary according to type of text (narrative versus expository) or the type variation within each category? Will other grade levels yield a different outcome?

In summary, while there is some positive movement indicating that passages with "sidenotes" could improve the comprehension of less-able readers, the result is viewed as nonsignificant. Therefore, it seems safe to say that the usage of "sidenotes" as an independent vehicle will probably not improve the reading efficiency of poor-ability readers.

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