

Designing a Contextual Learning Plan to Improve Adolescent Literacy Skills

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to design appropriate lessons for adolescent students after the analysis of the roles of literacies in their lives in order to help their continued development as readers and writers in a broader context. The information used to design the lessons here is mainly based on the analysis of the two adolescent participants' literacy practices, which are appropriate for sixth graders to develop the reading comprehension and writing skills. The materials are deliberately selected from various sources based on the students' needs and interests such as newspapers articles, magazines, etc. to reinforce their motivation.

Keywords: adolescent literacy, instructional design, literacy skills and practices, reading and writing skills

Introduction

From the interview that I conducted to investigate the two adolescent students' literacy practices in their everyday lives, this paper is the follow-up task to make use of what I have learned from the students' interests, motivation, and their literacy practices to develop them into a curriculum. I propose and provide teaching procedures and activities, which can be used to teach adolescents in the future. According to the analysis of the two participants' literacy practices, their main interests are concerned with dancing, drama, fashions, cooking, sports, comedy, music, and general information in the internet. The important feature of the instructional plan is to engage students actively to respond to text materials and to encourage them to read and write with enjoyment. And at the same time, it will help to develop their reading comprehension and writing skills.

The Profiles of the Participants

Joe and Jane (pseudonyms), were the key informants in this study. They were 16 and 17 years old at the time of data collection. They were both from a family with a middle socio-economic status and lived in Bangkok. In selecting the informants, I considered the ones whose backgrounds, interests, and literacy practices would provide a rich understanding of their experiences. Other practical considerations such as the interest in participating as well as the possibility that the informant would provide insightful information were also taken into account.

Joe

Joe was seventeen years old and in his first year at the university. He had one sister. He lived with his family. Joe was taking 6 subjects in the engineering program. He was a nice and friendly guy. From my observation, Joe seemed to be busy with his study, and did not return home until six to seven p.m. It was quite difficult to

contact him at home when I wanted to ask additional questions from him on the phone. He liked to spend time in the university library searching for information for his school work. When he was home, he usually did his assignments. To me, he was an attentive student, and studied quite hard. He did not participate often in the extra-curricular activities due to his study. But he seemed to enjoy spending his free time on the computer by his own.

Jane

Jane was sixteen years of age, and in grade 12 at a public secondary school. Jane was interesting, articulate, and active in the life in and out of the school. Unlike Joe, she was actively involved in the school activities such as the dancing and sport clubs. Jane was very talkative and cooperative, and enjoyed attending social functions with her mother. She seemed to be a lively and cheerful person. She was a typical girl who liked pretty and fashionable things. Academically, she was an attentive student. Thus, she could be well-served as a student who was academically successful.

Proposed Instructional Approaches

As the main objectives of the curriculum are to develop students' reading and writing skills, a variety of effective instructional strategies are introduced depending on the materials used in each lesson. Teachers should use their own judgement which strategies are most effective to their students by considering their age, needs, interests, and other factors. I will describe the brief concepts of the useful strategies that can be used to serve the purposes of the curriculum and will demonstrate how to implement them into a real learning process. However, the teaching strategy presented in each lesson is only the guideline and can be adjusted or substituted with other strategies that the teachers think are more suitable for their students. In this paper, I select the strategies that I think best suit Joe's and Jane's cases as follows:

Context-Structure-Sound-Reference (CSSR)

Ruddell and Ruddell (1995) advocated the CSSR System for developing independent word learning strategies. This technique is used because Jane likes to read books at a higher level to increase vocabulary. The CRRS System is a sequential approach for students to follow when they encounter an unknown word. The sequence first directs students to search for meaning clues in the contexts of sentences and paragraphs surrounding the word. If the context is not helpful, then students should examine word parts and pronunciation. As a last resort, students explore references such as margin notes, glossaries, and dictionaries. Ruddell and Ruddell stressed expediency in finding a strategy that will enable students to construct a sensible word meaning in the most efficient manner possible. The goal is to move on quickly as long as the constructed meaning makes sense. Each step is supported by a variety of instructional activities to practice these strategies.

Problem-Solving Techniques

Blachowicz and Fisher (1996) encouraged teachers to help students use problem-solving techniques as they examine context. Students learn different types of context clues such as synonyms, purpose of the word, and general ideas about the word to help them figure out a sensible meaning for an unknown word. Blachowicz and

Fisher also advocated metacognitive context instruction where students are directed to examine the word and its location, make a connection between their background knowledge and what the author says, predict a meaning, and then accept or reject the newly constructed meaning.

Think-Alouds

To capture students' interactions with self-selected unknown words in personally chosen texts, teachers may conduct think-aloud sessions (Harmon, 1998) and have students read until they found an unfamiliar word to discuss. At this point, they talked about what they were doing to help themselves construct plausible meanings for their self-selected terms.

Read-Aloud

Atwell (1998) referred to reading aloud to students as “a bride for kids, taking them into territories they might never have explored”. During read-aloud time, teachers read to students using expression and volume, or what Atwell referred to as “going for it”, to make the text come alive for them. Reading aloud benefits reluctant adolescent readers in that it helps students feel a sense of belonging to a community of readers. Teachers may model their thinking while reading aloud to students.

Minilesson

Minilessons lend themselves nicely to the “direct and explicit instruction shown to improve reading comprehension” (Dole, 2000). Minilessons work well if they are planned ahead of time and include the following components:

- Focus statement-remarks at the very beginning of the lesson that explain what the strategy is and how and why it is being learned.
- Modeling-examples of the skill or strategy being learned, usually provided by the teacher.
- Practice-opportunities for students to practice the skill with independent or instructional level materials as a group or in partners.
- Reminder-directions to the students to continue practicing the skill or strategy during their silent reading time.

Journal Writing

Students keep a response journal. Responding to reading through writing helps students develop their writing and reading skills. Teachers may use read-aloud to demonstrate making connections, noticing characters and setting, and asking questions that occur as they read. Students may use a spiral notebook to record their responses. In the journal students respond to a prompt or a question. For example, teachers ask students to draw and label a picture of the different settings in their book or ask them to tell about a favorite character in the story they are reading and use examples from the text to support their observations.

Instructional Materials

Instructional materials should be authentic and from different sources such as popular novels, newspaper articles, magazine articles, sport columns, e-mails, etc.

Assessments

The following types of assessment are proposed to assess the students' learning performance.

- Reading aloud daily.
- Peer tutoring, paired reading, and reciprocal teaching activities.
- Daily monitoring of reading through the use of observation during silent reading time and a reading log.
- Discussing reading strengths and weaknesses honestly with students.
- In-class activities and reports.
- Quizzes and final exams.

Teaching procedures

Basically, I will select a variety of authentic texts that capture the students' interests, and have them read aloud. After that, I will assign appropriate follow-up activities for them such as asking them to write the reflective responses after the reading. This activity will help the improve both reading and writing skills.

Samples of Instruction plans

Example 1

Topic: Titanic

Goal: To improve writing skill

Objectives:

- 1) Students will be able to analyze the plot, the arrangement of events to the end, the main characters, and the setting of the film.
- 2) Students will be able to write the most impressive part of the film.

Procedures:

- 1) Teachers show the film "Titanic" to the class.
- 2) Teachers ask students to take notes while seeing the film the important events, the main characters, and the setting of the film.
- 3) After showing the film, teachers ask the class what they think about the film. Have students comment on any part they like.
- 4) Have students write the important events of the film, the main characters, the setting, and their most impressive part as individual work.

Assessment:

- 1) I will know that the students can do the critical analysis if they are able to write the plot, the character, and the setting after seeing the film.

Example 2

Topic: E-mails

Goal: To increase reading and writing skills and vocabulary

Objectives:

- 1) To encourage students to do as much extensive reading outside of class as possible.
- 2) To encourage students to have the discussion take place outside of class via e-mails.

Procedures:

- 1) Teachers divide the class into small e-groups of four or five students each. Then the students are given a reading {e.g., a magazine or newspaper article, a poem, or a short book}.
- 2) After they have completed the reading, they can e-mail their reaction to it to the other members of their e-group.

Assessment

- 1) I will know that students are able to understand the reading selection if they can write their reactions to what they read.

Example 3

Topic: News stories

Goal: To improve reading and writing skills

Objectives:

- 1) To encourage to read and write news articles, and relate the stories to their experiences.
- 2) To have students write a summary of the news stories.

Procedures:

- 1) Have students read news stories and take important notes of the news they read.
- 2) Students share their opinions on the issues raised in the stories and relate these issues to their own experiences and/or to society in general.
- 3) Have students submit weekly summaries of news stories with their reactions.

Assessment

- 1) I will know that students can comprehend the news stories and can summarize the main point of what they read from the summaries that they weekly submit to me.

Example 4

Topic: Sports

Goal: To improve reading and writing skills.

Objective:

To encourage students to read more of the external materials other than the ones used in the classroom and to practice them to find the important ideas of what they read.

Procedures:

- 1) Have students read the sport sections of newspapers, analyze them into different categories, and make a report who the winners were of each match.

Assessment:

- 1) I will know students will understand how to find the main ideas of the sport news they read if they can tell who the winners were in the report.

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