Focused Feedback for Inference in Expository Text

Christina Thornley, Joanne Selbie, Trevor McDonald

When third grader Maria (pseudonym) explained, “I just need to find the pieces of literal information and think, What do they mean when I put them together?” she was demonstrating the success of “focused feedback,” an approach used by her teacher Jo (second author) for comprehension instruction. Earlier in the year, Jo had noticed that Maria, like some others in her class, was a fluent reader but had difficulty understanding unfamiliar expository texts. She would sometimes omit information or exhibit an overreliance on prior knowledge, thereby drawing erroneous conclusions (Burns, Roe, & Smith, 2002; Marcell, 2007; Pressley, 1998; Walker, 2005).

Jo discussed her students’ comprehension difficulties with Chris (first author), a teacher educator and PhD student conducting literacy research partnerships with elementary teachers. Jo joined the project to investigate her comprehension teaching. She wanted increased access to research literature to help refine the comprehension strategies that she taught and to modify her reading instruction by using focused feedback (Clarke, 1998; Clarke, Timperley, & Hattie, 2003).

Jo understood that giving focused feedback involved identifying learning intentions with the students, then ensuring that the oral feedback they received addressed their independent or supported application of the strategies. Jo was already using focused feedback in her writing instruction and observed that her students could increasingly articulate their new understandings (Walker, 2005). More important, assessments using curriculum benchmarks and standards had shown an improvement in the quality of the students’ independent writing. Jo attributed this to their greater writing knowledge and increased self-regulatory behavior brought about through focused feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2003).

The Research Project

The three girls and four boys whose learning is reported here constitute half of the group who received Jo’s refined instruction and who gave consent for their progress to be reported. The school served a predominantly midrange socioeconomic population. None of the students whose first language was English had learning disabilities, yet their comprehension achievement in third grade already spanned three grade levels, from one year below to one year above, and, as explained previously, each student’s achievement was lower when reading unfamiliar expository texts. The students in Jo’s class who were not part of the focused feedback cohort received her regular guided reading instruction.

To begin the project, Jo asked Chris to observe and create verbatim transcripts of her comprehension instruction and the feedback she gave her students. Together they analyzed the transcripts. Jo’s instruction involved asking the students to retell aspects of the content they had read. Then, as she elaborated on their responses, she referred back to relevant parts of the text. The transcripts showed that Jo’s feedback frequently constituted nonspecific praise or addressed decoding and fluency behaviors.

With reference to the comprehension research literature and her own notes, Jo reflected with Chris on her students’ meaning making. She talked about the omissions that frequently occurred in the students’ retellings (Marcell, 2007; Richards & Anderson, 2003). She described their speculations, often too loosely based on available evidence to increase their knowledge of unfamiliar topics (Tovani, 2000) or refute their misconceptions.

Jo and Chris talked about how authors convey nonfiction information, through literal and implied statements, and the implications of this for reading (Burns et al., 2002; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; McDonald & Thornley, 2004; Tovani, 2000). Research
claimed that although inference was seen as the “bedrock of comprehension” (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000, p. 105), students who exhibited comprehension difficulties seldom used it (Pressley, 1998; Tovani, 2000). Inference had often not been clearly articulated to students who were instructed to “read between the lines” (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Tovani, 2000). Jo decided that, to improve her students’ self-regulatory behavior and increase their understanding of expository text (Block & Lacina, 2009), she needed to teach them to read for literal and inferred information and reinforce their efforts by providing focused feedback.

To gather the research data to accompany the teaching, Jo asked Chris to undertake further observations through which they could review her teaching and feedback. Together they created a six-question oral survey to find out whether the students could articulate the strategies Jo would teach and explain how these strategies aided their comprehension. Jo also created an inference assessment activity using an unfamiliar text at a readability level suited to all of the students’ decoding. From the ongoing findings, she would modify her teaching to enhance the students’ knowledge and reduce their confusion (Johnston, 2004).

**The Teaching**

Jo began the eight-month instruction period by teaching the students to provide textual examples as evidence for the points they made when retelling. She anticipated that these examples would be literal but recognized this as requisite to inference (Burns et al., 2002). Jo wrote the “retell with evidence” learning intention on the board and modeled the retelling process. She created opportunities for students to practice retelling in her lessons and in their independent reading (Pardo, 2004).

Jo created cards to remind herself to give focused feedback on the inclusion of information gleaned from the text and the use of examples in retelling. On them, she wrote comments like “I see you got that information from this picture” or “That was a good example of how...,” in addition to questions like “Can you show us in the text where you learned that?”

After four months, Jo observed from her notes that the retellings included more evidence and that the students had reduced the level of speculation based on nontextual beliefs (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Tovani, 2000). However, she wanted some specific data and asked Chris to observe a lesson in which she gave the students a short piece of text and asked them to help her list all the information. Chris’s observation showed that students were gaining more of the literal information but were not making inferences.

Jo spent another month on retelling with evidence, encouraging more thorough literal information gathering. Then she demonstrated how authors convey information through inference (Marcell, 2007; Tovani, 2000). Jo described the instruction as very explicit. We had a definition of what literal information was and what inferred information was, and we talked about what that meant and then we used extracts...from texts and broke them down, and we brainstormed together. We found the literal information, what we could actually read from the text, and then wrote all that down. Then we used that as clues to write down all the inferred information that we could find. Then we had the section of the “maybes,” where we weren’t entirely sure if it was inferred or not, like where there were only little or parts of clues.

Jo called the literal information “clues” and said that to make inferences, readers needed to think carefully about what these clues meant when they linked them together (Pressley, 1998; Richards & Anderson, 2003; Walker, 2005). When they made inferences that seemed likely rather than conclusive, Jo categorized them as “maybes.” For herself, Jo wrote additional focused feedback cards specific to the inference instruction.

After two more months of instruction, Jo conducted the oral survey, asking the students to describe how to retell with evidence and make inferences,
then explain why they used these strategies. Five of the seven students felt that retelling with evidence made them read and think more carefully and that inferences helped them understand most of what they read. Two students said the strategies were to help the teacher make sure they did the reading. These same students said they sometimes did not understand what they were reading. All of the students provided nonspecific explanations of inference as demonstrated in the following quote: “looking for clues and using your head.” Jo felt that while the oral survey gave her access to the students’ perspectives, she remained unsure about their application of inference and whether being able to articulate the strategy was a prerequisite to using it.

Chris and Jo implemented the inference assessment activity the following month. The students were asked to independently read and retell information from a text excerpt (see Figure 1). No precise calculation of topic prior knowledge was conducted, but preference was given to this text because the content had not been studied in the school and was unlikely to be familiar given the context and lives of these students. Table 1 shows the amount of information provided by each student and whether they identified it as literal, inferred, or maybe. Table 2 provides examples of the students’ answers.

The assessment activity showed that, despite their vagueness in describing inference, all the students could make inferences. Only Student C needed a prompt, which referred her to two of the literal points she had given and asked what she now understood. She then made two correct inferences. No student made incorrect attempts. Three students found more inferential information than literal. Student G explained the process this way: “I have to get some literal information first, then I can do it.” He aptly demonstrated this by combining and cross-checking four literal statements to expand his information by inferring seven more points.

**Key Components of the Work**

Jo was pleased with the outcome of the teaching for her students and identified three elements key to the success. The first involved the use of focused feedback, specifically the examination of her existing feedback habits and subsequent modification: “It was very easy actually. As soon as I became aware of just how unspecific I was at times, and once I knew what I wanted the students to do... the feedback naturally just became so much more focused.”

Second, she described how matching her strategy instruction with the needs of the students and the content of expository texts was important. She believed that using the research literature and monitoring the students’ understandings and strategy use increased her knowledge of how to teach inference. She now saw a sequence that she needed to account for:

They [the students] needed to be really clear about the purpose of locating information in texts before you could go into developing the idea of what’s literal information and what’s inferred information. If they couldn’t locate examples of information in text, it was going to be really hard for them to understand the difference between literal and inferred information.

The third element related to the data that helped Jo understand the students’ learning. She noted that, in the oral survey, none of the students could articulate the way that inferences are made and that two students appeared to see no personal benefit in using

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**Figure 1**

**Text Excerpt for Inference Assessment Activity**

Banana plants need plenty of rain, warm temperatures and lots of sunshine. That’s why they grow so well on Tonga. New plants grow from small suckers that appear around the base of the main plant. Banana plants grow as tall as trees but they don’t have woody trunks. Instead they grow in clumps with lots of overlapping stalks.

the strategies. She felt this illustrated the importance of also gathering data in a context where students could reflect on text as they read, demonstrating an understanding of how to make inferences using the literal information. This was all useful to her for making instructional decisions:

The surveys were interesting... They gave a picture of the child’s mental processes and ideas. Sometimes we get so caught up in our thoughts that we forget that they often have a different slant.... The assessment task, I liked that as well because, once again, it shows up very clearly whether a child knows what they’re doing or not.

Jo believes that any literacy instruction aimed at improving students’ comprehension should be driven by reference to research literature that can enhance understanding of strategies, by observations of current instruction, and by findings from assessments tailored to students’ authentic strategy use. She anticipates that this model of instruction in inference, supported by the use of focused feedback, could be applied at other grade levels or to other strategies that assessment data show students need to practice.

References

Table 1
Inference Assessment Activity Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Literal</th>
<th>Inferential</th>
<th>Maybe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student B</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student C</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2 (after prompt)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student D</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student E</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student G</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Examples of Students’ Answers on Inference Assessment Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literal</th>
<th>Inferred</th>
<th>Maybe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banana plants grow as tall as trees.</td>
<td>If they don’t have lots of rain they die.</td>
<td>Lots of banana plants in Tonga.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banana plants don’t have woody trunks.</td>
<td>Tonga is warm.</td>
<td>Bananas grow out of stalks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banana plants need plenty of rain and warm temperatures.</td>
<td>They grow really tall.</td>
<td>Might need water if there was no rain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New plants grow from small suckers.</td>
<td>Trees have woody trunks.</td>
<td>Stalks might bend over because there are so many they might grow crooked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They grow well in Tonga.</td>
<td>Tonga has banana plants.</td>
<td>Couldn’t climb them because of all the stalks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Marcell, B. (2007). Traffic light reading: Fostering the independent usage of comprehension strategies with informational text. The Reading Teacher, 60(8), 778–781. doi:10.1598/RT.60.8.8

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