Informational Text in the Primary Classroom

A Research Project

Submitted as a Requirement For The

Degree of Masters In Reading Education

In The Graduate School Of

Texas Woman’s University

Tamara Hatcher

Denton, Texas

July 2011
Introduction:

As a first grade teacher I want to give my students every opportunity to learn strategies that will help develop reading comprehension in expository text as well as the traditionally used narrative text. Comprehension is defined as constructing meaning between the text and the reader. The type of text determines the comprehension strategies that are used to make meaning. Narrative text is used most often with young students in grades K-2nd to teach key elements of text structure. Recommendations from the National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE, 2010) suggest students should be taught main elements such as “setting, characters, plot, problem and resolution” (2010, p.18) adapting the instruction to the age of the student. There is an additional recommendation to teach text structures using informational text. The consensus of the NCEE panel and researchers is that students can improve their reading comprehension using informational text in the primary grades. Preparing students for standardized testing, that can include up to 80% expository text, is a reality in education today. The lack of exposure and instruction of informational text in the early grades may contribute to the decline in reading achievement and academic success in preparing for the 21st century (Duke, 2000).

Much of the instruction concerning informational text structure has been relegated to third grade and above due to the belief of many educators that young children (Pre-K – 2nd) do not have the cognitive development to fully comprehend the structures of informational text (Hall, Sabey, & McClellan, 2005; Williams, Hall, Lauer, Stafford, & Desisto, 2005). Researchers feel strongly that educators must include informational text in the primary grades to prepare
students for the future educational endeavors. (Duke, 2000; Culatta, Hall-Kenyon, & Black, 2010) The panel of National Center for Education and Evaluation (2010) states that students in the early grades should be exposed to informational text because understanding the structure can improve reading achievement. The NCEE and Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) both state the importance of including informational text instruction for children in the early grades to be able to comprehend more complex and varied text. Although these recommendations are based on research, the number of research studies available has been limited in this area (Duke, 2000; Hall et al., 2005; Norman, 2010; Williams, Hall, Lauer, & DeSisto, 2005).

In the seminal study by Duke (2000) informational text and contexts as having many or all of the following features were defined:

(a) a function to communicate information about the natural or social world, typically from one presumed to be more knowledgeable on the subject to one presumed to be less so; (b) an expectation of durable factual content; (c) timeless verb constructions; (d) generic noun constructions; (e) technical vocabulary; (f) classificatory and definitional material; (g) comparative/contrastive, problem/solution, cause/effect, or like text structures; (h) frequent repetition of topical theme; and (i) graphical elements such as diagrams, indices, page numbers, and maps. (p. 2)

The terms nonfiction, expository, and informational text can have different meanings for different people. In current research on informational text these terms have been used to define text that conveys factual information (Hall, Sabey, & McCellan, 2005; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007).

For the purpose of this paper I define nonfiction as factual information that contains text and/or visual graphics to convey information. The terms nonfiction, expository, and informational text will be used interchangeably.
My research question is, “What are the benefits of using informational text in the primary grades?” As I reviewed the research I found three themes. The first theme is the importance of explicit teaching of informational text structure. The second theme is using authentic literacy events that allow students to internalize the strategies used in reading the different genres that can lead to students to become independent learners. The third theme is strategies used to teach expository text.

Methodology:

As a First grade teacher I am always looking for instructional practices that promote reading comprehension across the curriculum. The increased interest in using more informational text in the primary grades is a factor in my research choice. I began my search using ERIC/Epscohost data base at the Texas Woman’s University library website. My search began with the descriptors expository text features and the results were 0. The next 10 tries yielded 0 results using the descriptors of text features, expository text, instruction of genres, comprehension, book captions, elementary and primary. I found 48 results using the descriptors of text features and study, but after reading the abstract I found most of the information was in the form of articles and chapters in books. The few studies that touched on my area of study did not address informational text in the primary grades. I continued my search for several days by looking at reference lists from articles that addressed informational text or expository text in the primary grades. More than half of all reference lists included Duke’s (2000) seminal study 3.6 minutes per-day: The scarcity of informational text in first grade. I included the study in my research due to this fact. I continued to search for studies to use in my research by changing the descriptors to informational text, reading comprehension, reader text relationship and reading comprehension yielding more than 350 results. I was able to find 3 studies I included in my
INFORMATIONAL TEXT IN THE PRIMARY CLASSROOM

charts. Still needing more research focused on early childhood and informational text I used
vocabulary and read aloud as descriptors that provided 72 results. I was able to find 3 additional
studies that addressed nonfiction text and vocabulary development. It was narrowing my search
to vocabulary development and read aloud that I was able to find the additional studies on using
nonfiction/informational text with young children. I found that there are many articles and books
written on the subject of using nonfiction, informational or expository text with the primary
grades. The research articles were based on studies conducted in the 1990's or books written on
the subject, as well as other articles from professional journals. There is an abundance of
information on the importance and instructional strategies for teaching informational text in the
primary grades but I was unable to find many current research studies specifically geared to
expository text in the primary grades. I did use Google search engine to locate additional online
articles. I used the phrase teaching informational text primary grades and found many great
resources but no articles or studies listed. I found Scholastic had two resources for teachers, the
first being a list of the six reasons to use informational text in the primary grades (K- 2\textsuperscript{nd}). I then
checked the reference list, the references listed were from 1983- 2003. After eight days of
searching I found most of my information was divided into two groups; informational text with
Pre- K – Kindergarten students and informational text second grade students.

After reviewing the studies on informational text in primary grades, I have included 10
studies that related to my research question, “What are the benefits of using informational text in
the primary grades?” I updated the search to include studies that were dated between 2001 and
2010 and included the age groups from early childhood to third grade. While most of my
research studies included teaching informational text to students, one study addresses the issue of
the amount of informational text that young children are exposed to in school and in the home.
Themes

Explicit Teaching

When students receive explicit teaching of text features and structure of a variety of genres, teachers are able to draw on students’ knowledge of text structure to deepen understanding and promote independent reading. Students should be exposed to informational text because its structure can build on understanding and recall. The research involving preschool – kindergarten children stated that deliberate and explicit instruction is necessary, and they should begin in preschool (Culatta, Hall-Kenyon, & Black, 2010) Studies by Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, & Kaderavek (2010) support Culatta et al.’s findings when students as young as preschool were exposed and taught the specific scientific and text structure vocabulary there was an increase in actual usage of the language in conversations.

Teaching expository text involves some of the same comprehension strategies used in narrative text such as using prior knowledge, making connections, teaching key concepts, and explicitly teaching vocabulary. In expository text the connections evolved from text to self, to text to world connections and the vocabulary instruction includes more technical or genre specific vocabulary (Culatta, et al., 2010; Norman, 2010; Hall, Sabey, & McClellan, 2005; Williams, Hall, Lauer, Stafford, & DeSisto, 2005). The text structure introduced most often in early childhood classes during nonfiction instruction included the concepts compare/contrast (including vocabulary as, alike, different, similar) and problem/solution. The most frequently used text structure was compare/contrast. In research studies with preschool to second grade children it was found students were able to understand and enjoy nonfiction literature and began to use the language of informational or nonfiction text after the explicit teaching (Maloch, & Beutel, 2009; Pentimonti et al., 2010; Bortnem, 2008). This process of exposing and explicitly
teaching nonfiction structures and vocabulary allows students to become more familiar with the strategies so the students can be more flexible and take control of their own learning (Ranker, 2009).

The research on second grade students by Hall et al. (2005) involved a specific program that could be implemented with students during small reading groups to explicitly teach the structure and vocabulary of expository text. Students participating in the “Text Structure” program were explicitly taught content, major vocabulary words and clue words. The clue words were those that explain the structure of the text. The study used compare/contrast structure that included the clue words, alike, both, but, different, however, and contrast. The results of this study demonstrated that the group that received the explicit teaching scored higher on the post assessments. The results suggest that explicit teaching of text structure is an effective strategy to use with second graders.

In a similar study, Williams, Hall, Lauer, Stafford & DeSisto (2005) the “Text Structure” program using whole group instruction in contrast to the small group instruction in the previous study. In both Hall et al. (2005) and Williams et al. (2005) the research question addressed explicit instruction of text structures and the effect on text comprehension of expository text, specifically compare/contrast. In both small group and whole class explicit teaching in content, vocabulary, and clue words scored higher in expository text comprehension and suggests that explicit teaching is an effective way to teach some of the components of expository text. As the studies of Hall et al. (2005) and Williams et al. (2005) clearly demonstrated explicit teaching in either small group or whole group was highly effective.
Research indicates when explicit teaching of text structure and language of informational text is included in the early grades children can increase text comprehension (Culatta et al, 2010; Hall et. al., 2005; Pentimonti et. al., 2010, Purcell- Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Teaching children text structure, text features and genre specific vocabulary in the early grades will help prepare our students for future experiences with informational text.

Authentic Experience:

Engaging students in authentic experiences is important to understanding informational text. For the purpose of this paper authentic experiences will be defined as experiences in which students participate in activities using informational text for real purposes. In the research studies and articles written about increasing comprehension in kindergarten through second grade students, using multiple genres and text features, there was a consensus that explicitly teaching the features and structure was essential to student’s learning.

Several studies stated explicit teaching alone may not be enough. When students are given opportunities to practice using the features and structure of expository text in writing or reading after explicit instruction they were able to move towards using the information within learning groups as well as independently (Culatta, Hall- Kenyon & Black, 2010; Moss, 2004; Ranker, 2009; Williams, Hall, Lauer, Stafford & DeSisto, 2005) Bluestien (2010) states, “Research has found that when comprehension strategy instruction is embedded into content area learning, comprehension processes are learned to a ‘higher level’” (p. 597). Bluestein (2010) also noted that providing authentic instructional experiences will serve to “deepen and expand the students understanding of what they read.” Purcell- Gates, Duke, & Martineau (2007) completed
a study concerning the role of authentic experience and explicit teaching and concluded
“authentic reading and writing activities are essential to genre learning.” By providing authentic
experiences with explicit teaching, students begin to understand they have an important voice in
their own learning process thus giving the student a sense of agency (Johnston, 2004). Across the
research, children’s trade books in nonfiction literature were used for both teaching and practice.
Selecting the right text is important but can be a daunting task for both experienced and novice
teachers; however, it is critical in teaching multiple genres. Moss (2004) states “if today’s
students are to meet the literacy demands of the future, they need to engage in authentic literacy
tasks with expository text” (p.710). Ultimately our goal is to prepare students for the future.

Instructional Strategies

It was Duke’s (2001) study 3.6 minutes per day: The scarcity of informational text in
first grade that brought awareness to the lack of exposure young children had to informational
text in the school setting. Over the course of a school year the study revealed students received
on average 3.6 minutes per day of exposure or instruction using informational text. More
disturbing were the findings that the lower socioeconomic status classrooms were observed to
have on average 1.9 minutes per day exposed to informational text. Duke did observe “the most
common activity involving informational text was teacher read – aloud” (p.216). Read – alouds
provide opportunities for teachers to expose young children to informational text, promote
discussions to build prior knowledge and increase vocabulary assisting children in constructing
meaning of text (Duke, 2000; Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, & Kaderavek 2010; Pike & Mumper,
2004).
Several studies conducted in recent years on informational text in the primary grades found the most common strategy for exposing and teaching informational text to young children was read–alouds (Maloch & Beutel 2009; Norman, 2010; Ranker, 2009; Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010). Read–alouds expose children to a variety of texts, familiarize children with nonfiction text features, allow students to gain knowledge and participate in social experiences through discussions and think alouds (Norman, 2010; Maloch & Beutel, 2009; Pentimonti et al. 2010; Purcell – Gates, Duke & Martineau, 2007; Ranker, 2009). Maloch & Beutel (2009) found students’ in a second grade class initiations in discussions were linked to the type of text being used. Students engaged in more challenging discussions and used nonfiction text to clarify confusions and support their ideas while debating with each other.

The research using informational text with children as young as preschool found the primary strategy was using read–alouds. Teachers were able to expose children to a variety of nonfiction text, build background knowledge, model strategies, build vocabulary and familiarize students with nonfiction text structures (Hall, Sabey, & McClellan, 2005; Moss, 2004; Pentimonti et al., 2010; Pipe & Mumper, 2004; Ranker, 2009).

In 2010, the Culatta, Kenyon–Hall, & Black study with preschool children found an effective strategy using a theme–based instructional model to teach expository comprehension. The lessons used informational trade books as a prop for instructors to tell the information rather than read from the book. Teachers were able to use personal stories to connect to the topic, and clarify implied information that is important to the understanding of the text. The program addresses vocabulary development in both content area and text structure. The children engaged with the expository information through discussion, dramatization, and hands–on experiences. The children were able to understand the compare/contrast and problem/solution structure.
Parents reported that “their children were starting to think and talk about things in their lives in terms of problems and solutions” (p.335). The study concerning using a systematic instructional program reinforces the idea that preschool children can learn and deal with expository concepts and structures.

Using a systematic instructional program that addresses specific text structures in addition to traditional content teaching has been shown to be an effective strategy for teaching expository texts to second grade students. The results of two studies on the “Text Structure” program found students who participated in the program scored significantly higher than those who had “Content Only” instruction in understanding expository text. The instructional program for text structures included “clue words, reading and analysis of target paragraphs, compare/contrast questions and graphic organizer” in addition to content only teaching (Hall, Sabey, & McClellan, 2005; Williams, Hall, Lauer, Stafford, & DeSisto, 2005). In Williams et al. (2005) study the “Text Structure” program was presented as whole group instruction. The students participated in two 45 minute lessons per week for approximately nine weeks. In a similar study conducted by Hall et al. (2005) the “Text Structure” program was included in guided reading group time in which the students met for 20 - 25 minutes two to three times per week. Each study used the same clue words and the compare/contrast structure, paragraph frame and lesson review discussion. The results from each study found a significant increase in expository comprehension, specifically in the compare/contrast structure using the Text Structure program. In both studies the authors concluded students as early as second grade can benefit from systematic comprehension instruction of expository texts (Hall et al, 2005; Williams et al., 2005).
Conclusion:

It is a goal for educators to provide the tools our students need to be successful not only in their present grade, but in their future academic, social and work lives. In recent years there has been a greater awareness of the need to incorporate informational text in the early grades. Researchers concluded students who have exposure and instruction in informational text will be better prepared for future academic demands (Duke, 2000; Hall, Sabey, & McClellan, 2005; Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010; Williams, Hall, Lauer, Stafford, & DeSisto, 2005). Providing more experiences with informational text will allow students to be more familiar with the purpose and structures that they may encounter in standardized testing and textbooks used in the later grades.

Research supports explicit teaching of text structure, text features, and genre specific vocabulary in the early grades can increase text comprehension and prepare our students for future experiences with informational text (Culatta et al., 2010; Hall et al., 2005; Pentimonti et al., 2010; Purcell- Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). The Purcell – Gates et al. (2007) study results found explicit teaching is enhanced when combined with authentic literacy experience sharing the opinion of other researchers, “authentic reading and writing activities are essential to genre learning” (p.12). The research concluded explicit teaching alone may not be enough when teaching young children informational text. Bluestein (2010) also noted providing authentic instructional experiences will serve to “deepen and expand the students understanding of what they read” (p.600).

Using read- aloud has been shown to be an effective strategy for teaching expository text. Using the practice of read – alouds not only exposes children to a variety of nonfiction
texts, but builds background knowledge, builds vocabulary, and familiarizes students to the structure and features of nonfiction text. The teacher read-aloud is a common instructional practice in many early childhood classrooms and can provide opportunities to model and demonstrate strategies used to understand and use nonfiction text. The read-aloud experience can facilitate dialogue and discussion to support young students in understanding informational text.

Another instructional practice that Hall et al. (2005) & Williams et al. (2005) found to be effective with second grade students is a systematic instructional program. The program included specific teaching points with text structure and genre specific vocabulary in addition to content resulted in students scoring significantly higher on expository text comprehension. The systematic program worked with large and small group settings and proved to be an effective strategy.

As early childhood educators incorporate nonfiction text in the instructional day through classroom libraries and instruction, students can begin to develop their expertise in the genre. To put it simply, we live in an expository world. In order for students to succeed in the Information Age “they must develop a greater familiarity with and understanding of expository text” (Moss, 2004, p.710).
References


