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Using the Language Experience Approach with Precision

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One method of reading instruction that is often employed by teachers of students experiencing academic difficulties is the whole-language approach (Heymsfeld, 1989). This approach focuses on the child's development of meaning from text, stresses the use of meaningful readings, favors a whole to part instructional format, and de-emphasizes subskill teaching. A potentially productive aspect of the whole-word orientation is the language experience approach (LEA) (Van Allen, 1976), in which learner generated stories serve as the reading material. These stories are meaningful to the child, contain familiar vocabulary, and offer the potential for increased motivation due to a greater sense of ownership of the story. Initially the student may need assistance in formulating good stories (Heller, 1988), but greater responsibility for creating the story can be shifted to the student gradually. The intuitive appeal of LEA has made it a popular reading tactic among mainstream and special education teachers attempting to individualize for students with poorly developed reading skills.

Although LEA is frequently used to supplement reading instruction. Its current usage has placed little demand on teachers for direct and frequent measurement of learner performance. Such measurement is desirable to document student achievement as it relates to individualized education programs: Therefore, it is important to explore methods for bridging the gap between the language experience approach and data-based techniques that directly and frequently monitor learner performance (e . g., Precision Teaching). The combination of LEA and Precision Teaching seems to offer great potential.

This article describes two interventions that were used with elementary students to improve their oral reading skills. Repeated readings (O'Shea, Sindelar, & O'Shea, 1987; Samuels, 1979), combined with a simple error correction technique (Graham & Johnson, 1989; Sindelar, 1987), and precision teaching were included in both procedures. The only difference between the two interventions was that the first used LEA stories, while the second used passages from a basal reading program. Student progress was compared in terms of the rate of learning (celeration) and accuracy.

Implementation

The Students

The instructional procedures were implemented with two elementary school students attending a self-contained diagnostic classroom for students experiencing academic, behavioral, and/ or medical difficulties—Latasha, a 9 year-old third grader and June, an 8-year-old second grader. Intelligence scores were in the average to low average range, and both students were considered at risk for special education services. In spite of their intellectual ability, the girls were experiencing difficulties in reading, particularly their oral reading skills: Both girls needed to increase their reading rate.

Setting

The setting for this investigation was the Multidisciplinary Diagnostic and Training Program (MDTP) diagnostic classroom located at the University of Florida, which accepts referrals from 14 school districts and one laboratory school located in north-central Florida. School district personnel refer children who have diverse learning, behavioral, and medical problems. The students discussed in this article attended the diagnostic classroom instead of their home schools for 6 weeks. The purpose of their enrollment was to identify

data-based teaching techniques that would enable them to be more successful in their school experiences.

Materials

Materials included a stopwatch, standard celeration charts, student-generated reading passages, and reading passages taken from the Ginn Basal Reading Program. Individual file folders were used to store each student's reading passages and the standard celeration charts.

Procedures

Informal assessment data indicated that Latasha and June needed practice on oral reading skills. Both girls read slowly, so reading fluency and comprehension were a problem. Their teacher decided to use l-minute repeated readings on a daily basis to help the girls increase their oral reading rates. Two interventions were implemented—LEA passages and Ginn passages. The students received both interventions concurrently on a daily basis. The order in which the passages were assigned was determined by a table of random numbers (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1979). This allowed the teacher to monitor the girls' individual progress and determine which reading material was more effective for increasing reading rate.

Baseline data were collected for the girls on both the LEA and Ginn reading passages. To generate an LEA passage, each student dictated a story into a tape recorder. The teacher listened to the taped story, wrote it down, and later typed it on a blank sheet of paper. For several days, each student read aloud from her LEA and Ginn stories for 1 minute. Passage order was randomized. The teacher counted the number of correct words read per minute and the number of errors made. No feedback was provided to the students regarding their performance. The teacher plotted these baseline data on Standard Celeration Charts and initiated the treatment procedure (see Figure 1 for an example).

Intervention 1. The teacher set a stopwatch and cued the student to begin reading her LEA story orally. While the student was reading, the teacher noted any reading errors. To facilitate the notation of errors, the teacher made a copy of each student's story and covered it with an acetate, marking the errors as the student read. At the end of 1 minute the stopwatch beeped, cueing the student to stop reading. The teacher then pointed to the first word the student missed, pronounced it correctly, and asked the student to repeat the word. Then the teacher read the word in its context (i.e., a phrase), and the student repeated the phrase while looking at it. This same correction procedure was used for all words missed. The student was then allowed to read the remainder of the passage untimed. If the student miscalled any additional words, the teacher simply said each word correctly and the student repeated it and continued reading. This oral reading practice continued for 9 days.

Intervention 2. The instructional procedures used in intervention 2 were identical to those used in intervention 1, but instead of the LEA story, the child was asked to read passages taken from the Ginn Basal Reading Program. Passage selection was based on student performance. The teacher had the students read several Ginn passages until an oral reading rate was obtained that was similar to the rates obtained on the student's LEA passage. Thus, the student's initial reading rate was similar for both the LEA and Ginn passages.

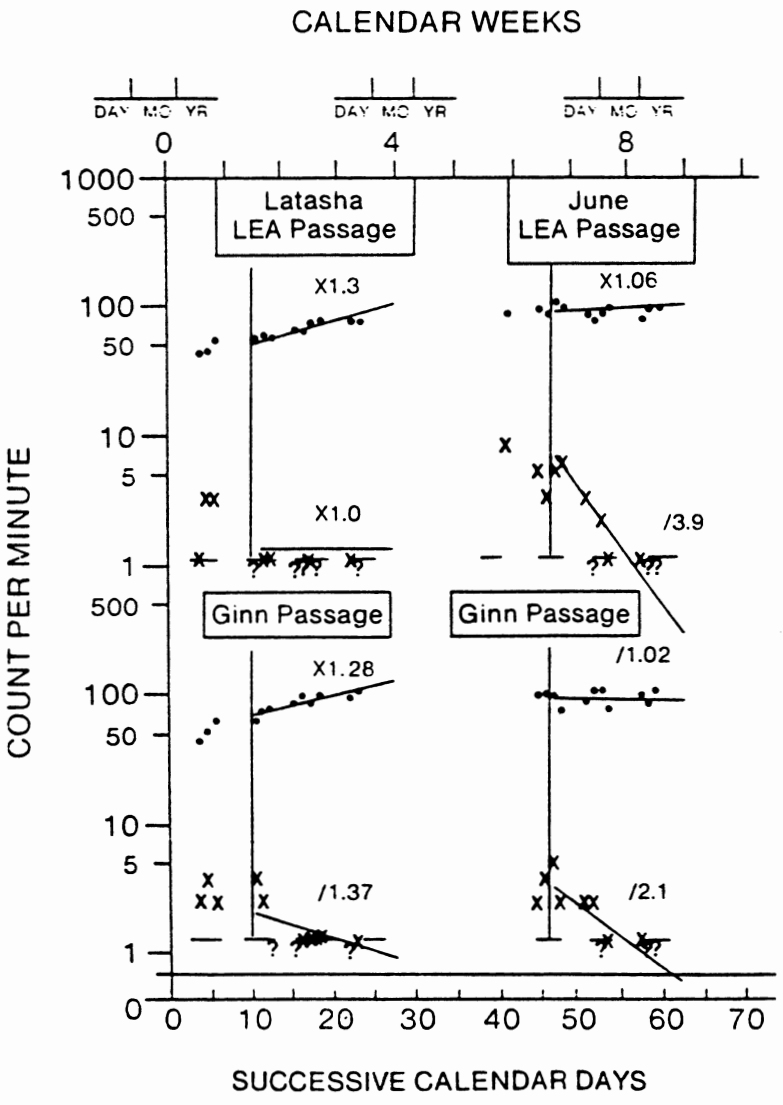
Reliability data. Reliability data were collected to ensure accurate scoring on both the LEA and Ginn timings. Interobserver agreement occurred with 100% accuracy on 2 separate days during the treatment period for both students.

Results

Intervention 1 and intervention 2 were equally effective with both girls. They improved their reading fluency (correct words per minute) and/or decreased their error rate. Latasha's initial LEA rate was 41 correct words per minute with 1 error. Her ending rate after 11 days of practice was 74 words per minute with O errors. Her celeration, or rate of learning for correct responding, was x1.30, or 30% improvement per week. Latasha's initial rate on the Ginn passage was 39 words per minute

Figure 1

LEARNER PERFORMANCE DATA



with 2 errors. Her ending rate was 93 words per minute with 1 error. The rate of learning on this task for correct responding was x 1.28 or 28% improvement per week.

June's initial rate on the LEA passage was 89 correct words per minute with 8 errors. Her ending rate was 99 correct words per minute with O errors. While June's rate of correct responding increased with a score of x1.06 or 6% improvement per week, the decrease in errors was even more dramatic, a /3.90. On the Ginn passage, June showed minor improvement. She scored 86 correct words with 2 errors initially and ended with 92 correct words with 0 errors.

The initial accuracy values [i.e., corrects / (corrects + errors)] for both students were between 93% and 98%. This is the range teachers typically select for instructional reading materials. The ending accuracy for each student was 99% or better.

Discussion

Celeration and accuracy scores obtained from both the LEA and Ginn reading passages provided an equal opportunity for learning. The students' individual performance was consistent regardless of the reading material used for practice. These data show that if teachers were using repeated readings, error correction procedures, and precision teaching to improve reading fluency, either basal readers or LEA stories would work equally well.

An informal survey was taken at the end of 9 instructional days. Another teacher, who was not involved in the reading instruction, interviewed Latasha and June. Each girl was asked two questions: "Which timing did you like better?" and "What helped you the most to do well on these timings?" Both students said they liked their LEA timing better. The students had more difficulty answering the second question: Latasha and June said that going faster helped them the most.

When asked which timings she enjoyed more, the teacher who provided the instruction said, "The LEA, because the children were more excited about their own stories." When asked whether or not any student resistance was noted on the timings, she reported that Latasha was a little resistant on the Ginn passage because she had already read the story prior to the use of the timing. According to the teacher, June seemed to like both timings equally well.

The final question answered by the teacher was, "What were the advantages and disadvantages of each intervention?" Advantages for the LEA intervention were greater student interest and increased familiarity with vocabulary. The disadvantage reported was the time involved in having the l-minute timings served as additional reinforcement that could enhance their overall performance. The disadvantage of the Ginn intervention was the uncontrolled vocabulary: Words were included that may not have been in the students' own language repertoire.

Conclusion

For children who are resistant readers the personalized nature of LEA stories may provide needed motivation. The opportunity for a student to succeed on a text with personal meaning should be noted as a significant benefit. On the other hand, students who do not need the special motivational advantages of the LEA story may perform equally well on a standard piece of text. If the instructional goal is to increase reading rate, teachers can save the time it takes to have students generate their own stories as well as the time it takes to type the stories. In such cases, it may be more productive to incorporate storytelling into creative writing or composition instruction. Using basal readers may also bridge the gap between regular and special education classes.

The instructional strategies used by a teacher may be of more importance than the materials selected. Building reading fluency through the use of repeated readings, a direct instruction correction procedure, and daily monitoring of student performance through precision teaching is an effective combination of teaching strategies (Jenson, Sloane, & Young, 1988). Collection of student performance data is particularly important, and the precision

teaching format provides a viable method for doing this. Traditionally, LEA has been used without data collection. Unfortunately, this leaves the technique open to criticism and prevents the teacher from knowing when to change instructional tasks.

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