DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 480 887 CS 512 422

AUTHOR	Smith, Carl B., Ed.
TITLE	Grammar and Language Skills: The Benefits of Direct Instruction. ERIC Topical Bibliography and Commentary.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Institute of Education Sciences (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	TBC-03008
PUB DATE	2003-09-00
NOTE	5p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0028
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St., #140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698. Web site: http://eric.indiana.edu.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- ERIC Publications (071) -- Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Secondary Education; *English (Second Language); *Grammar; Instructional Effectiveness; *Language Skills; Phonemic Awareness; *Reading Instruction; *Second Language Instruction; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Direct Instruction; Engelmann (Siegfried); Explicit Instruction

ABSTRACT

Direct Instruction (DI) is a pedagogical method that has come to be seen as the principal alternative to whole language reading instruction. Its development is attributed to Siegfried Engelmann, from the University of Illinois, in the mid-1960s. DI was originally developed as an instructional method in both mathematics and reading. This topical bibliography/commentary focuses on use of the DI method for reading instruction. The bibliography/commentary explains that, as DI is a pedagogy informed by the insights of general linguistics and segmental phonology in particular, DI theories of reading instruction view written text as a set of small units that become meaningful in combination with one another. It discusses what DI considers the problems in learning to read: phonemic awareness, the relation of words to their meaning, and the interpretive element. It also discusses DI and second language instruction. Lists 3 Internet resources and 12 references. (NKA)

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Grammar and Language Skills: The Benefits of Direct Instruction

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Introduction

Direct Instruction (DI) is a pedagogical method that has come to be seen as the principal alternative to whole language reading instruction. Its development is attributed to Siegfried Engelmann, a professor at the University of Illinois, in the mid 1960's. In the following decades many scholars added their own contributions to the field (for an overview see DiChiara, 1998, p. 13; MacIver, 2002). DI was originally developed as a method of instruction in both mathematics and reading. The latter is the concern of the following summary.

DI and Reading Instruction

Unlike whole language approaches to reading instruction, DI requires students to deal with the problems of reading one a time. As it is a pedagogy informed by the insights of general linguistics and segmental phonology in particular, DI theories of reading instruction view written text as a set of small units that become meaningful in combination with one another. The smallest units are the letters or *graphemes* and the speech sounds (*phonemes*) represented by each grapheme. DI programs (particularly those devised especially for students who are at risk of reading failure) are usually concerned to establish as quickly as possible in the minds of the students the relations between phonemes and the graphemes that represent them. This aspect of DI (sometimes called "phonemic awareness") involves something more than making students aware of the alphabet, and most advocates and researchers in DI view it as essential to students' progress in reading (see Bump, Swedberg, and Yates, 1997; Baumgart, 1998; Moats, 2002).

After mastering phonemic awareness, the next problem faced by students learning to read is the relation of the next largest unit of language (words) to their meanings. Learning the meanings of words is dealt with by teaching what has come to be known as "decoding and encoding" techniques (see Fielding-Bamsley, 1997).

The last problem associated with learning to read is more an interpretive problem, faced by readers of all ages. Nonetheless, advocates of DI often view it as completing the sequence of instruction outlined above. Learning the relations of sentences and

paragraphs to other sentences and paragraphs is a study known by a variety of names, the most common being "structural" or "comprehension" instruction (see Carnine, et al., 1997). It forms an integral part of most DI programs in reading instruction.

According to advocates of DI, the advantages of a segmented approach to reading instruction are numerous. As students move from mastering the simplest to the most complex units of written discourse, teachers may track their progress with greater ease and may isolate a given student's reading problems with more precision by identifying the language-unit in which the student appears to be having the most difficulty. DiChiara (1998) outlines these advantages as follows:

- Every task the child is asked to perform is taught directly by the teacher. Learning is not left to chance.
- Teacher models by illustration, not simply by explanation. Instruction is more efficient; it is easier for the teacher to teach and the child to understand.
- The teacher uses precisely laid-out lesson plans, which use similar presentation formats for similar tasks. All critical components are taught. Less preparation time is involved for the teacher, freeing up teaching time. The consistent use of instructional language makes it easier for the child to follow.
- Small learning increments are taught in a carefully controlled sequence through interactions between the teacher and the group. Increased student success leads to an increased expectancy of achievement, (pp. 17-18).

DI and Second Language Instruction

Studies that seem to demonstrate the success of DI in reading instruction continue to proliferate (see Din, 1998; Bump, Swindberg, and Yates, 1997). Research into second-language acquisition has traditionally been conducted along somewhat different lines, but not without providing for the former some valuable insights into how children and all language learners acquire grammatical knowledge. Researchers and educators in second-language acquisition and TESOL studies are usually faced with the same dilemmas as those involved in reading instruction. Major debates in the field use concepts and pedagogical programs that, though described in different terms, are very similar to those discussed in reading instruction research. DI is known in the second-language acquisition field variously as "Direct Explicit Instruction," "explicit instruction," and "consciousness-raising" (Ellis, 1998, p. 47-48). Its parameters are somewhat different in the high school or college-level language classroom because most students at this level have already acquired the grammar of their native language in written and spoken form. Most of the students, however, while they may enjoy an intuitive sense of what is appropriate grammar within their own language, will have a difficult time saying *why* a given construction is grammatical and another is not. This is the case because it is rare for second-language students in high school or college to have been taught to identify grammatical forms by name. As Rod Ellis (1998) writes, "[t]he principal choice regarding explicit instruction is whether to teach explicit rules directly or to develop activities that enable learners to discover the rules for themselves. Direct explicit instruction takes the form of oral or written explanations of grammatical phenomena" (pp.47-48).

Where students lack an intuitive sense of a language's grammar, encouraging them to discover grammatical rules for themselves has proven to be as difficult as it sounds in most recent studies (see Fotos and Ellis, 1991). Ellis's description of a recent experiment offers a dramatic demonstration of this principle:

> Robinson (1996) investigated 104 adult students in English (mainly Japanese) learning both an easy rule (subject-verb inversion as in *Into the house ran John*) and a complex rule (pseudoclefting as in *Where Mary and John live is in Chicago not New York*). The subjects viewed the sentences on a computer screen under varying conditions. One group (labeled the *implicit group*) was simply asked to remember the sentences. A second group (called the *incidental group*) was given comprehension questions about the sentences, to which they answered *yes* or *no*. A third group (the *rule-search group*) was asked to identify the rules illustrated by the sentences, and the fourth group (the *instructed group*) first received direct explanations of the rules and then tried to apply them to the sentences. The group receiving explicit explanations outperformed all the other groups on a grammaticality judgment test administered immediately after the treatment (1998, p. 49).

A typical DI assignment in the TESOL classroom would be, when teaching proper use of the prepositions *at*, *in* and *on* in adverbial time phrases: (1) ask the students to identify all the adverbial time phrases in a given English text; (2) ask them to write the appropriate adverbial time phrase under the appropriate preposition in a table; (3) ask them to devise a grammatical rule which can explain the use of *at*, *in*, or *on* in time expressions. The "correctness" of the grammatical rule is not what is important. The purpose of (3) would most likely be that it would permit the teacher to see the extent to which the student is developing abstract rules with which to understand the second language (Ellis, 1998, p. 48). Thus the advantages of a variant of DI in the TESOL/Second Language classroom are analogous to the advantages of DI in the elementary reading classroom. By understanding the process of learning a language as a process of a learner mastering small and clearly discernible units of language, teachers can monitor with scientific precision the progress of their students, and diagnose the problems of students who are close to failure with greater precision than would be the case were the students were simply immersed in the language.

Conclusion

Most advocates of DI would argue that it is most helpful when part of an integrated program involving other pedagogical programs. There is no reason to see the adoption of DI as necessarily excluding aspects of whole-language instruction (Pressley, Roehrig, Bogner, Raphael, Dolezal, 2002). However, the insights of second-language acquisition and TESOL research—fields which face very similar problems to those of traditional reading instruction—demonstrate in a very pointed way the advantages of DI for both as a means of helping teachers track the progress of their students and assess their problems in the most direct way possible.

Internet Resources

*Summary of Principles of Direct Instruction, by Dr. William G. (Bill) Huitt, Dept. of Psychology and Counseling, Valdosta State University
http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/instruct/dirprn.html
*Direct Instruction Model (K-8), from Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
Includes origin/scope, general approach, and results of the direct instruction model.
http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/catalog/ModelDetails.asp?ModelID=13
*Direct Instruction (DI) Results, Case Studies, and Considerations
One of the Six Promising Schoolwide Programs for Raising Student Achievement from the American Federation of Teachers
http://www.aft.org/edissues/whatworks/six/di/page2.htm

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