

**The Content-based Reading Approaches (COBRA) Model in the ELL and LD
Classroom**

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Abstract

The Content-based Reading Approaches (COBRA) framework, constructed by Heerman (2002), was made up of the instructional goals designed for reading-learning integrations in subject matter classrooms. ELL and LD students often fail to have sufficient reading skills to succeed within their different academic subjects, consequently it is important for both sets of teachers to promote such content-based reading skills, to help improve academic success within these two types of student groups. The main function of this model is that it will help English language learners (ELLs) and students with learning disabilities (LD) to have good reading skills in content-based reading in order to get into the mainstream classrooms. According to Lee's (2007) research, she provides many useful reading strategies for teaching comprehensive reading skills for both sets of students. By drawing parallels between students with learning disabilities (LD) and those from non-English backgrounds, the author hopes to equip teachers from both fields with a more diverse classroom environment.

Introduction

The framework of Content-based Reading Approaches (COBRA) was developed by Heerman (2002). The purpose of this model is to improve reading skills among students within middle and high school reading programs of the United States. Heerman (2002) emphasizes that the seven goals of this model seek to build a common ground among reading standards, school accreditation process, and the *No Child Left Behind* mandates. It contains seven reading-learning objectives for subject matter classrooms. Rather than seven goals, Lee (2007) consolidated the seven COBRA goals into five, those being: background knowledge; experiential learning; vocabulary; comprehension; and study and appreciation, and extends her study beyond middle and high school programs, to include English language learners

(ELLs) and students with learning disabilities (LD). The purpose of the present article is to propose the applicability of the COBRA model to the ELL and LD classroom.

The five COBRA goals

Activating background knowledge

Short and Echevarria (2005) state that “content-area teachers can provide rich, meaningful lessons that strengthen background information and promote the literacy of students learning English” (p. 1). They argue that like native English speakers, English language learners (ELLs) have differing levels of cognitive abilities. “When ELLs struggle with schoolwork, however, teachers should be aware that the problem may be related to background knowledge rather than to intellectual ability” (p. 10).

Peregoy and Boyle (2000) state that all good readers will set a purpose for reading and bring several knowledge resources to bear upon the comprehension process, among them: decoding ability, language knowledge, background knowledge, written genre knowledge, familiarity with text structures, and comprehension-monitoring abilities. They also claim that “comprehension was better when reading the passage reflecting their own cultural tradition” (p. 5). Furthermore, “In similar studies involving culturally familiar and culturally unfamiliar passages of similar linguistic difficulty, comprehension was higher for the culturally familiar text” (p. 5). In other words, familiarity with text content “alleviated limitations” associated with second language proficiency in text comprehension. Therefore, building background knowledge on a text topic through first-hand experiences such as science experiments, museum visits, and manipulatives can facilitate success in reading” (p. 5).

It is helpful to activate LD students’ background knowledge prior to teaching them a text.

Haager and Klingner (2005) state that “pre-teaching vocabulary helps students by providing them with background knowledge that can help them understand the topic they will be studying” (p. 349). They mention that pre-teaching will indicate what information is important and requires their attention while reading. They suggest using a variety of pre-reading strategies such as graphic organizers, semantic maps or webs, and concept maps. In addition, they suggest that field trips, videos, live demonstrations, direct experiences through hands-on learning, multimedia presentations, websites, and guest speakers can provide further background knowledge to ELL students and LD students.

Guided imagery is one of the visualization strategies that “capitalizes on students’ active imaginations. Activities such as role playing, pretending, and daydreaming are natural elements of children’s play” (Buehl, 2001, p. 59). Haager and Klingner (2005) state that graphic organizers provide a visual or spatial framework for organizing the important conceptual relationships among new vocabulary words and help students who have difficulty understanding a concept. In addition, Santa (2006) states that to help students activate their background knowledge, think-pair-share is a good strategy to help students by asking each pair to think about a topic, write down what they know about it, and then share their knowledge with the whole class.

Using experiential learning

Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) argue that for the beginning reader, the language experience approach (LEA) proposed by Rigg in 1981 is an excellent way to control vocabulary, structure, and content. The basic LEA technique uses the students’ ideas and their own words in the preparation of beginning reading materials. Alyousef (2006) suggests that LEA is an effective method to help teach English language learners (ELLs) learn reading comprehension. Pierson and Glaeser (2003) state that “the language experience approach (LEA) to reading is a technique that draws upon the real life experiences of students” (p. 123).

One example of LEA involves having students dictate a story about an actual experience to a teacher or partner. Next, they copy the story, illustrate it, and read it over and over. In this way, students' actual language becomes their reading material. They suggest that there are several important strategies connected to LEA such as daily journal writing, description of art, and community-based reading and writing. Dixon and Nessel (1983) advocate that LEA uses second language learners' own experiences, vocabulary, and language patterns to create texts for reading instruction. In addition, Pilonieta and Medina (2009) suggest that teachers use LEA to promote independent writing with English language learners (ELLs). The teacher writes the words the students say about an experience they have all shared together, to cooperative experience where students write in pairs or interactive writing (McCarrier, Pinnell and Fountas, 2000) where the teacher and students share in the actual writing, to independent writing, where the student writes on his/her own is a way that you can guide ELLs toward independent writing.

Haager and Klingner (2005) state that the LEA has been found as an excellent way to get nonreaders started with beginning instruction to help students who have experienced failure in their initial reading experiences. They define this approach as a "whole-to-part, constructivist approach that has been widely recommended for students with learning disabilities (LD)," (p. 230), and note that "it is appropriate for diverse, inclusion classrooms" (p. 230).

Using vocabulary instruction

Wiesen (2001) states that authentic texts bring learners closer to target language culture, which can be highly enjoyable and motivating. Problematically, Mastropieni, Scruggs, and Graetz (2003) identify that content textbooks typically do not present material in a

reader-friendly fashion, but instead contain densely worded paragraphs that include an overwhelming number of concepts, facts and details with insufficient explanation. Nichols and Rupley (2004) suggest some useful reading strategies such as semantic word maps, webbing, semantic feature analyses, and teaching relationships among words. They are effective tools that incorporate many of the guidelines for the active processing of vocabulary. Such vocabulary activities enable students to expand their vocabularies, understand relationships between the new word and existing concepts, and ultimately learn the meaning of the new word. These strategies, when matched with the appropriate instructional design, can become part of pre-reading activities, during-reading activities, and post-reading activities.

Rodriguez and Sadoski (2000) state that the keyword method explicitly brings into play both verbal and imaginative processes because the keywords and the target words affect the development of vocabulary in the second language. The use of mental images creates appropriate referential interconnections between second language learners' verbal representations and the imagery system. Zhang and Schumm (2000) point out that "experiences and prior knowledge affected comprehension and recall, and that vocabulary knowledge, typically, may be a highly significant variable in United States ESL learners' success" (p. 4).

Haager and Klingner (2005) mention that students with learning disabilities (LD) require careful, systematic planning and instruction to help them acquire new vocabulary. They argue that when LD students lack the background knowledge and experiences necessary to understand new words, learning can be quite difficult. Then, "the focus should be on helping students make connections or associations between new words and previously learned

information” (p. 347). Many researchers advocate explicit instruction. However, it is more difficult for students with learning disabilities to obtain direct instruction and repeated practice in a general education than in a special education classroom.

Achieving comprehension

Hickman, Pollard-Durodola and Vaughn (2004) recommend “using culturally relevant texts as well as those that incorporate aspects of students' life experiences to draw upon prior knowledge to promote comprehension and retention of text concepts and new vocabulary” (p. 1). Opitz (1998) reminds us that “comprehension instruction for all developing readers must be sensitive to the total orchestration of cognitive, linguistic, and cultural variables in order for the literacy learners to construct meaning for the texts they are reading” (p. 92).

Fitzgerald and Graves (2005) seek to persuade teachers that they should use scaffolding reading experiences (SREs) to help educate ELL students. The SRE framework consists of a set of pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities to use with any genre of text, including fiction and nonfiction. These activities will break down a complex reading task into smaller chunks to help tailor lessons to ELL students' abilities and needs.

Taguchi (2002) proposes some useful reading strategies to help ELL students achieve comprehension when they are reading narratives. These comprehension strategies are paralinguistic cues, including vocal qualities, intonation, stress, pause, tone, or speech rate; adjacency pair rules such as the use of the knowledge of conversation structure; background knowledge/experience; key word inferencing; logical reasoning; and speaker's intention. In addition, Kruger (2000) suggests skimming material for essential information and underlining it; organizing ideas by category and labeling them or diagramming them; reading by phrases

and clauses to increase comprehension; summarizing; identifying themes, sequences, and main ideas.

Haager and Klingner (2005) state that LD students are poor at comprehending and “lack both the meta-cognitive skills to monitor their reading comprehension and the ‘fix-up’ strategies to repair understanding when it breaks down” (p. 355). They advocate many useful comprehension strategies such as text-structure-based strategies, interactive instructional model, K-W-L strategy, directed-reading-thinking activity (DRTA), answering comprehension questions (QAR), and collaborative strategic reading (CSR).

Text-structure-based strategies refers to “the way the text is organized to guide readers in identifying key information and making connections between ideas,” (p. 363) including compare/contrast structure. According to them, the interactive instructional model was developed specifically for LD students but also benefits other students, particularly ELL students by helping them with text comprehension and content area learning.

Directed-reading-thinking activity (DRTA) is a predicting strategy meant to help LD students understand content area text. It was “developed to help students refine their purpose for reading and apply prior knowledge to understand text” (Haager and Klingner, 2005, p. 365), including reciprocal teaching. Haager and Klingner state that LD students often have problems locating specific information in text. Answering comprehension questions (ACQ) is a way to assess students’ comprehension of text, including question-answer relationships (QAR). They point out that students are taught to identify the different kinds of information needed to answer comprehension questions, as well as where to find the information before, during, and after reading. In addition, describing collaborative strategic reading (CSR), they also state that “initially the teacher presents the strategies (*preview, click and clunk, get the*

gist, and *wrap up*) to the whole class using modeling, role-playing, and teacher think-alouds. After students have developed proficiency applying the strategies through teacher-facilitated activities, they are then divided into heterogeneous groups where each student performs a defined role as students collaboratively implement the strategies” (p. 367).

Mastropieri, Scruggs, and Graetz (2003) mention that frequently secondary school content-area textbooks have readability levels that are even higher than the assigned grade levels. They emphasize peer-tutoring/peer-assisted learning strategies (PALS). Such strategies incorporate comprehension in history and science classes. Tutoring interventions appear to improve content-area learning while also improving reading comprehension.

There is no text that is completely explicit. Students, especially LD students, must be skilled/trained at making inferences in order to fully comprehend what they read. Eilers and Pinkley (2006) state that the reading comprehension of students will be greatly affected by explicit instruction. Alfassi (2004) also claims that “the teacher's role is to explicate strategies for learning from text so that students perceive them as useful, meaningful, and beneficial” (p. 173). Teachers need to use direct instruction to teach students how to use inference to strengthen comprehension.

Applying study and application skills

Referring to ELL students, Wiesen (2001) suggests that “authentic texts are basic to communicative and proficiency-oriented foreign language teaching, because they contribute to authentic linguistic and strategic skills” (p. 2). Nonverbal communication is an effective teaching strategy and needs to be given more attention in teacher development programs. Teachers must become aware of its largely culturally specific nature as well as the ways they

actually use it and how it can be best exploited in ELL teaching (Lazaraton and Ishihara, 2005). Swanson (2005) has stated many strategies for helping students learn to read such as checklists/organizers. She recommends breaking tasks into small steps and using simple lists to let a child know what steps to follow. In addition, she supports the strategy of adjusting students' first language based nonverbal behavior so as not to confuse students when that behavior is employed concurrently with the verbal target language.

Lenz, Deshler and Kissam (2004) suggest that cooperative learning, peer learning, and structured small group practice will help LD students improve their reading abilities, interpersonal skills, and social and problem-solving skills. They mention many organizers such as visual organizers, structure organizers, and semantic organizers to help students locate the main ideas and make connections between other information and the text when they read. They also state that reciprocal reading is another effective method to enable LD students to activate four different comprehension strategies - predicting, questioning, clarifying, summarizing - which they apply collaboratively to help each other understand a text they are reading

Paraprofessionals' supplemental daily tutor scaffolding and individualized corrections may provide critical support in context reading skills (Vadasy, Sanders, and Peyton, 2005).

Calhoun (2005) states that peer-assisted learning strategies (PALS) significantly increased the reading comprehension skills of students with reading disabilities. Recent studies have shown that peer tutoring is very effective for teaching reading comprehension strategies in remedial reading classes and in English classes at the middle and secondary levels (Mastropieni, Scruggs, and Graetz, 2003).

Conclusion

By drawing parallels between ELL and LD teaching strategies, the author aspires to introduce to teachers of both groups a variety of effective teaching methods for promoting the COBRA skills set. This article provides teachers of these two types of students (ELL and LD) with comprehensive and effective methods for teaching reading, providing school administrators in the public school setting aid in making decisions about how to evaluate cross-curricular teaching methods related to ELL and LD reading instruction. Such strategies should be especially useful to teachers who have both of these types of students in the same classroom. The literature for each of the five COBRA goals for English language learners (ELLs) and learning disabled students (LD) above shows rich support for the idea that the COBRA model is beneficial for teaching English language learners (ELLs) and learning disabled students (LD) in content area subjects.

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