

An Examination of Balanced Literacy Instructional Model Implemented to Youths with Hearing Loss

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Abstract

Recently, the balanced literacy approach, a combination of whole language and skill development approaches has received attention in literacy instruction. The purpose of this school-based action research was to create a balanced literacy environment, and to describe the impacts of the various instructional activities based on the balanced literacy approach on literacy development of the youths with hearing loss attending a vocational school for the handicapped, Anadolu University, Turkey. This study was conducted between 2005 Fall Term and 2009 Spring Term. The volunteer students and the school instructors were the main participants of the study. Eight experienced faculty members of the school continuously and systematically reviewed the data. An ongoing qualitative (inductive and descriptive) and quantitative (descriptive) data analyses were applied to various kind data sources. This article summarizes the emerged literacy instruction model and some of the achievements. This action research effort provided some improvements for the literacy instructional programs applied in the School and the literacy performance of the hearing impaired students. Based on the outcomes of the study efforts, it is also expected that this set of data would provide basis for creating literacy curricula and the area of literacy of hearing impaired students in Turkey and abroad.

Key Words

Balanced Literacy Instruction, Hearing Impaired Youths, Education of Hearing Impaired, Action Research.

Today, children are surrounded by various types of print written for different purposes in many culture (Butler & Clay, 1983). And a comprehensive defi-

nition of being literate contains not only reading, writing, speaking, and listening but also it includes the skills to criticize, to create, to question, and to think logically (Fisher & Williams, 2001). It is now known that spoken and written language development of children with hearing loss can be similar to that of normally hearing children, but often delayed. Individuals with hearing loss have more difficulties than their normally hearing peers in literacy learning (Albertini & Schley, 2003; Andrews & Gonzales, 1991; Andrews & Mason, 1986; Arfé & Boscolo, 2006; Berent, 1996; Conway, 1985; de Villiers, 1991; de Villiers & Pomerantz, 1992; Erickson, 1987; Evans, 2004; Ewoldt, 1981, 1985; Fisch-

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ler, 1985; Hirsh-Pasek, 1987; Holt, 1993; Graves, 1983; Kelly, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1998; King & Quigley, 1985; Kretschmer & Kretschmer, 1978; Kluwin & Kelly, 1992; LaSasso & Mobley, 1997; McGill-Franzen & Gormley, 1980; Paul, 1998, 2001, 2003; Rotenberg & Searfoss, 1992; Ruiz, 1995; Schirmer, 2000; Truax, 1985; Uzuner, 1991; Williams, 1994; Wilson, 1979; Wurst, Jones, & Luckner, 2005; Yoshinaga-Itano & Downey, 1996).

The results of the studies suggest that not only chronological age but also linguistic age, hearing loss level, and past experiences are influential on literacy learning of the individuals with hearing loss (e.g., Cambra, 1994; Pakulsky & Kaderavek, 2001; Truax, 1985; Uzuner, İçden, Girgin, Beral, & Kircaali-İftar, 2005; Uzuner, Kircaali-İftar, & Karasu, 2005). Because of these difficulties, we have to provide lifelong effective literacy experiences for the hearing impaired individuals (Albertini & Schley, 2003). There are various literacy instructional approaches. Two of them, Whole Language (Goodman, 1986) and Skilled Based approaches, (Asselin, 1999) are popular in the education of both hearing and hearing impaired individuals. Based on the research conducted with individuals with hearing loss, there appeared a need to combine these approaches addressing it as the Balanced Literacy Instruction ("Balanced reading instruction"; 2005; Evans, 2004; Goodman, 1986; Harp & Brewer, 2005; Howell & Luckner, 2009; Girgin, 1999; Luckner et al., 2006; Musselman, 2000; Pressley, Roehrig, Bogner, Raphael, & Dolezal, 2002; Reutzel & Cooter, 1992; Pearson, Raphael, Benson, & Madda, 2007; Schirmer, 1997, 2000; Walker, Munro, & Rickards, 1998).

The basic principles of the Balanced Literacy Instructional Approach are as follows (Schirmer, 2000): (1) All forms of expressive and receptive language work together. The balance should be provided in every aspects of literacy instruction. (2) Focus is on meaning of written language in authentic context. Learning occurs when it is meaningful, functional and purposeful. (3) Classrooms are communities of learners in which literacy is acquired through use. (4) Children are motivated when given choice and ownership. Environments that provide opportunities for the development of metacognitive skills are invaluable. (5) Literacy development is part of an integrated curriculum. Interdisciplinary instructional efforts are important. (6) Reading behaviors of skilled readers reveal what instruction should accomplish. (7) Processes and products are equally important.

Significance

Although there are evidences about the appropriateness of application of the activities based on the principles of balance literacy interaction, we have to know more about how individuals with hearing loss acquire literacy skills. As it was pointed out above the lifelong effective literacy environments are essential for hearing impaired students becoming effective citizens in their society. In order to provide more effective literacy environments, it is worth examining the impacts of meaningful, purposeful, functional, and authentic learning environments designed according to the principles of balanced literacy approach on literacy acquisition of the students with hearing loss (Arfé & Boscolo, 2006; Evans, 2004; Luckner, Sebal, Cooney, Young III, & Goodwin, 2006; Wurst, Jones, & Luckner, 2005). Based on the literature review, there appeared a strong need to review and revise the literacy curriculum at the School for the Handicapped, the only vocational college for the hearing impaired individuals in Turkey. Therefore the research questions were as follows: (1) In what ways did the emerged literacy learning-teaching model reflect the principles of balanced literacy instruction model? (2) What were the characteristics and process of the components of the learning-teaching model emerged based on the principles of the balanced literacy interaction? (3) What were the qualitative and quantitative impacts of the emerged balanced literacy instruction model on the hearing impaired students' literacy skills?

Method

Design

Action research process occurs in education as teachers systematically gather information about and reflect on their students' needs, abilities, and learning styles to enhance instructional outcomes. Action research process in education occurs as teachers gather information about and reflect on their students' needs, abilities, and learning styles to enhance instructional outcomes (Aksoy, 2003; Beverly, 1993; Dinkelman, 1997; Ferrance, 2000; Hensen, 1996; Johnson, 2002; McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996; McTaggard, 1997; Mills, 2003; Schumuck, 1997). Therefore, action research effort seems to provide us appropriate research design in developing and evaluating a literacy program based on balanced literacy approach since action research claim to provide improvements in quality of life of others through critical reflection and inquiry.

Setting

The study was carried out in the School for the Handicapped (SfH) located at Anadolu University, Eskişehir. The SfH is the first and the only higher education institution that gives vocational education to hearing-impaired students in Turkey. The educational programs having been executed in the SfH since 1993, include Graphic Arts Bachelor's Degree Program, Ceramic Arts Bachelor's Degree Program in the Department of Applied Fine Arts; Computer Operator Training Associate Degree Program in the Department of Administrative Vocations; and Architectural Drafting Associate Degree Program in the Department of Architecture. SfH has a one year Turkish Preparation Class where the students upgrade their language skills. Students passing the Turkish Competence Exam begin from the first year of their education.

Although most of the classrooms and facilities in the building of SfH were available for the research effort, a classroom designated for the language lessons, and a computer laboratory and a reading room were mostly utilized for obtaining the valid data in the SfH building.

Participants

The Students: Thirty six students starting the SfH in the year 2005 were followed up for two school years during the language, graphic, and software lessons. The number of the students has gradually increased. Most students had bilateral profound sensory-neural hearing loss. Except three students with cochlear implant, they all wore ear level hearing aids. The age range was between 18 to 22 years old. Verbal interactions occurred during the lessons. They all voluntarily participated in the study and signed consent letters. **The Researchers:** Rather than the students the research team consisted of the teacher/researchers in the area of the education of hearing impaired individuals. **The Trustworthiness Committee:** The primary members of the Trustworthiness Committee were the experienced faculty members in the area of education of individuals with hearing loss. In addition, the Project Evaluation Committee at Anadolu University, the other faculty members working at the School for the Handicapped and various conference attendances served as trustworthiness committee.

Data Collection Techniques

The data were compiled through the video record-

ings of the actual interactions in the target classrooms, audio recordings of the reflection meetings, writing lesson plans and reflective journal entries, filling the data evaluation charts, the students' portfolios, archival data, and surveys (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2005; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006; Yin, 2003).

Instructional Materials: The instructional materials were authentic, attractive to the students' attentions, appropriate to the students' academic and age levels, functional and purposeful. Therefore, it is assumed that meaningful materials were utilized throughout the research effort.

Instructional Nature of the Implementations: Based on the review of the data, the target lessons proved to be appropriate to the principles of the balanced literacy approach, the needs and interests of the students. Various Functional, purposeful and meaningful reading and writing opportunities were provided for the students. The major strategies, building background knowledge, recognizing words in print, vocabulary development, silent reading, oral reading, questions that highlight the text structure, and predicting etc. (Schirmer, 2000).

Pre and Post Tests: Among the various assessment and evaluation techniques performance tests including the tasks for describing, direction giving, filling in the cloze test, filling out forms and summarizing were developed by the researchers. The tests were utilized as pre-and post-test. The student performances were scored by independent scorers based on the adequacy criteria of each task (McLoughlin & Lewis, 2005; Turgut, 1983; Üzuner, 2008).

Trustworthiness and Ethics: The necessary preventions for a trustworthy and ethical action research were taken throughout the research effort (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Creswell, 2005; Maxwell, 2005; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006; Yin, 2003).

Analysis

The data were analyzed during and at the end of the research project by applying the pretests and post-tests, reviewing the data systematically, writing and reviewing the reflective evaluations of each lesson, sharing the data with the project team, reviewing the lesson plans and classroom instructions via control lists, summarizing the data, comparing the data continuously and repetitively, reviewing the answering keys and renewing it, and conducting micro analysis of the student portfolios and the selected master tapes.

Results

What were the Characteristics and Process of the Components of the Learning-Teaching Model Emerged Based on the Principles of the Balanced Literacy Interaction?

An interdisciplinary and metacognitive balanced literacy instruction model emerged during the course of the research effort.

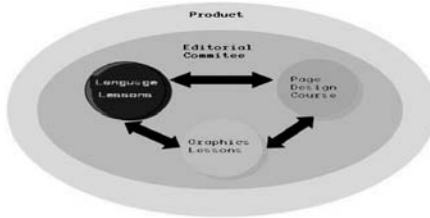


Figure 1.
The Emerged Interdisciplinary and Metacognitive Balanced Literacy Instruction Model

The nature of the components of the emerged interdisciplinary and metacognitive balanced literacy instruction model was dynamic, synergic, cyclical, and developmental. These components were page design course, software QuarkXPress course, Language Lessons, editorial committee, and the product.

The Process of the Components of the Emerged Model: While some of the components were hierarchic, the others were operating simultaneously. The whole process started as soon as the students were placed in their classes.

The Product: The students and the research team decided to publish a school newspaper for the product. The newspaper was published by the end of the each semester.

Page Design Course: A group of students and the instructor of the Page Design Course developed a new page design based on their evaluation. One of the designs was chosen by the instructor and the students. The chosen design was introduced to the principle. The digital form of the design was kept in the computer so that it would be used for the publication.

Language Lessons: All the students in the school and language instructors developed new written products for the newspaper. They read various types of reading materials and daily newspapers and wrote reaction papers regularly. The instructors applied the strategies explicitly whenever it was necessary. The instructors guided the students to consciously apply the necessary strategies. Class-

room discussions were common about the written materials. The characteristics of a particular text were discussed and listed. The students developed that kind of text either at home or in the class. They brought their written pieces to the class to share with their peers and the instructor. They evaluated the texts using written language analysis form developed by the research team and adapted it to the students' understanding level (Erdiken, 2003). They all chose the texts for the publication. Revising processes started in the form of one-on-one, group or via internet. The revised texts were put in a file to be chosen by the editorial committee. Each student kept his/her own written pieces in his/her portfolio. Some of the literacy activities implemented are as follows: Analyzing the text types, predicting the content of the text, introducing the structures of various texts genres, thinking aloud about the text as reading along with the students, developing and answering questions about texts, reviewing the texts to recheck the answers, developing concept maps about texts, summarizing, critical reading, reviewing and evaluating written texts.

Software QuarkXPress Course: While all the students developed the texts, one group of students learned how to operate a special software program in order to publish the newspaper. By the end of the term they published the newspaper utilizing this software program. The new newspaper edition was developed for dissemination.

Editorial Committee: The committee held a meeting towards the end of the semesters. The instructors and one or two selected outstanding student were the participants. The committee selected students' written products for publication.

What were the Qualitative and Quantitative Impacts of the Emerged Balanced Literacy Instruction Model on the Hearing Impaired Students' Literacy Skills?

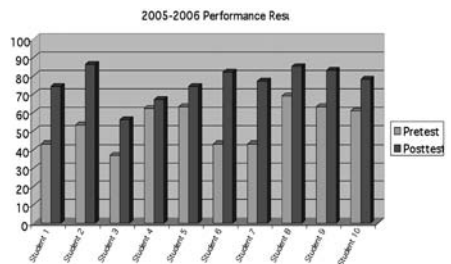


Figure 3.
The Pre and Post Test Results of Each Student

As it is shown in the graph, all the students have improved in descriptive writing, direction giving, filling in the cloze test, filling out forms and summarizing.

Description: While more than half of the students improved, two students become worse in descriptive writing. Based on the first test results, it is observed that the students mostly had difficulties in choosing and using specific descriptive terms in their writings. Moreover, the students had difficulties in distinguishing the conceptual information and focusing the related details. According to the results of the posttest those students who had problems in descriptive writing criteria showed evidences of improvements (Duchan, 1988; Tompkins, 2007).

Direction Giving: All the students showed evidences in struggling direction giving writings. The students had difficulties in using words signaling the destination and therefore, they could not give proper directions for guiding the reader how to reach the destination. Post test results showed that all the students improved in direction giving particularly they started to use the terms signaling the destinations and provided more appropriate sequences for particular destination (Duchan, 1988).

Cloze Test: Based on the pretest results it was determined that more than half of the students made mistakes or left a blank in filling out the cloze test. However the same students showed improvement in finding the appropriate words in filling the blanks (Walker, 2005).

Filling out Forms: Among the students particularly one student showed noticeable improvement in filling out forms. While four students did not improve, five students had lower score in filling out forms at the post test than the pretest (Oosterhof, 1999; Uzuner, 2008).

Summarizing: None of the students had skills for summarizing at the beginning of the study. However, all the students improved in applying all the summarization criteria in their summaries. They all started to use their own sentences in their writings. Moreover, they all improved in finding the main ideas of the texts (Rubin & Opitz 2007; Tompkins, 2007).

Discussion

It was not our aim to derive cause and effect relationships among the variables in this study and to generalize the data to the whole population of

individuals with hearing loss. However, the action research methodology adopted here provided us with critical information about learning and teaching attempts through critical reflection and inquiry (e.g. Johnson, 2002; Mills, 2003). Although there are many aspects that should be reviewed and revised, there are many improvements in hearing impaired youths (Griffith & Ripich, 1988; Schirmer, 2000; Yoshinaga-Itano & Downey, 1996) concerning the principles and components of balanced literacy instructional approach (2007; Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991; Pearson et al., 2007; Standiford, 1984; Strassman, 1997). There is a growing literate culture in the School (Cüceloğlu, 2008). The students and we have started to share meanings to construct a culture (Vygotsky, 1978). The purposeful, functional and meaningful learning instructions and situations seem to create “*the real learners*”. The students and the other readers have been reading our newspapers. The newspaper has been recognized by the National Statistics Institute. After the dissemination of each issue the readers fill out a survey form reflecting their opinions. The newspaper publication process has become a tradition of the school. The students are on their way to become a journalist and a reader (Alber, 1999; Lehr, 1995). The research team members keep reflecting on the model and prepare a plan for the following semesters. A new cycle has been conducted each semester. The emerged model has been tested through doctoral dissertations and master thesis. The language art instructors have become more competent in communication and their professions (deVito, 1989). We keep examining the instructional strategies. Interdisciplinary and metacognitive literacy model has been and will be examined (Ramsey & Conway, 1995). We have developed a school library. The students and the instructors have been utilizing this library during and after the lessons. We have developed a data base for library loans. We have an informal evaluation system for language and literacy. We have been developing a question bank so that we could rearrange various test formats. We are in the revisions process of this question bank (Oosterhof, 1999). Moreover, the experimental or quasi experimental studies are in need to be conducted in order to derive cause and effect relationships between the variables.

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