



ENRICHING THE READING EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG LEARNERS BY FOSTERING THE STRATEGY OF DRAWING INFERENCES AMONG THEM

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ABSTRACT

Inferring is the basis of mature comprehension and one of the most important cognitive strategies that a skilled reader should be equipped with. The biggest challenge involved in teaching young learners the strategy of inferring is the fact that they also need to perceive what has not been explicitly stated in the text. This is a tall order for a young reader because extracting inferential meaning from the text calls into play the readers' background knowledge, his personal experience, the written text and also the unwritten meaning of the writer (McEwan, 2004). The current paper is based on the premise that explicit and engaging instruction can be used in order to teach young learners the strategy of drawing inferences. The paper also explains and discusses the tools and the teaching methodology used by the researchers in order to teach middle school students the strategy of inferring.

Key words: *Inferring, explicit instruction, background knowledge*

INTRODUCTION

Teaching young learners to infer can be a formidable task because as Hirsch (2003 cited McEwan 2004) puts it, the ability to infer depends on the students' "word and world knowledge." When the researchers introduced the concept of "making inferences" to the middle school learners, it was simply incomprehensible for them. Based on the suggestion made by McGregor (2007), the researchers decided to give students a concrete experience of making inferences in order to make them realize that it was something that they did almost every day on a day to day basis. As Harvey (2007:138) puts it, "Inferring is about reading

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faces, reading body language, reading expressions and reading tone as well as reading text.” The researchers played a little game, as suggested by McGregor (2007), with the students in order to launch the concept of inferring and this caught the fancy of the students so much that it became a trusted anchor lesson to which the researcher referred back often in order to drive home the fact that they have it in them to make inferences.

The researchers produced a handbag before the students and told them that by examining the evidence in the bag, they had to figure out about the owner of the bag and create a profile of her. The one condition, however, was that the conclusions they drew should be based on evidence. The researcher posted some inferring stems to aid students as they expressed their thinking. They are as follows- *I think...*, *This could mean...*, *I assume...etc.* Based on the evidence in the bag, these were the assumptions that the students made on a whole class basis.

- Lipstick: *The lady is conscious about her looks. This could mean that she is stylish and good looking.*
- “Prevention” Magazine: *I think the lady is health conscious. The cost of this magazine is Rs. 100. I assume that she must be rich. I also infer that she is fond of reading since she didn’t mind spending so much on a magazine. This makes me infer that she must be well informed.*
- Pedigree Biscuits: *I assume that she must be having a dog for a pet. I think she is very fond of her dog and takes good care of it. Pedigree biscuits are quite expensive. I assume that she is quite rich.*
- Stationery Note pad: *This could mean that she is very organized. This assumption is reinforced by the fact that the bag doesn’t have unnecessary junk.*
- Receipt from a day care centre for kids: *I assume that she is a young, working woman who keeps her child/children in a day care centre. This means that she is an economically independent woman. This reconfirms my assumption that she is an educated woman.*

This experiment with the students turned out to be an anchor lesson and it was referred to over and over again as the study of inferring was deepened.

There were a few mini dramas carried out in which a few students dramatized the situation while their classmates i.e. the audience drew inferences that offered explanation for the



actors' behavior and words. The game was played as a whole class activity. Given here are two examples of mini games that were played.

- Two girls are looking at the third girl and laughing.
- A student who is poor in studies is called by the principal of the school to her office.

Equation for making inferences:

A simple equation, as suggested by Harvey (2007) and McEwan (2004), was used to teach students the strategy of inferring: **Text clues + Background Knowledge = Inference** (TC+ BK=I). The students were told how merging what they knew with the text clues would help them draw inferences. The typology of inferences, as suggested by Johnson and Johnson (1986 cited McEwan2004) and the prompts given by McEwan was used by the researcher to show students the various kinds of inferences that can be made. The text examples to illustrate each one of the inferences were added by the researcher. The students were each given a sheet of "Many ways to Infer" which gave them enough opportunity to read the statement properly and then discuss with their cooperative groups to come up with the best answer to the questions asked in the third column. Given below is the sheet "Many ways to Infer" which was used by the researchers:

| S No | Kind of inference | Text statement | Question |
|------|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| 1 | Location or setting | <i>Cattle were being sold or auctioned. Stalls had opened selling everything from pins to ploughs.</i> | Where do you think this is happening? |
| 2 | Career, occupation or job | <i>He had grown to resemble the drooping weeds that he was always digging up with his tiny spade.</i> | What do you think the person's profession must be? |
| 3 | Feeling | <i>The long held record was broken by me. Everybody came forward to congratulate me.</i> | What must be the feelings of the person? |
| 4 | Time (Clock or historical period) | <i>Arun was asleep. Moonlight came in from the veranda and fell across the bed.</i> | What time of the day is described? |
| 5 | Action | <i>At first the young bear put his nose to the ground and sniffed his way along until he came to a large ant hill.</i> | Based on the action described, what do you think the bear must be doing? |
| 6 | Instrument, tool | <i>He realized that his son had very high</i> | What tool is being used? |

| | | | |
|----|-------------------------|---|---|
| | or device | <i>fever.</i> | |
| 7 | Cause | <i>"I'll never make fun of old people again," she said.</i> | What do you think the cause is? |
| 8 | Effect | <i>In the first month of my job in the tea stall, I broke six cups and five saucers.</i> | What do you think the effect would be? |
| 9 | Problem | <i>This time I decided to muster enough courage to face the audience and give my speech.</i> | Based on the text, what do you think the problem was? |
| 10 | Solution | <i>The father needs money for the treatment of his child.</i> | What do you think the solution to it is? |
| 11 | Character's personality | <i>The employer said, "The customer is always right. You should have got out of his way."</i> | What do you conclude about the employer here? |

Researchers' Think Aloud:

The researchers used clear and explicit think aloud in order to model to the students how and what they think when they read. The purpose of these think alouds is to show students what thought processes go through the proficient readers' minds as they draw inferences and make sense of the text. Keene and Zimmermann (2007) suggest that the teachers need to be aware of their own thinking so that they can be as explicit as possible when describing to students how they infer in lessons.

The researchers chose some sentences from the table above and then answered the accompanying questions by thinking aloud using the equation given above $TC + BK = I$.

| | |
|--------------|--|
| What I read | <i>The long held record was broken by me. Everybody came forward to congratulate me.</i> |
| The question | <i>What must be the feelings of the person?</i> |
| $BK+TC=I$ | <i>The text says that a long held record was broken by the narrator. S/he must have felt very happy and proud of herself/himself. I remember once when I stood first in the university exam; everybody congratulated me and I felt elated. I felt particularly happy that I made my parents proud. The narrator must have had the same feelings.</i> |



The students witnessed how the researchers used text cues and background knowledge in order to know about various aspects of the text such as a cause-effect relationship, character's feelings, problem-solution etc. As the thought process became visible to the students, the students pitched in with their inferences and soon the researchers' think aloud evolved into an interactive session.

Guided practice for inferring with fictional texts:

One of the most important strategies required for reading fictional texts is that of inferring. While reading out the texts, the researchers modeled to the students how they zoomed in on parts of the narrative texts to know more about the character or to gain more insight about the cause-effect strategy or resolution of the problem. The students were shown how various items such as dialogue between characters or actions of the characters or even their inner thoughts can help us gain insight into the personality of the character. Similarly they were given practice in discovering implied meanings in the cause-effect relationship. Robb (2010) believes that students can get a unique interpretation of the text if the teacher helps her/his students connect this kind of thinking with their own lives or experiences before helping them move on to use it with their texts. For example- students were given the cause statement: *It was raining cats and dogs*. Students were then asked to pair-share to discuss the effects of the above mentioned cause. The students came up with answers such as- no school; the rivers overflowing, paper boats, riding the bicycle in the rain and letting it lash on their faces, water logged roads, *pakor*s and hot tea at home etc.

Guided practice for helping students understand the big ideas:

One of the biggest challenges in teaching inferring was to have the middle school students use specific details in the text in order to arrive at the general themes or big ideas. The researchers, again taking the cue from Robb(2010), began by starting with experiences that they could relate to in their own lives and together they created themes based on these. An example of the same is given below:

Details: *You were very close to a friend who lived in the neighborhood. You loved each other's company and cared for each other. One day, this friend breaks the news to you that his father has been transferred to another city. This comes as a bolt out of the blue for you. However you and your friend promise each other that you would keep in touch forever. After your friend moves to the new place, you call the person frequently and manage to keep in touch. However, as days pass by, you make new friends and so does your old friend. Gradually the calls to the friend become infrequent and later on, the calls stop altogether.*



Theme: Sometimes friendship may not stand the test of time.

The students were shown how details were used to arrive at the general theme. The students were told how to discern the difference between the theme and the plot. While the theme represents the bigger idea, the plot represents the action that takes place in the narrative. (Harvey, 2007) . The students soon learnt that the themes are rarely explicitly stated and how one has to infer themes or arrive at big ideas. The students also realized that there can be more than one theme or big idea in a text and whatever the theme arrived at, they had to support it by showing evidence from the text in the form of words in the text, the action or dialogues of the characters, pictures or illustrations etc.

Guided practice for inferring to understand non-fiction information:

One of the best ways to make students develop interest in their content subject is by making them draw inferences from the information that they have read. The students were given a fair idea as to what the difference between facts and opinion was- facts were statements that have been proved whereas opinions are feelings or beliefs that one has about something. The researchers gave students many opportunities while teaching content subjects to draw their own inferences from the facts that were stated in the texts. Given below are a few examples:

| Facts stated in the book | Inferences drawn or interpretation made. |
|---|--|
| Firewood and brushwood are used as fuel in rural areas. | This is a matter of concern as this can lead to destruction of forests. |
| The earth gets tremendous amount of energy from sun. | Why don't we Indians use only solar energy? After all, energy from sun is unlimited and renewable. |
| Growing population and industrialization would lead us to an energy crisis. | The only answer to this is to start using more solar energy. Government should encourage use of renewable sources of energy. |

CONCLUSION:

After being introduced to the skill of making inferences, it was noticed that the students showed a visible increase in the interest with which they read the texts. They learnt that one has to see beyond the information given in the text and draw inferences from them. After due practice, the students started showing a little more confidence in the use of the strategy of



inferring and showed some improvement in comprehending the text. Students also started applying the strategy of making inferences to their own lives. For instance, Ajay could now understand how people drew inferences from the body language used and how it added meaning to what was being verbally conveyed. Vedha mentioned that now she was more conscious of when she was using the skill of inferring even in her day to day life. The students, after doing the cause-effect exercise, could also apply it to their own lives and realized that they had to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions or lack of it. For instance, if they scored less in the exams, then the cause was not their bad luck but their lack of efforts. Thus the use of inferring skills had a positive effect both on their reading experience as well as on their lives.

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