

Teachers' Instructional Competence on Students' Comprehension Skills and Critical Thinking Ability

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Abstract

Reading is a challenge and an opportunity to every person's daily undertaking. If its ultimate aim is to develop critical thinking, then it has to be inculcated in the basic education. Observably, there is a prevailing issue on the low performance of students in content areas owing to their lack of comprehension. It is therefore the purpose of this study to determine how the teachers' instructional competence influences the intermediate students' comprehension skills as well as their critical thinking ability. Utilizing the normative-evaluative method, findings revealed that the intermediate students obtained an above average performance in following Directions. This reveals that the students are generally obedient. They are conscious of applying the skill in carrying out their varied activities/responsibilities because according to them careful compliance to standards and the like, engenders peace and order. On the other hand, both groups performed below average in Predicting Outcomes and Drawing Inferences respectively. This obviously denotes inadequacy in making intelligent guesses which are paramount in decision making. Since reading is significant to success basically in an academic undertaking, the teachers' instructional competence as reflected in the findings is highly instrumental in the development of students' comprehension skills and critical thinking as these would eventually lead them to function effectively in society.

Keywords

Intermediate Students; Reading Comprehension; Critical Thinking; Instructional Competence

1. Introduction

Reading is a challenge. It is an important means of introducing the child to his environment. Hence, it is consi-

dered the basic tool for his personal and academic development. Challenges and opportunities are offered in order for him/her to understand the world better and eventually respond to its diverse needs. In so doing, he/she makes himself/herself a useful citizen, an active contributor to the progress of the nation and eventually becomes an agent of transformation. To fully grasp, internalize and apply what has been read is not an overnight fuss. Everything has to start from the very first years of the child's exposure to the different reading comprehension skills and gradually master them. Paris [1] likewise noted that a competent reader exhibits three kinds of knowledge about the reading process as they read: 1) declarative knowledge—the “what” of comprehension 2) procedural knowledge—the “how” of comprehension and 3) conditional knowledge—the “when” of comprehension. In this tough world where stiff competition is apparent, comprehension is necessary in the development of a child's critical thinking. The ability and the skill to follow directions, determine cause and effect relationships, distinguish fact from opinion, draw inference and predict outcomes are potent tools that would lead the child to function effectively in the society. It is the concern of this study that the intermediate students' comprehension skills be evaluated because as noted, students' weaknesses in other areas of discipline like problem solving in Mathematics, situational analysis in Social Studies, understanding and applying the scientific processes in Science, poem and story analysis in Communication Arts in English and Filipino and the like, do not lie on the subject per se, rather on the aspect of comprehension. Thus this study is conducted.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to determine the influence of teachers' instructional competence on the intermediate students' reading comprehension skills profile and their critical thinking ability.

3. Literature Review

This study is anchored on the theory of Hyde [2] which states that the ability to read proficiently is a fundamental skill that affects the learning experiences and school performance of children and adolescent students as measured by their performance on reading tests, are more likely to perform well in other subjects such as Math and Science. Parker *et al.* [3] confirm that reading and writing are strong predictors of reading, writing, and math content assessment outcomes. According to Dole *et al.* [4] in the traditional view of reading, novice readers acquire a set of hierarchically ordered sub-skills that sequentially build toward comprehension ability. Although Laberge and Samuels [5] state in their concept of automaticity that attention is important to reading and only a small amount of attention can be used for decoding skills if one is to comprehend fully. Goodman [6] in his cognitive view of reading, stressed that having mastered these skills, readers are viewed as experts who comprehend what they read. He presented reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game, a process in which readers sample the text, make hypotheses and so forth. Here, the reader rather than the text is at the heart of the reading process. Being aware that strong reading skills in early children protect unemployment according to Caspi [7], teachers in the basic education in particular should be well-equipped with relevant methods and techniques in order guide the students to become develop comprehension skills and eventually lead them to become critical thinkers and lifelong learners. Burbules, N. and Berk Rupert [8] note that a concern with critical thinking in education, in the broad sense of teaching students the rules of logic or how to assess evidence is hardly new. Conscious of this ultimate goal in teaching reading, Siegel [9] added that the critical movement has emphasized the idea that specific reasoning undergird the curriculum as a whole and that the purpose of education is to foster critical thinking and that the skills and disposition of critical thinking can and should infuse teaching and learning at all levels of schooling. In this study, critical thinking ability of students is developed through the teacher's art of questioning. Taba [10] identifies a strategy which utilizes the question approach as “cognitive commerce”, the active cognitive transaction that occurs when the child interacts with his environment. Questions may range from focusing type, which establish a “mental set” or purpose for reading or discussion, to raising type, designed to obtain additional information on a topic at a higher level of comprehension. According to her, questioning strategy, an important instructional tool increases one's ability to develop comprehension competencies and levels. The different interaction patterns are: Focusing—where the question or statement identifies the topic and established a “mental set” for the discussion; Extending—where the teacher elicits ideas for clarification and elaboration; Lifting—where the teacher leads the discussion to a higher level and Substantiating—where a student or teacher justifies choices of actions. She mentioned that understanding the questioning strategies will heighten awareness of interaction patterns in the classroom.

The interplay of these theories would shed light on how the teachers' instructional competence influences the students' comprehension skills and their critical thinking ability.

4. Methodology

This research which utilized the normative-evaluative method focused on the assessment of comprehension skills among the intermediate students' (grade 5 and 6) of St. Theresa's College, Cebu City. Varied stories with corresponding comprehension questions were provided to both groups respectively. Thereafter, the students' comprehension skills profile was assessed. Conscious of their influence on the students' critical thinking ability, the reading teachers' instructional competence was likewise determined.

5. Results and Discussion

As shown in the **Table 1**, it is in the Following Directions where students attain the Above Average level. This means that the students achieve more than the performance target. This finding is reflective of this skill being basically introduced in the Pre-School (STC Grade School-Scope and Sequence in Reading and Phonics) and exposed at home and in the environment. Taba [10] in her question approach as "cognitive commerce" noted that the active cognitive transaction occurs when the child interacts with his environment. Furthermore, it is not only taught in reading but in other subjects as well. Hence, consciously and unconsciously, they have mastered the skill.

It is in the skill in Predicting Outcomes however, that students need to improve on. They results show that students have not attained the performance target, hence Below Average. Since this skill involves making intelligent guesses about what may happen in the future as a result of series of observations, given the situation on hand, these students are not very well equipped yet to apply the skill. Edfelt [11] said that since comprehension is not a passive process, the comprehender must continually make hypothesis on what he is reading, check the hypothesis with other data available, and modify the hypothesis if inadequate. The results imply that these students tend to see only what is here and what is available, thus they tend to scamper on some necessary things to be done in case certain needs arise. The results possibly denote that of most of them are over-protected by the family and friends.

Although the findings show that these students, have achieved more than the proficiency level (Above Average), there is still a need to further reinforce the skills which they found difficult (Below Average).

The findings in **Table 2** reveals that among the five reading skills, the Grade 6 students are Above Average in the skill on Following Directions. It can be deduced that this finding can be the result of the early introduction of the skill in the curriculum. (STC Grade School—Scope and Sequence in Reading and Phonics). Furthermore, students have mastered this skill because it is not only in Reading class that the Following Directions is stressed but in other subject areas as well. It is likewise very much applicable in and out of the classroom where they consciously use the skill. It is in the skill on Drawing Inferences that the Grade 6 students achieved the Below Average rating. Reading is not a matter of determining a single correct meaning in the text; it is a matter of interpreting the text based on what the reader already knows. (Duffy and Roehler, [12]). This finding revealed that students still need the ability to guess/infer some causes of certain actions. Possibly still, this particular skill is not commonly practiced/experienced in school and outside, thus they somehow fail to analyze why and how certain situations happen. Thus, they need more enrichment activities to reinforce their mastery of the skill.

In totality, the reading comprehension skills profile of the Grade 6 students is Average which means, the students have gained satisfactory achievement in reading. However, relevant activities are still needed for reinforcement and mastery of the skills noted.

The findings show the various utterances of students on how their reading teacher's influenced them on their critical thinking ability as shown in the **Table 3**. They are ranked according to their degree of influence. Results show both Excellent and Very Good performance of the teacher. This may have accounted to the teacher's educational background being a master's degree holder in English Language Teaching and her experience of having taught the subject for almost a decade. It is further implied that the teacher is conscious of her strategies in teaching the subject. The pre-mid and post reading activities have made their teaching-learning experiences meaningful. According to Melendez and Pritchard [13] a series of pre-mid and post-reading activities serve to synthesize students to the cultural framework which they need as they survey the text, form expectations, make predictions and respond to questions that would portray their understanding of the content, an indicator of their

Table 1. Reading skills profile of the grade five pupils of St. Theresa's college SY 1995-1996.

Skills	No. of Items	h.m.	a.m.	SD	Computed z	Description
1. Following Directions	10	7.5	9.6	0.62	49.08	Above Average
2. Distinguishing Fact From Opinion	10	7.5	7.14	1.80	2.90	Below Average
3. Determining Cause and Effect Relationship	10	7.5	6.63	1.98	6.37	Below Average
4. Drawing Inferences	10	7.5	7.56	1.81	0.48	Average
5. Predicting Outcomes	10	7.5	7.27	1.65	2.02	Below Average
Total	50	37.50	38.20	4.51	2.51	Above Average

Table 2. Reading skills profile of the grade six pupils of St. Theresa's college SY 1995-1996.

Skills	No. of Items	h.m.	a.m.	SD	Computed z	Description
1. Following Directions	10	7.5	8.95	0.87	24.17	Above Average
2. Distinguishing Fact From Opinion	10	7.5	6.95	1.67	4.58	Below Average
3. Determining Cause and Effect Relationship	10	7.5	6.8	1.65	6.36	Below Average
4. Drawing Inferences	10	7.5	7.04	2.04	3.29	Below Average
5. Predicting Outcomes	10	7.5	7.51	2.00	0.07	Average
Total	50	37.50	37.25	5.31	0.68	Average

Table 3. Teacher's instructional influences on grade 5 students' critical thinking ability.

Teaching-Learning Activities	Weighted Mean	Description	Rank
She allows us to ask questions about the story.	4.93	E	1
She encourages us to read good books, magazines, and other reading materials.	4.34	E	2
She carries out the reading lesson with vitality and enthusiasm thus keeping us attentive.	4.31	E	3
She uses varied ways and means to make us understand the lesson.	4.30	E	4
She gives oral and written activities to measure our understanding of the lesson.	4.25	E	5
She encourages and guides us to think in the right direction.	4.11	VG	6
She gives many exercises and activities related to our lesson.	4.07	VG	7
She shares with us her actual life experiences that are related to our lesson and activities.	4	VG	8
She helps us understand unfamiliar words found in the story.	3.92	VG	9
She arouses our social awareness through the activities based on real life situations.	3.91	VG	10
She brings and connects our lessons to our life.	3.89	VG	11
She gives us a chance to give opinions and react to events or characters found in the story.	3.81	VG	12
She asks clear and easy to understand questions.	3.77	VG	13
She creatively brings the interest of the class to the new lesson.	3.75	VG	14
She relates our lesson to the contents in other subjects.	3.57	VG	15
Total	4.06	VG	

ability to comprehend. Buy and large, the instructional influences of the Reading Teacher on the Grade 5 students' critical thinking ability as experienced and rated by the students themselves gained a weighted mean of

4.06 which means a Very Good performance. Taking into consideration the noted results, the teacher has performed and brought about a well-grounded, relevant teaching and learning activities. She is also able to provide opportunities for higher order thinking skills which made the students analyze as well as evaluate varied situations. The research of Wolf, King and Huck [14] on children's critical thinking abilities identified the importance of higher level questions on children's responses. They found that questions characterized as interpreting, analyzing, applying and evaluating produced higher response level than did specific fact or classifying type questions.

As shown in the **Table 4**, the feedback/comments of the Grade 6 students which were ranked according to the degree of influence reveal that their teacher made a Very Good performance in the way she influenced her students in the development of their critical thinking ability. This further shows competence of the teacher in the delivery of instruction owing to her educational background as masters degree holder and having rich experience in teaching both in the primary and intermediate levels. Furthermore, the Reading teacher who has taught reading for critical thinking, conscientiously utilized questioning strategies. Taba [10] said that the basic and commonly accepted tool used to stimulate thinking and enhance the cognitive process and comprehension ability is the question. Questions can clarify information and encourage the child to involve higher thinking processes. Concretely, the students have mentioned about the teacher's art of questioning which evidently led them to think intensively about the varied situations which bear practical value to their lives. Generally, all activities/learning experiences are substantiated and geared towards the development of critical thinking and in the attainment of the vision-mission of the school: total formation of a person.

However, with the conscious desire to excel, the teacher needs to continuously equip herself with varied and relevant activities in order to make teaching-learning more meaningful.

Table 5 discloses that there is a significant relationship between the Grade 5 students' reading achievement and teacher's instructional competence. This aptly reveals that teaching methods affect students' proficiency in reading. Varied materials and meaningful learning activities which basically include the art of questioning, help influence their critical thinking ability. Every child deserves excellent reading teachers because teachers make a difference in children's reading achievement. (International Reading Association). In capsule, good teachers create environments in which everyone has a chance to learn. Giving due credit to instruction, the teacher is considered an indispensable bridge to facilitate meaningful learning outcome.

The results show a significant relationship between the Grade 6 students' reading achievement and the teacher's instructional competence as shown in the **Table 6**. This means the higher the teacher's instructional competence, the higher is the students' achievement. According to Le Fever [15], students learn fast and enjoy the learning process when teachers use strategies that correspond to the students' primary learning styles. Therefore, with some obvious reasons that students in this era of technology crave for more information, all the more the

Table 4. Teacher's instructional influences on grade 6 students' critical thinking ability.

Teaching-Learning Activities	Weighted Mean	Description	Rank
She gives oral and written activities to measure our understanding of the lesson.	4.29	E	1
She helps us understand unfamiliar words found in the story.	4.26	E	2
She allows us to ask questions about the story.			
She uses varied ways and means to make us understand the lesson.	4.21	E	3.5
She gives many exercises and activities related to our lesson.	4.05	VG	5
She encourages and guides us to think in the right direction.	3.91	VG	6
She encourages us to read good books, magazines, and other reading materials.	3.82	VG	7
She asks clear and easy to understand questions.	3.81	VG	8
She gives us a chance to give opinions and react to events or characters found in the story.	3.76	VG	9
She brings and connects our lessons to our life.	3.72	VG	10
She shares with us her actual life experiences that are related to our lesson and activities.	3.64	VG	11
She relates our lesson to the contents in other subjects.	3.62	VG	12
She carries out the reading lesson with vitality and enthusiasm thus keeping us attentive.	3.6	VG	13
She arouses our social awareness through the activities based on real life situations.	3.45	VG	14
She creatively brings the interest of the class to the new lesson.	3.27	G	15
Total	3.84	VG	

Table 5. Relationship between the grade five students' reading achievement and teacher's instructional competence.

Variables	N	X	SD	R	T
1. Teacher's Instructional Competence in Reading	210	59.84	7.40	0.161	2.736
2. Students' Reading Achievement	210	38.28	4.51		

N = 210.

Table 6. Relationship between the grade six students' reading achievement and teacher's instructional competence.

Variables	N	X	SD	R	T
1. Teacher's Instructional Competence in Reading	210	57.95	9.60	0.187	2.75
2. Students' Reading Achievement	210	37.32	5.31		

N = 210.

teacher should equip himself/herself with content and pedagogical skills as they affect students' proficiency in reading.

6. Conclusion

Teachers' instructional competence is highly instrumental in the development of students' comprehension and critical thinking ability. Since reading is significant to success both in the academic and non-academic undertaking, reading instruction should be made relevant so that students will be led to function effectively in society.

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