

Explicitly teaching and practising visualization strategies can improve comprehension levels in children who have reading difficulties.

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Abstract

One of the problems which many students encounter is that of being able to decode a text but have little understanding of what is being read. This study examines how explicit teaching of the visualization strategy to students who have completed the Reading Recovery program can improve their literal and inferential comprehension ability.

Six Year 3 students were chosen for the study, three in the teaching and learning group and three in the control group. All students had been on the Reading Recovery program within the past two years, and all had received extra literacy support in Year 2. Pre assessment and post assessment testing was used to determine improvements made over the ten lessons, and all students showed gains in comprehension. The intervention targeted explicit teaching of visualization as a strategy during the ten lessons, with a gradual withdrawal of scaffolding and support by the teacher.

Implications for teaching indicate that there needs to be a focus on explicit teaching of a variety of skills and strategies in order for students to improve their reading comprehension.

Introduction

Many students find it difficult to comprehend what they are reading, and for many the effort involved in simply decoding the text gives them little or no time to develop any understanding of what is being read. Students in their second year of schooling are routinely tested and those deemed 'at risk' of not meeting benchmark standards are offered a place in the Reading Recovery Program.

These children are explicitly taught the strategies to become proficient readers and writers, and a gradual release of responsibility model is used. This enables the child to move from a position of greatest support to complete independence by gradually withdrawing scaffolding at the child's 'zone of proximal development', (Vygotsky, 1978) as cited in Rodgers & Rodgers, (2004). However, after the twenty week program there are some students who still find it difficult to be successful at reading, consequently other paths or strategies need to be sought to assist these children.

Research shows that many strategies are used by successful readers, including activating prior knowledge, finding the main idea in a text, making visual images and drawing inferences. Skills such as re-reading, self-checking and using all sources of information on a page are also vital in the reading process. Good readers employ these skills while reading in a fluent manner, which generally assists

in comprehending at deeper levels. Marie Clay, in her book "Literacy Lessons Designed For Individuals Part One" cites Ken Goodman and Carolyn Burke who state that ".....the proficient reader gets the most meaning with the least effort in the fastest time!"

Students who have completed the Reading Recovery program but still have difficulties with reading need an intervention which will utilize those strategies and skills they have learnt, but provide them with a way to make links between the information they are reading about and how they can better understand it. Teaching children to visualize as they read helps students organize their thoughts and re-tell stories or information in a more logical and descriptive manner. Chan, Cole and Morris define visualizing as "imagining or 'making pictures in the mind' of what is being read and aims at promoting active processing and organization of text propositions to enhance comprehension and recall." (Chan, Cole and Morris, 1990, pg 3). Nanci Bell, (1991), provides a detailed study in using visual imagery to make mind pictures, and sees the technique as one which "links a reader to and from prior knowledge, establishes vocabulary and stores information in both long term and short term memory." (Bell, 1991)

A National Reading Panel Report (US Education Department, 2002) claims that text comprehension is best facilitated by teaching students a variety of techniques and strategies to assist in recall of information, formulation of questions and the ability to summarize information. For those students who struggle with reading for a variety of reasons, whether it be a lack of a wide range of prior experiences or knowledge, difficulty with organizing and verbalizing thoughts, lack of practice in applying the skills they do know, or poor self-efficacy and confidence when reading, all paths need to be explored.

Visualization may be a useful strategy to explicitly teach these children in order to improve their reading behaviour and comprehension.

Method

This study uses an OXO design in which the gains in reading comprehension were monitored following explicit teaching of the visualization strategy to three Year Three students who had experienced earlier interventions. Six students participated in the project, three in the teaching and learning group and three in a control group.

School assessment data has identified the three students in the teaching and learning group as performing well below expected standard for grade level. All three students have participated in the Reading Recovery Program during Year One, and received follow-up intervention the next year in Grade Two. This year the students have commenced the ERIK program and will continue with that program during second and third term of this year. Test data from ERIK was used to build a literacy profile of each child. Two of the children can decode text competently enough to be reading between a Level 19 to 23 in the Alpha Assess Benchmark Kit, however one of the children is experiencing difficulties with decoding and has reached Level 12 Instructional.

Students in the control group are working at slightly below average level in the classroom. These students also participated in the Reading Recovery program in Year One. All three experienced extra literacy support in Year Two and are currently on the ERIK program during terms two and three of this year.

Student	Age	Male or Female	Information/Profile
Student A	8 years 1 month	Male	Student A completed the ERIK testing in March 2008. Results of the assessment tasks undertaken indicate that Student A reads slowly and inaccurately, which affects comprehension results. He decodes unknown words incorrectly and makes guesses and substitutions which are often not real words. He has difficulties with the structure of language and finds retelling a story a hard task. Reading at Level 12.
Student B	8 years 0 months	Female	Student B also completed ERIK testing in March 2008 and results show that she reads slowly and inaccurately which affects comprehension. Her understanding of the structure of

			language is poor and her retell of a story showed difficulties. Student B had particular difficulty with Part 2 of the K-BIT test (matrices) involving visual analogy (she scored 3 in percentile rank). Reading at Level 19.
Student C	7 years11 months	Male	Previous testing (ERIK) has shown that Student C reads quickly and often inaccurately, affecting comprehension. He guesses and substitutes random words, and answers to questions are often unrelated to the original question entirely. He is unable to locate the section of the story which relates to the question heard. Although Student C has good verbal skills he has difficulty in immediately recalling spoken language, particularly that of a complex nature. Reading at Level 23.

Materials

The materials used include the following;

- Alpha Assess Benchmark Kit: CEO benchmarking kit used only for testing purposes. 'Record of Behaviour' and 'Reading Behaviour Analysis' proformas used.
- ACER Comprehension Test 2. Used for pre and post Testing purposes, measuring comprehension at the literal and inferential levels.
- Language In Pictures (Catholic Education Office)
- Cue cards
- Guided reading book sets
- Picture story books;
- LDA Photo picture cards
- Visualizing Strategy (John Munro)
- Information maps
- Whiteboard and markers
- Paper, grey leads and felt tip pens
- Tape recorder
- Easel for shared books

Procedure

The Reading Benchmark (Alpha Assess) test was administered to each child individually, while the Reading Progress Test was administered to both groups simultaneously. This procedure applied pre and post test. The lessons were given only to the teaching group. Lessons were conducted as small group sessions for thirty minutes per day over a period of three weeks. The three students who were part of the teaching group were withdrawn from the literacy block during the first two hours of the day for optimum teaching and learning. Each session began with a review of the previous day's lesson and concluded with a plenary session in which the children articulated their learning.

A teaching model of gradual release of responsibility for learning based on Vygotsky's Model of Teaching, as cited in Rodgers E., and Rodgers M., (2004)) was used over the ten sessions. Initially the students were introduced to the strategy with explicit instruction and modeling before gradually moving towards independence by lesson eight. By lesson ten, students were expected to use the strategy independently with no prompting by the teacher. Scaffolding strategies were used throughout; "scaffolding requires clearly articulated goals and learning activities which are structured in ways that enable learners to extend their existing levels of understanding." Hammond & Gibbons (2001) Guided practice enabled teacher and students to share responsibility for task completion with gradual withdrawal of support by the teacher. Group discussion gave feedback to students and encouraged independent practice. By the end of the lessons, children could apply the strategy without support and in other settings, (e.g. classroom or home).

Narrative texts were used to enable students to use their imagination to create their own mind pictures. During shared reading sessions only the text was shown to the children with illustrations being shown after students had drawn and discussed their own pictures. Texts were read in short sections so that students could recall, visualize and draw before proceeding to the next page/section. These texts moved from a "read to" book, to "shared read", to "guided read" and "independent reading".

Cue cards were introduced during the first lesson to help students provide additional information when describing a sentence/paragraph/story, and create a more detailed mental picture.

The series of lessons moved from simple to more complex sentences, longer paragraphs and full stories.

Verbalizing was heavily emphasized during the intervention. Questioning was open-ended to provide students with greater opportunity to verbalize their thoughts and give more detail.

A record of the lesson plans can be found in Appendix 3.

Results

Trends for this group indicate that the use of visual techniques such as making mental pictures while reading can increase reading comprehension at text level. Improvement in comprehension scores is shown for all three students regardless of whether or not they have moved to a higher level. Two of the students moved up one instructional level in text reading while one remained at the same level but improved on the number of miscues, accuracy and comprehension (literal and inferential).

The students' performance can be described in two sections, reading behaviour and reading comprehension.

The tables below summarize the results of the reading behaviour performance test (Alpha Assess Benchmarking Kit) for the three students in the teaching group. All children were tested to instructional level of text.

Alpha Assess Benchmarking Kit

Student A	Pre-test			
	Miscues	Self corrections	Accuracy	Comprehension (1-6)
Level 12 "Going Rowing"	11	2	91%	3
Student A	Post-test			
	Miscues	Self corrections	Accuracy	Comprehension (1-6)
Level 12 "Going Rowing"	7	2	94%	4

Student A demonstrated improvement in reading behaviour and comprehension during the intervention, however it should be noted that he is reading at a significantly lower level than the other children in the group. Consequently the time taken by Student A to complete most of the testing and activities was greater than that of the other children. He was more focused on decoding the text than on visualizing what was being read. Student A also has poor verbal skills and was more dependent on questioning and prompts to develop visual images. During the post testing Student A monitored his reading more accurately and read more expressively. His re-tell was more detailed.

Student B	Pre-test			
	Miscues	Self corrections	Accuracy	Comprehension (1-6)
Level 20 "The Girl And Her Bucket"	9	3	94%	4
Student B	Post-test			
	Miscues	Self corrections	Accuracy	Comprehension (1-6)
Level 21 "Flying With The Wind"	8	1	93%	6

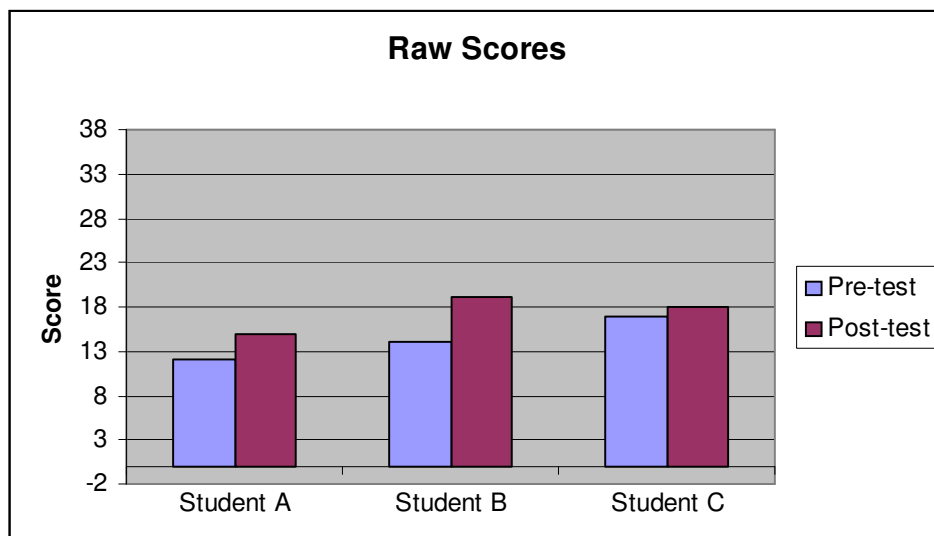
Student B was confident in using her ability to visualize, and was keen to talk about the 'mind pictures' she had made. Of all members of the group, Student B was the most engaged and motivated and the results indicate that she made the most gains.

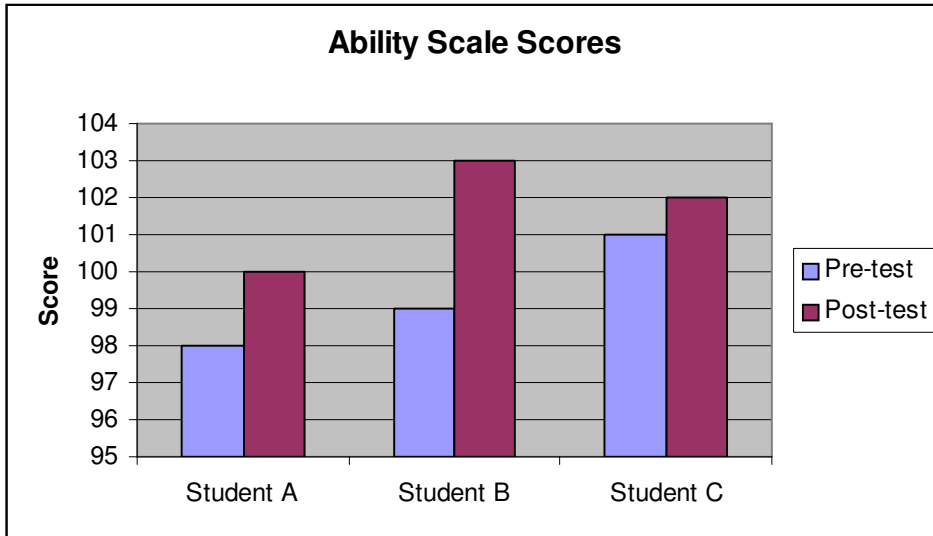
Student C	Pre-test			
	Miscues	Self corrections	Accuracy	Comprehension (1-6)
"Level 21 Flying With The Wind"	7	1	94%	2
Student C	Post-test			
	Miscues	Self corrections	Accuracy	Comprehension (1-6)
Level 22 "The Laughing Dragon"	17	2	90%	4

Student C made an improvement of one instructional level at post-testing, with a gain in comprehension score. His accuracy was slightly lower and number of miscues greater however his retell was more detailed and logical than in the pretest. He claimed that he could "see the dragon in my head because I've seen them in movies and this one looks the same....I like this story."

Below are the graphs showing results pre and post testing for the ACER Reading Progress Test (comprehension) for the same group of children.

ACER Reading Progress Test (comprehension)





Again, overall trends for this group show improvement in the students' ability to recall information and comprehend at a literal and inferential level.

Student B shows the greatest gains between pre and post testing, which supports the data shown in the Alpha Assess scores. Student A demonstrates improvement while Student C shows a slight gain.

Results for students in the control group are shown below:

Alpha Assess Benchmarking Kit

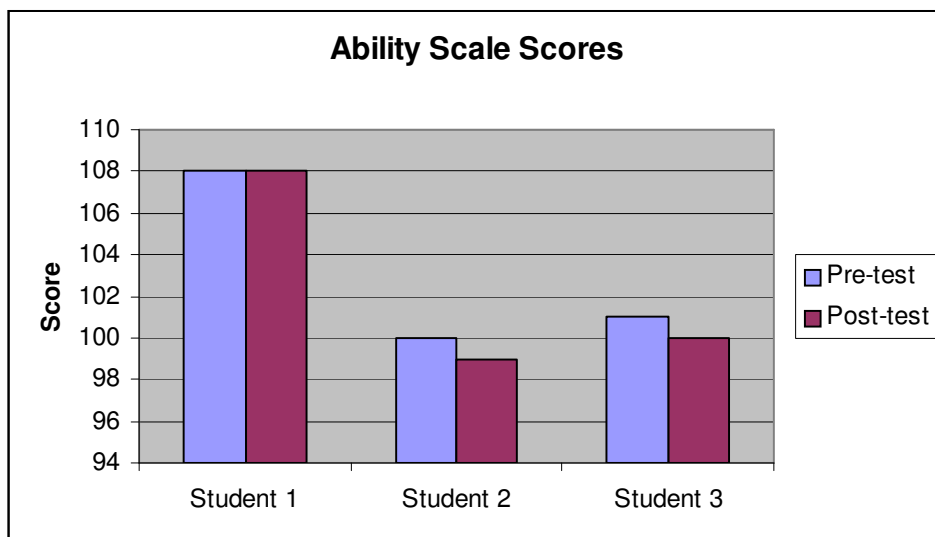
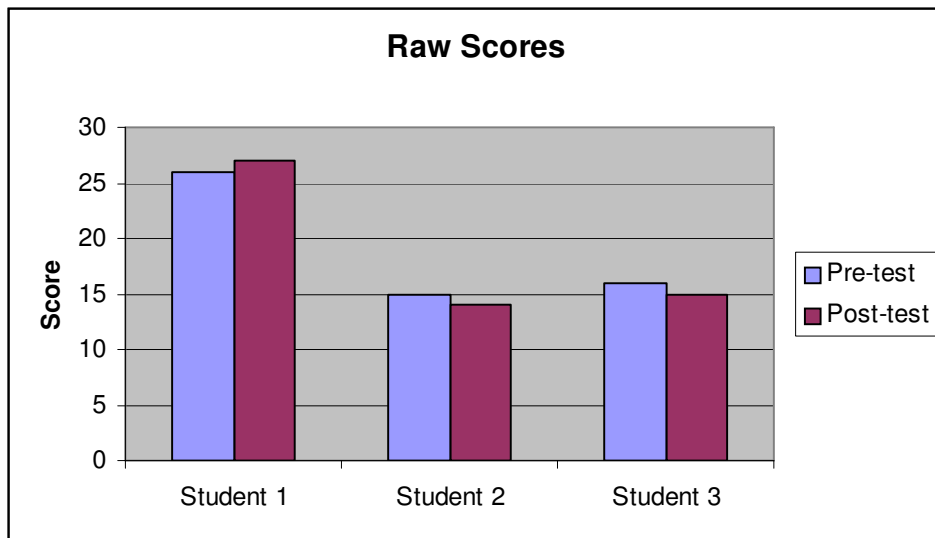
Student 1	Pre-test			
	Miscues	Self corrections	Accuracy	Comprehension (1-6)
Level 26 "How The Sun And Moon Were Made"	11	1	94%	6
Student 1	Post-test			
	Miscues	Self corrections	Accuracy	Comprehension (1-6)
Level 26 "How The Sun And Moon Were Made"	11	2	94%	6

Student 2	Pre-test			
	Miscues	Self corrections	Accuracy	Comprehension (1-6)
Level 23 "Tigers, the Big Cats"	11	0	94%	5
Student 2	Post-test			
	Miscues	Self corrections	Accuracy	Comprehension (1-6)
Level 24 "Skydiving"	11	1	92%	4

Student 3	Pre-test			
	Miscues	Self corrections	Accuracy	Comprehension (1-6)
Level 19 "Saving Water"	7	2	94%	5
Student 3	Post-test			
	Miscues	Self corrections	Accuracy	Comprehension (1-6)
Level 24 "Skydiving"	11	0	91%	3

Results for this group of children indicate that although they may be reading and decoding at the same or even a higher level, their rates of comprehension have shown no improvement, and in fact have decreased slightly or remained static during the period between testing.

ACER Reading Progress Test



The above data indicates that there was slight improvement in reading performance and comprehension skills for one student in the control group, however the other two students showed a decrease in results over the time period.

Discussion

The results of this study support the hypothesis that explicitly teaching and practising visualization strategies can improve comprehension levels in children who have reading difficulties. All three students in the teaching group showed that creating a mental picture of the story helped them to organize their thoughts and retell more descriptively. The children in the control group, while improving in reading performance, did not make gains in literal or inferential comprehension at post testing.

Variables which impact on the test data also need to be taken into consideration. All six children involved in the study are currently undertaking the ERIK program, which may have affected the results for the Alpha Assess Reading Behaviour test. This instruction occurred alongside the intervention, at a similar time of day, so it could be said that one may enhance the outcomes of the other. Another consideration is the students' attitudes towards reading. "Reader differences in such capabilities as fluency in word recognition, oral language ability, and domain knowledge, along with differences in such dispositions as the reader's motivation, goals and purposes, are important sources of variability in reading comprehension." (Reading for Understanding, p. 20)

Student A lacked confidence in his ability to read and was at times distracted and unfocussed during the study. He responded well to praise and positive encouragement from both the teacher and his peers.

Students B and C both had positive self talk about their reading ability and were able to focus on the tasks more easily.

Another variable which needs to be considered is students' prior knowledge and vocabulary. One of the guided reading texts used in Lesson 6 was about camping in a tent, a topic which was easily visualized by Student C who has frequently had this experience. Students A and B were not as proficient in their 'mind picture-making' in this instance as they did not have prior experience. Student A was unfamiliar with row boats (Alpha Assess Level 12) and struggled with decoding some of the text in pre and post testing.

A shift was noted in the way students organized their thoughts more cohesively over the duration of the lessons.

Working as a group rather than individually meant that discussion was extended, becoming dynamic and meaningful. Skillful questioning and prompting by the teacher supported and scaffolded the learning taking place, and gave each child the opportunity to extend their understanding.

Implications for further teaching of children with reading difficulties is that they require explicit, clear instruction and opportunity to practice the skills and strategies they need to use in order to become efficient and successful readers. Teacher modeling is vital, and careful scaffolding of the learning in all its phases will enable students to become independent and thoughtful readers. Expert prompting and questioning by the teacher leads students to clarify and organize their thoughts in a more logical and descriptive manner. It is important for those students who struggle with reading to be given opportunity to verbalize with the teacher, in a small group situation and with a partner.

For this group of students it is recommended that they continue to receive explicit and direct instruction in reading comprehension strategies. They also need to be given the opportunity to develop vocabulary and activate prior knowledge throughout the reading process.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Ten Teaching Sessions

Lesson 1

Materials: Cue cards

Pens, pencils, paper

Novel: "George's Marvellous Medicine." By Roald Dahl

Photo Adjective Cards (LDA)

Aim:

- to help the student create a picture in his/her mind
- describe his/her picture

Steps

- Teacher explains the purpose of the lessons – we are going to make pictures in our minds as we read so that we can understand stories better.
- Read the description of Grandma (pg 5) from "George's Marvellous Medicine" by Roald Dahl, which the children are currently listening to as a class novel.
- Ask the children to listen again as they close their eyes and make a picture of Grandma in their mind. Think about what she looks like, sounds like, smells like and feels like.
- Introduce the cue cards:
 - ❖ **Who/What** can you see in the story?
 - ❖ **Where** are they?
 - ❖ **When** did the event happen?
 - ❖ **Movement** - what are the characters doing?
 - ❖ **Sound** - what can be heard?
 - ❖ **Feel** - how are they feeling?
- Each child describes the picture of Grandma they see in their mind. Discuss with the group.
- Ask the children to draw a picture of grandma. Discuss as a group.

- Each child selects a picture from the Picture card set. Use the cue cards to describe the picture, using as much detail as possible.
- Elicit more information from students by asking appropriate questions.
- Take turns to describe pictures then ask children to select another one to work with.
- PLENARY: Revise the concept of visualizing (making mind pictures or videos in our head) and ask the children to reflect on one new thing they have learnt today.

Lesson 2

Materials:

Sentence strips

Cue cards

Paper

Grey leads

Picture story book “Hairy Maclary’s Showbusiness” by Lynley Dodd

Aim:

- To focus on making mind pictures using cue cards.
- To visualize at sentence.

Steps:

- Revise yesterday’s lesson – making videos/pictures in our minds. Look again at the cue cards and discuss briefly.
- Introduce the sentence strips (List A). Student A selects a sentence strip and reads aloud to the group. The children close their eyes and make a picture in their minds of the sentence. Student A describes his picture to the group. (e.g. “The children sat and ate breakfast.”)
- Students B and C take turns to choose a sentence and describe their mind picture to the others in the group. Each child takes another turn, this time using information from the cue cards to help their description.
- The students choose one of the sentences to draw. Refer to the cue cards to make sure that all relevant details are included (teacher asks open ended questions to gain more information and to scaffold the learning.)
- Share pictures with the group and discuss.

- Teacher reads the story “Hairy Maclary’s Showbusiness” Students are asked to close their eyes and listen, and make a video or movie in their mind as the story is read. (The teacher can prompt using the cue cards.)
- PLENARY: Students articulate the ways they can think about a story in their mind and how they can apply that knowledge when reading.

Lesson 3

Materials

Paper

Grey leads/textas

Cue cards

Story “Hairy Maclary’s Showbusiness” by Lynley Dodd

Aim

- To make mind pictures using the information in a short text and to be able to describe his/her pictures.

Steps:

- Teacher begins reading the story “ Hairy Maclary’s Showbusiness” again to the children (not showing illustrations as yet.) After each page, stop and ask the students to describe the picture they have in their mind.
- Encourage students to articulate what they see, referring to the cue cards, e.g. “Where is Hairy Maclary” “Why did he want to go to the cat show?”
- Each child is given a piece of paper folded into four. Ask them to draw a sequence of pictures, just using grey lead, which represents what they have been seeing in their mind. (Prompt using the cue cards.)
- When finished, each student retells the story using the pictures they have drawn and the cue cards (taking turns.)
- PLENARY: Read the story book to the children again, this time showing the illustrations. Ask deeper questions of the children, e.g. Imagine if you were Hairy Maclary – what would you have done? Why do you think he likes to chase cats? How did he feel about receiving a prize at the end of the cat show?

Lesson 4

Materials

Object hidden in a box

Pencils/paper/textas

Cue cards

Shared reading book: "Into The Forest" by Anthony Browne

Aim

- To visualize at paragraph level and be able to re-tell the story.

Steps

- As children enter the room, ask them to look at the special box and try to guess what is inside.
- One at a time, they can put their hand into a hole in the box and feel what is in there. While they do this they can make a mind picture of the thing they are feeling (prompt using cue cards.)
- Describe to the other children.
- Students can draw the object they visualized.
- Using the picture story book "Into The Forest" by Anthony Browne, teacher and students read aloud each page. Stop after each section, close eyes and visualize what the story is about.
- At the end of the book, use own words to tell what the story was about, using as much detail as possible (minimal prompting by teacher.)
- PLENARY: Children articulate things they can do during a shared reading session, i.e. look at the pictures to gain information about the story, make pictures in their minds to help them remember what the story is about so they can retell it.

Lesson 5

Materials

Cue cards

Pencils, paper

Whiteboard and markers

Picture story book: "Into The Forest" by Anthony Browne

Information maps (examples)

Aim

- To assist students to read a short text themselves and visualize each page, describing to the group.
- That students be able to provide an adequately detailed oral description of the story.

Steps

- Revise visualization strategy used in previous lessons. Discuss using the cue cards and go through them again.
- Introduce the Information Maps to the students using an enlarged copy taped to the whiteboard (or use an interactive whiteboard). Talk about having a beginning, middle and end, and that the story must be in sequence. Explicitly teach children how to fill in the information map using enlarged copy.
- Students read aloud the picture story book “Into The Forest” by Anthony Browne and visualize the story. After each short section of the book ask the students to draw their mind pictures on the information map in front of them. Refer to the cue cards as needed to include as much information as possible.
- Ask the students to describe their information maps to the group using as much detail as possible.
- Interactive Questioning: teacher uses open-ended questions to gain more information from the children, and to encourage them to think on a deeper level about the story, e.g. “Why do you think the boy was missing his dad?”
- PLENARY: discuss the things that good readers do when they are reading, such as predicting, re-reading, asking “Does that make sense?”, and VISUALIZING.

Lesson 6

Materials

Cue cards

Information maps

Pencils, paper

PM Guided Reading book set: “Wet Weather Camping” by Dawn McMillan (Level 18)

PM Guided Reading book: “Castle Adventure” by Roderick Hunt (Oxford Reading Tree) Level 14

Tape recorder

Aim

- To revise the visualization strategies taught in the previous sessions.
- Gradually withdraw scaffolding so that children become more independent.

Steps

- Revise what we know about creating pictures in our minds to help with understanding a story. (Brief discussion.)
- Give each child a guided reading book "Wet Weather Camping" by Dawn McMillan (PM Readers), Students B and C, "Castle Adventure" by Roderick Hunt, Student A.
- Two minute book orientation on each story before students are asked to read the book themselves. (A reminder first about the strategy; read, close eyes and make mind pictures at each page.)
- Teacher moves around the group, guiding children individually.
- When children have finished reading, ask them to re-tell the story using as much detail as possible. Teacher prompts only when necessary to elicit more information when needed.
- Students use one of the information maps to describe the story. They can use drawings and/or sentences.
- PLENARY: Discuss the information maps and the strategies used to help understand the story. Students reflect on how they can apply what they know about visualizing to other texts they use.

Lesson 7

Materials

Cue cards

Picture story book "Handa's Hen" by Eileen Browne

Aim

- To practice making mind pictures while reading a longer text.
- Enable the students to become more independent by withdrawing support gradually.

Steps

- Revise using the visualization strategy to help understand a story. Ask students to articulate what they do when

reading a text (predict, check pictures, re-read, self-check, VISUALIZE.)

- Teacher introduces the book “Handa’s Hen” by Eileen Browne. Students are going to read the entire book and visualize without drawing pictures or writing.
- Ask students to read one page each at a time and make mind pictures without talking.
- At the conclusion, each child re-tells the story using as much detail as possible. Discuss as a group.
- PLENARY: talk about the things that helped you to understand the story and think about it more deeply. What can you do in future to help your understanding of text?

Lesson 8

Materials

Guided reading sets: “After The Flood” by Jenny Giles (PM Readers) Level 14

“Robin Hood” by Roderick Hunt (Oxford Reading Tree) Level 19

Aim

- To have the children use the visualization strategies taught while reading independently.

Steps

- Review strategies taught in previous lessons.
- Introduce the guided reading books. Give an orientation for each one, emphasizing that students will be reading individually but will be given support if needed.
- Students read their book silently, with the teacher moving around checking children.
- At completion of reading, students are asked to write and draw a ‘visualization’ of the story using an information map.
- Share and discuss each child’s page.
- Shared reading of each book with the group, discussing what they did while reading and key words or phrases to remember.
- PLENARY: all students reflect on their learning today and articulate how they can use the strategies regularly.

Lesson 9

Materials

Guided reading books; “After The Flood” by Jenny Giles (PM Readers) Level 14

“Robin Hood” by Roderick Hunt (Oxford Reading Tree) Level 19

List of interactive questions (teacher).

Aim

To enable the children to independently use the visualizing strategy to assist comprehension.

Steps

- Revise making mind pictures or videos while reading a text.
- Each student takes a guided reading book and the teacher gives a short book orientation.
- Students read the book silently while teacher moves around from child to child hearing each read a short passage.
- Each student individually writes a ‘visualization’ of each section of the story.
- Share with the group.
- PLENARY: group discussion about how to apply the strategy in the classroom on a regular basis.

Lesson 10

Materials

Guided reading sets – “Kipper And The Giant” by Roderick Hunt (Oxford Reading Tree) Level 15

“Diving At The Pool” by Kaye Baillie (PM Readers) Level 20

Aim

- To practice making mind pictures while reading a more complex text.

Steps

- Children are given a guided reading book each with a one sentence introduction by the teacher.
- Students read their book silently, visualizing each page.

- When completed, students write a re-telling of the story using their own words.
- Discuss as a group.
- PLENARY : conclude the series of lessons with a group discussion of important things the students can remember to do in the classroom and at home when they are reading.

* Appendices 2 and 3 in paper-based copy only.