Textbook Selection

CONNIE MUTHER

How to Determine Which Textbooks Are Easiest to Read and Remember

Readability formulas are not recommended for use in California. Perhaps you shouldn't use them, either. Why? If texts are written to a readability formula, the formula is invalid. And too many of today's textbooks are rewritten to formula.

Textbooks must still be purchased. Is there another simple and easily administered method to determine which textbooks are the most interesting, understandable, and memorable for students? Here are three ideas.

1. At the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, Bonnie Armbruster has determined that comprehensible and memorable textbooks are "considerate" to readers. Considerate texts are structured with a "logical, easily identifiable organization," with clear headings, subheadings, introductions, and summaries. Obvious main ideas, usually in the first sentence, are supported with details presented in a predictable order. Graphics are directly related to the written text. These are only some of Armbruster's "Characteristics of a Considerate Textbook." She explains her ideas more considerately in her many articles, which may be obtained from the Center.

2. Although Roger Farr's idea relates to evaluating basal reader stories, his idea of "kid interest" should be used in all subject areas. Farr asks students to read and react to stories. When they cannot read, or if there is only one book, he reads to them to determine their level of interest.

3. To determine the writing quality of content textbooks, the following idea might be useful. Harriet Tyson-Bernstein, Director of the Council of Chief State School Officers/National Association of State Boards of Education Project on Quality of Textbooks and Instructional Materials, spends many evenings reading high school textbooks. Because she found her mind constantly wandering while reading certain passages, she decided to monitor her own reading by placing a checkmark in the margin every time she was forced to reread. Examination of those passages identified garbled, confusing, or inaccurate writing. Since most people blame themselves for being inattentive when their minds wander, Tyson-Bernstein believes that all evaluators should monitor their own rereading to identify poor writing in textbooks.

Hopefully these three ideas—selected for their simplicity—will help you to evaluate new texts or understand the textbooks you currently use.

Please send questions, ideas, responses, or suggestions for this column to Connie Muther, 25 B Esquire Drive, Manchester, Connecticut 06040, or call (203) 649-9517.

Armbruster's articles are available for $2.00 each. For more information, write to the Center for the Study of Reading, University of Illinois, 51 Gerty Drive, Champaign, Illinois 61820.

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Reading

PATRICIA M. CUNNINGHAM AND JAMES W. CUNNINGHAM

Does Research Support Whole-Class Reading Instruction?

In a growing number of classrooms throughout the country, reading instruction is being carried out in a manner not seen in many decades. Whole classrooms of children can be seen looking at the same page of the same basal reader or workbook as the teacher guides their reading of a selection or teaches them reading skills. When teachers are asked about this "new" way to teach reading, they often appear puzzled but assure the ques-
tioner that the decision to do so was made at the higher level of their school system and is supported by teacher effectiveness research. Does research support whole-class reading instruction in the grade-level book?

If one examines both reading instructional research and teacher effectiveness research, two findings seem most supported by the research: (1) students learn more from being taught directly by teachers than from working individually (Rosenshine and Stevens, 1984), and (2) students must have consistent and high success on daily instructional tasks in order to learn (Berliner, 1981; Cunningham, 1985).

Obviously, the first research finding stands in strong opposition to the practice of individualized instruction so widely advocated from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. In fact, this finding is one of the main justifications for the return to whole-class reading instruction. Since the research shows that the more time learners spend working independently, the less they learn, it is logical to assume that more learning would occur if the teacher could teach all students at one time as if they were all alike.

Perhaps, if all students were alike, that assumption would hold true. Unfortunately, the second finding from research shows that students must be given tasks they can complete with high success or they will not learn. In fact, millions of children in schools all over America cannot do grade-level work regardless of how much whole-class teacher direction they receive. Anyone who is aware of how reading was taught in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s can attest that these students are doomed to failure if they receive whole-class, grade-level reading instruction.

Herein lies the dilemma of schooling—and not just today’s dilemma, but that of yesterday and tomorrow as well. A classroom typically has one teacher and a number of students with a range of abilities. Research will always support the indispensability of the teacher (Finding #1), but it will also always support the need for individualized instruction to meet the needs of students with different abilities (Finding #2). Neither individualized instruction nor whole-class instruction alone has ever worked for reading, and neither ever will.

What then is the solution? How can students have teacher-directed instruction and high success rates when individual differences in instructional level and rate of learning are a constant part of human variation?

The solution is not that tried so often prior to the 1960s. Placing children in classes by ability or moving them around at reading time so that all children in one class are at a certain level is a tried and untrue solution. Predictable and serious shortcomings of this type of organization are decreased motivation and self-concept of students, time lost while children change classes, and lack of ability for integration across the curricular areas.

The solution is one common to many teachers and school systems: try to achieve a balance and compromise with the conflicting needs. Many schools achieve a balance by assigning teachers no more than three reading levels in their class. Many teachers “trade” a few children at reading time to reduce their group to a manageable size. Some individualized instruction is always appropriate for children on both ends of the achievement continuum. Other activities—writing and listening comprehension, most clearly—which are needed by everyone and in which all students can be successful are best carried out in whole-class groups.

The idea that all children would profit by individualized instruction ignored the practical constraint of one teacher and many children. The pendulum appears to be swinging all the way over to whole-class/every-child-on-the-same-page-of-the-same-book-instruction. This swing, however, is not supported by research.

References


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Science

JOHN E. PENICK AND ROBERT E. YAGER

Textbooks Can Supplement the Curriculum

A man may as well expect to grow stronger by always eating, wiser by always reading.

—Jeremey Collier (1650–1726).

As we identify outstanding school science programs through the Search for Excellence in Science Education of the National Science Teachers Association, we ask the same question, “What texts do you use in your program?” The answer is almost invariably the same, “We use all we can find.” They also use