

On Teaching Reading: A Conversation with Ethna Reid

A former teacher, principal, and supervisor, Ethna Reid is the founder and director of the Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction, a program disseminated by the National Diffusion Network, and the author of a number of teacher texts. Here she discusses ECRI's development since the '60s, explains several of its distinctive teaching techniques, and discusses its efficacy in light of our knowledge of reading today.

The ECRI program is widely used in American schools. Just how widely?

In recent years we've had teachers in about 800 new schools per year adopt the program. Our staff and certified trainers offer inservice to 5,000 to 6,000 teachers a year.

How did ECRI originate?

In the 1960s I was supervisor of language arts in the Granite School District in Utah. The state began providing funds for special remedial reading teachers, who were to teach 12 to 25 students a day taken out of their regular classrooms. A study conducted for the State Legislature at the University of Utah found that the remedial students had been making an average gain of about five months a year in their regular classrooms. With remedial reading, they were making aver-



age gains of one year and four months. The evaluators concluded that the program was successful, but I became curious about why a third of the remedial students in district after district made smaller gains or no gains at all.

My assumption at that time was that there were different levels of reading instruction. There was the developmental reading level: the level the classroom teacher could take care of. Then there was the remedial or corrective instructional level, which required more expertise than classroom teachers had. But because even the remedial teachers were not being successful with 35 percent of their students, I thought there must be yet a third: a clinical level. I thought that students at this level must require more in-depth diagnosis and more prescriptive types of teaching, in order to teach them you would have to know even more than a remedial teacher.

So I embarked on a search for the best kind of clinic, and decided it should be multidisciplinary, with ophthalmologists, neurologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, speech and hearing therapists, pediatric neurologists, and so on. On the basis of my study, the district was funded by the Utah State Office of Education to start a reading clinic. We brought a group of specialists together, and we watched each other test through the viewing windows. We identified problems, and we learned a lot from each other. But we didn't find out how to teach the students to read. We would ask the physicians, "Now that we know why children aren't learning, how can we teach them?" and they would say, "We don't know." In short, my doctoral dissertation was on the need for and the design of a reading clinic. But within the first year of operation of the clinic, I found that we didn't need one.

What did you do instead?

We established the Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction and began doing research. For example, Gabriel Della-Piana, at the University of Utah, devised the use of a regression equation to look at test data and make predictions about student achievement. We found that most teachers taught as other teachers had, and their students scored about as predicted. But there were some teachers whose students never achieved the predicted levels—and some who took their students above predicted levels. We asked *them*, "What are you doing to help your children learn?" But they didn't know why they were different.

That's when we began our observational research—counting behaviors based on things we thought teachers should be doing. For example, we really thought that teachers would be more effective if they could diagnose students' difficulties, so in our observations we looked at their ability to diagnose. We counted the types of questions teachers asked, using Bloom's taxonomy, and we counted the ways the students answered the questions. We measured the sequence of introductions of new information, and so on.

We found that the teachers who obtained the greatest number of responses from students were the ones who took their students beyond their predicted achievement levels.

The first thing we discovered that was dramatically different was the use of positive reinforcement. Teachers who were positively reinforcing had students who achieved above prediction. But we didn't find anything else very different, so after about three years I finally said, "I'm through counting teacher behaviors; I'm going to focus on children." With the predictability formula, we knew that a 1st grader who scored low on the reading readiness test in the fall would not score well on the reading subtest of the Stanford Achievement Test in the spring. So I said, "Okay, we'll start observing children. We'll count behaviors of those 1st graders who score below 74 on the Murphy-Durrell."

After just three weeks of observing these children, it hit me like a bolt of lightning: they never did anything we could count. We'd be poised with our fingers pressed to the adding machine buttons, and the students wouldn't do anything! And we were amazed to find that most teachers weren't asking for overt responses from the nonresponding students. At that time, it was much more difficult to see that nothing was happening, by the way, because teachers

had such silent classrooms. Even when the children were in a small group, some children didn't answer the teacher's questions, so the teacher answered for them. They didn't read, so the teacher read for them. If there was someone who couldn't or wouldn't respond, the teacher would go around the circle and skip that child.

So we started looking at teachers again, but now we had something to look for. We found that the teachers who involved their students in all the language functions and in learning activities—who obtained the greatest number of responses from students—were the ones who took their students beyond their predicted achievement levels.

So that became a major focus of your program?

Yes. If you go into an ECRI classroom in which new words are being introduced or comprehension or study skills are being taught, you'll hear students responding to the teacher. They more frequently respond individually than in groups, but we also use choral responses. We think overt responses are important, because it's hard to know what's happening if you can't see it or hear it. For instance, when we teach silent reading comprehension, we have the children stop after they've read about half a page, look up, and state quietly to themselves the main idea. Then we at least know that their minds are really on what they're doing and that they are getting some specific information out of what they've read.

What might we expect to see in reading and writing instruction in an ECRI classroom?

Let's take an example from skills instruction. Just the word *skills* raises the eyebrows of some people. We call them *skills* because we can observe the results of learning them—although some reading specialists claim they can't observe them. For example, we talk about critical thinking skills, and they say, "Oh, that's too intangible. We can't measure that."

Well, I think most knowledge can be reduced to observable behavior. One of the ways to think critically is to evaluate whether what you've read or heard is fact or not. If it isn't, it could be fiction; it could be propaganda.

Let's say that I want a child to be able to judge whether the information he reads is fact; to be successful, I'd put it in terms that I'd be able to measure. For instance, I would say, "Fact is information that is true. It is accurate or correct." One way students can judge if information is true is to use their experiences: what they've seen or done. The teacher would model judging information by using his or her own experiences and would then provide opportunities for the students to do it.

How would an ECRI teacher teach something like that?

Through dialogue with students. After the modeling stage is the prompting stage. At this point the teacher uses a new selection so that students don't just imitate the teacher. The children are asked to think out loud—call it "metacognitive processing." We have the students tell the steps they took to arrive at their conclusions: how they transferred what they saw the teacher do to the selections they were asked to read.

Next, the teacher provides a third selection, which is used as another opportunity for students to demonstrate that they are learning. But ECRI teachers don't believe students have mastered something just because they have responded correctly in skills instruction. Mastery is really an individual process. All the teacher knows at this point is that the students have responded—and in some cases they will have given different responses. Now the students can begin to use the skill in various contexts so that they will really learn it. And, while they practice, the teacher holds individual conferences and checks their use of the skill. The teacher can individualize instructional activities at this point because the students responded during skills time. Without that kind of preparation, the students wouldn't be able to work on their own.

We agree with the whole-language people that reading and writing should be integrated. But we also agree with the proponents of direct instruction that children should be taught.

To summarize, then, you have a very explicit plan for what students are expected to learn, and you use a structure that ensures maximum participation: you make sure that every child practices the skills repeatedly in a small group before practicing them individually.

Yes. To give an example, a girl left Salt Lake City this morning to return to her home in Maryland. She is one of three sisters we tested last summer in the Learning Center—one in 3rd grade, one in 4th, and one in 6th grade—all reading at 1st grade level. The parents sent the youngest girl to Salt Lake City for a month; she was in school every day with us and in the Learning Center three nights a week. In one month she moved from 1st grade to top 3rd grade in oral reading and to 5th grade in silent reading. It was revealing to watch her the first week she was here; every student in the class responded about 12 times by the time she finally responded once. A child like that is just not going to learn if she doesn't respond.

Do you teach phonics in the ECRI program?

Yes, but in a very different way than in most classrooms: we teach in a

descriptive rather than a prescriptive way. Here's prescriptive: "When two vowels go walking, the first does the talking." Or "When there is an *e* at the end of a word, the initial vowel sound will be long." In descriptive teaching, we have students learn that a letter or a combination of letters can represent one sound or two or more sounds in words, and students begin to listen to sounds and watch how they're spelled.

What sorts of instructional materials do you use?

We've avoided emphasizing or promoting materials from the very beginning of ECRI. We don't prescribe what basal reader or which literary series is used.

Surely some materials are better than others.

Yes, we've had some studies on that. Linguistic readers are found to be more effective than traditional basals, for example. Good literature is better than poor. We recommend that teachers not use the publisher's supplementary materials or tests; we're concerned with the stories or the literature only. It's what the teacher does with the learners that makes the difference.

What do you know about results of the ECRI program?

The program has been validated by the former Joint Dissemination Review Panel and is disseminated by the National Diffusion Network of the U.S. Department of Education, so we compile evaluation data annually. ECRI students score significantly higher than control students on achievement tests and measures of writing ability. But we also see other changes we're excited about: increased attendance, children who think learning is fun and who are confident that they can be successful at anything they want to do. One superintendent evaluated the program by showing how much money the district had saved because of decreased vandalism.

I sense that American education is beginning to move away from behaviorism and toward a cognitive

psychological approach. Does that suggest that your program is based on a psychology that's no longer in vogue?

Not at all. ECRI was certainly behaviorist when we counted teacher and student behaviors and when we identified effective teaching techniques such as the use of positive reinforcement. It was behaviorist when we identified the importance of teachers' and students' maximizing their use of time. But even before that, we were teaching teachers to help students become aware of how they learn. Both teachers and students were asked to think aloud. I also developed techniques for students to use as they anticipated questions from their teachers. ECRI's earliest instruction had students explaining what they had learned and how they had learned it. We just didn't use the words *schema* and *strategic*; we practiced them. ECRI's learning activities are never contrived. Mastery tests are always performance based: can the students read and write for their own purposes?

But some characteristics of your program—the choral responses, the use of formal definitions rather than having children formulate their own—make some educators uncomfortable. They think such practices treat children as little automatons.

Before saying that, they should look at the students and see what they're able to do. They will see students who are able to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate their experiences and what they read and how in a variety of contexts. A child who can write so his or her readers can infer cause and effect, for example, and know how he or she was able to do it, isn't merely parroting back what the teacher modeled.

A related question. There's a great deal of interest now in the "whole-language" approach. Advocates say we must not fragment language into a lot of little skills. How do you stand on that?

We also see reading as a process of constructing meaning rather than as an accumulation of little skills. We think the

drills found in workbooks are meaningless, because they don't teach anything. We think rules are of no use. But we think you have to help children become conscious that symbols in written language represent sounds.

There is no finer integration of the language arts than in ECRI. For example, students are taught to evaluate what they read. If it isn't a fact, it could be fiction. So they are taught to recognize three types of fiction: fiction about famous people and events, realistic fiction, and fantasy. Fantasy can be a fairy tale, a tall tale, a fable, and so on. Students learn to recognize writing that is fantasy. They learn that "fiction is writing the author invented or made up." The teacher models the process of reading a selection and deciding if it could be fiction. He or she tells why a particular passage is fiction and why it could not possibly happen. Students do the same. The teacher reads a fairy tale to the students, and the students read one or more tales. Then the

teacher writes a fairy tale, and the students write one, too, so their readers can decide if it is fantasy.

We agree with the whole-language people that language instruction—reading and writing—should be integrated. We care greatly about providing good literature for children to read. We believe that the outcomes of an effective reading program should include effective speaking, listening, and writing as well as reading. But we also agree with the proponents of direct instruction that children should be *taught*. We believe that teachers are capable of leading children to greater knowledge. □

Editor's note: ECRI publishes a newsletter, *The Reader*, six times during the school year. ECRI awareness materials, *The Reader*, and a catalogue are available upon request. Please call 1-800-468-ECRI for further information.

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