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# An alternative practice for teaching informational texts in kindergarten

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is to describe the steps for designing a new instructional practice to help kindergarteners comprehend non-fiction informational texts. The proposed practice includes activities which are based on principles of language and aesthetic literacies. The first one includes the skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking (Baynam, 2002). The latter's theoretical underpinnings arose from the field of 'arts integration' according to which, when learners are taught through the arts, they are given opportunities to approach and translate what they learn into a variety of sign systems (Deasy, 2003). The proposed instructional practice adopts techniques embedded in the "Think Aloud" strategy and the "Questioning the Author" reading approach to help children develop comprehension skills. Specifically, children are encouraged to predict text information and activate background information before reading. Subsequently, during reading they are motivated to process text content, ask their own questions and complete a diagram with the teacher which presents the key words from the text. Having read the text, they summarize the key information by following the completed diagram. Throughout this process, arts activities are integrated to deepen children's comprehension and help them interpret text information multimodally and creatively, using a variety of ways of expressing themselves, such as sounds, colours, shapes, movement, theatrical expression, and the expressive use of technology. To design the proposed practice, a non-fiction informational text was written on the subject of ancient Egypt. Indicative activities and indicators of learning outcomes are included in this paper.

**Keywords:** non-fiction informational texts, comprehension, language and aesthetic literacy, kindergarten

## INTRODUCTION

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In literature there is a fundamental distinction between two types of texts: narrative texts and informational texts. In preschool education children are usually taught narrative texts rather than informational texts (Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010), despite the fact that, in later schooling and as adults, people are mainly called upon to deal with the content of latter (Justice & Pence, 2005). Given this condition, the teaching of informational texts in preschool classes has not been studied in sufficient breadth or depth. There is a lack in the literature on teaching approaches that would enhance kindergarteners' comprehension of informational texts.

The aim of the present study is to describe the steps for designing an instructional practice based on precise and innovative specifications, so as to help kindergarteners achieve a high level of comprehension of non-fiction informational texts. To begin with, the theoretical underpinning of the proposed teaching approach is analysed. A discrete view of the meaning of "comprehension" emerges and the objectives of the proposed practice are based on it. Following are model activities that arose from improvements made on preliminary-pilot implementations of the practice.

### INFORMATIONAL TEXTS IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Informational texts are non-fiction texts that aim to convey information about the natural and social world, using expository writing and structures different from narrative texts. Reading informational texts to kindergarteners helps them become familiar with complex concepts, specialized vocabulary and different text structures (Massey, 2014). In addition, exposing children to informational texts helps prepare them for the next stages of education, as these texts constitute the main reading material used by teachers in primary education (Kletzien & Dreher, 2004). It is likely that kindergarteners who have no significant exposure to informational texts will face difficulties in reading and comprehending them in primary education and present low literacy achievement (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990).

### COMPREHENSION: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH

In the design of the proposed instructional practice, "comprehension" is the target skill. We conceptualized this skill by combining principles from two theoretical approaches, those of language and aesthetic literacies. The idea of combining the two was based on the transactional theory of Rosenblatt (1986, 2004), according to which texts can be approached in two ways. In the first, called "efferent", children focus on specific linguistic parameters (e.g. the formal and technical elements of the text or specific information contained in the text) which are taught based on the curriculum. The opposite of efferent is the "aesthetic" or "expressive" approach (Soter, Wilkinson, Connors, Murphy, & Shen, 2010),

in which every reader develops a personal relationship with the text. Readers have a qualitatively different response to the text and it is thus transformed into an intellectual, emotional, social and bodily experience according to the unique vision the individual has of the world (Narey, 2008). Recently, scholars (Swafford & Akrofi, 2005) have ascertained that the efferent approach is still the most widespread, although the best results arise from combining the efferent and aesthetic approaches in teaching.

With this in mind, elements of the literature on language literacy were explored according to which comprehension includes a variety of skills such as the readers' or listeners' ability to understand the meanings of the words and texts, as well as the meanings beyond the words of the texts. It seems that is essential that children become able to comprehend what they are hearing, seeing or reading, so they can evaluate, critique and apply the information presented in the texts in appropriate situations (Roche, 2015). More particularly, comprehension is best accomplished when the readers or the listeners activate background knowledge, predict and summarize key information in the text and ask questions in order to clarify and process the meaning (Duke & Pearson, 2008; Joseph, Alber-Morgan, Cullen, & Rouse, 2015).

The next step was to explore the aesthetic literacy approach (Albers, 2001) which holds that comprehension is the ability of a person to interpret and create meaning in multiple and non-linguistic manners of representation (Eisner, 2002; Lynch, 2007; Sanders & Albers, 2010), such as music, the visual arts, theatre and bodily expression and expressive use of technology. The objectives of aesthetic literacy have to do with people's ability to recognise aesthetic characteristics, to respond critically and interpretatively and to derive aesthetic satisfaction from all kinds of stimuli (Parsons, 1990). Within the framework of aesthetic literacy as an educational goal, the arts are not just one more subject, but are seen as the basic building block of a new kind of learning environment in which children can experience the qualitative dimension of the knowledge they are taught (Green, 1981; Sykes, 1982).

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE**

The theoretical foundation presented above led to an initial design of the teaching practice which was then tested in preliminary implementations. The findings pointed to improvements and the final formulation of the activities to be used. From the view of language literacy, comprehension is accomplished when children process the main ideas of the text by predicting, asking their own questions, clarifying, activating background knowledge and summarizing key information. From the view of aesthetic literacy, indicators of comprehension are considered to be connecting the meanings in the text to personal experiences, being engaged in the process in a multimodal and multifaceted way and interpreting the information in the text. These elements are the objectives of the teaching practice being studied.

The activities included in the proposed instructional practice adopt techniques embedded in the "Think

Aloud” strategy and in the “Questioning the Author” reading approach. “Think Aloud” is a cognitive strategy which readers apply to verbally express the mental processes they engage in when analysing and constructing text meaning (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1986). It is a strategy that can be used to help children develop comprehension skills and monitor their own comprehension difficulties while processing information (Baumann, Jones, & Seifert-Kessell, 1993; Pardo, 2004). The “Questioning the Author” strategy (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, & Worthy, 1996) is an instructional approach suitable for tackling the difficulties children face in comprehending texts with a complex or less coherent structure, such as informational texts. This approach aims to help children comprehend a text by encouraging them to be actively involved in constructing its meaning and to explore the message the author wants to convey. While reading the text, the teacher asks questions to have children draw conclusions about the meaning the author is conveying in each part of the text. The activities included in the proposed practice also used the techniques of “aesthetic teaching” (Pike, 2004; Sotiropoulou-Zormpala, 2012) so that the children could make connections between the text and their personal, social and cultural environment, could become activated in a multifaceted/holistic way (Miller, 2007) and could give the information being taught multiple interpretations by creating their own meanings (Eisner, 2002). The activities used a variety of ways of expressing oneself, such as sounds, colours, shapes, movement, theatrical expression, and the expressive use of technology (Jonson, 2007; Sanders & Albers, 2010).

## **TEXTS**

To design the proposed practice, we composed a non-fiction informational text on the subject of ancient Egypt. The text contained subsections on the Nile, clothing and appearance, religion and the afterlife, and the Pyramids. Appropriate visual material (pictures and photographs) was included in the text and then printed.

## **INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE: INDICATIVE ACTIVITIES**

The activities included in the proposed instructional practice aim at helping kindergarten children develop the following comprehension skills: prediction, background knowledge activation, questioning, summarizing, connecting elements in the text with personal experiences, multifaceted engagement in the process and interpreting elements of the text. Indicative activities are presented to describe the techniques we used to develop comprehension skills.

## **PREDICTION**

The teacher uses the “Think Aloud” and “Questioning the Author” techniques to cultivate children’s skills in predicting the subject of the text. The teacher might say: “I am holding a very interesting book

today, but I do not have the slightest idea about the subject. What can I do to guess the information that the writer is presenting? I think that if I read the title and the subtitle of the book, and if I look at the illustration on the front cover, I might be able to guess the main information that the writer conveys in the text.” The teacher reads the title and the subtitle of the book and encourages children to observe the front cover illustration in order to predict the subject of the book and its key information.

## **BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE ACTIVATION**

To activate background knowledge the teacher points at an illustration in the book and reads the caption: “The ancient Egyptians believed in many gods. One of them was the god Anubis. He was half human and half jackal and his duty was to prepare the dead for life after death.” The “Think Aloud” technique is then used: “I am wondering whether in Greek mythology there is god who has common features with the god Anubis. Think about what you already know about the gods in ancient Greece. Does the god Anubis remind you of any of ancient Greek gods?” At the last step of this procedure the teacher provides feedback to children’s answers and additional information so as to enhance their background knowledge: “The ancient Greeks also believed in many gods, like Zeus, Ares, Athena, etc. Just as the ancient Egyptians had the god Anubis, so the ancient Greeks had Pluto who was the god of the underworld; the place where someone lived after his death.”

## **QUESTIONING**

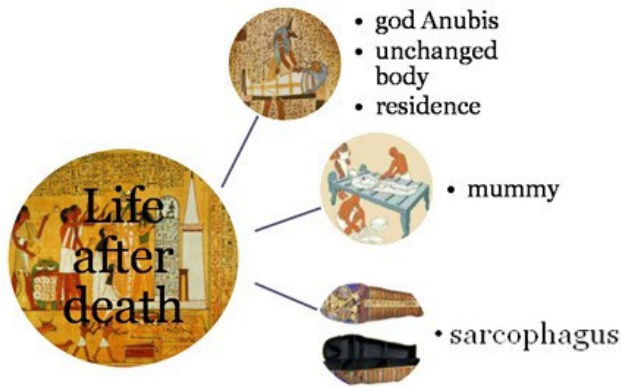
While reading the text the teacher uses “Think Aloud” prompts and “Questioning the Author” techniques to encourage children to ask questions in order to:

- a. *explain unknown vocabulary.* Indicative examples of what the teacher can say are: “The author states that the ancient Egyptians had to keep the body of the deceased “unchanged”. This is important information but I am not sure what the author means because I do not know what the word unchanged means. What you would you like to ask the author about this?” The teacher encourages children to form a question about the meaning of the word.
- b. *clarify information.* The teacher can encourage the children to clarify information from the text as follows: “Now that I know what the word unchanged means, it is easier for me to understand the information presented by the author in this part of the text. But there is still something that troubles me. I will read the text again and I want you to ask your own questions. This is an opportunity for me to figure out if we have the same questions. I do not understand what the author means when he writes: the body of the dead person was be the residence of his soul.” The teacher then tries to encourage children to ask their own questions so they can get the clarification they need: “What would you like to ask the author about this? If the ancient Egyptians did not look after the body of the dead, what did they think could happen?”

- c. *synthesize text key information*. Indicative prompts that the teacher can use to help children synthesize information are the following: “I wonder if the text provides some further significant information about the mummies. What might this be?” After the above prompt, the teacher provides feedback to children’s comments and guides them throughout this process by asking questions which help them elicit the necessary information: “What did they do to turn someone’s body into a mummy? What did they use?”

## SUMMARIZING

While the text is being read, the teacher completes an appropriate graphical organizer with keywords and pictures displayed in the book to guide children in the summarizing process. After reading the teacher uses an appropriate “Think Aloud” prompt to help children summarize key information from the text cooperatively: “After finishing the text, it is useful to summarize, i.e. tell the basic information in a few words. This helps me remember the most significant information that the writer has presented in a book. The graphical organizer we completed during reading can help us in this.” The teacher uses the graphical organizer and points to the pictures and the corresponding keywords to help children summarize the information from the text.



Example of the graphical organizer

## CONNECTING ELEMENTS OF THE TEXT WITH PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

A theatre activity can be used to have children connect the information from the text with their personal experiences. The references to papyrus in the text can become the basis for a discussion on “how life would be without paper”. Divided into small groups, the children can then perform skits (e.g. a dialogue between a mother and child on how guests can be invited to a birthday party if there is no paper to write on).

## MULTIFACETED ENGAGEMENT IN THE PROCESS

In order to engage the children bodily, intellectually, socially and emotionally with the information being taught, the teacher can provide them with opportunities to identify with situations and/or people mentioned in the text through art constructions or theatrical activation. Having on hand the appropriate

material, the teacher can help the children dress up as they want and discuss their choices, e.g. “Where are you from? Who are you? Are you a man? Woman? Slave? Pharaoh? Do you want to say something to us? How would you walk?” The costumed children would then be photographed by the teacher or classmates and at the end of the activity the photos would be shown on the board and the children would discuss their costumes.

## **INTERPRETING ELEMENTS OF THE TEXT**

In order for the children to be given the opportunity to interpret and produce their own meanings on what they have been taught, the teacher can employ a musical activity. An extract on the afterlife can be read to the children two times, with two different types of accompanying music in a contrasting style (calm and march type music). In the following discussion, children are called upon to express an opinion on “which music was best” for the content of the text and “why”. It is made clear to the children that there is no right answer.

With the same goal in mind, children are asked to choose words in the text that made an impression on them and act the word out bodily as they wish. Each child’s presentation is discussed by the group, the word is found and the meaning the child has ascribed to it is discussed (how the child has understood it, how he/she feels about it).

## **CONCLUSIONS. CRITERIA FOR ANALYSING EFFICACY**

This study presented the manner in which a teaching practice with particular specifications was designed so as to provide pre-schoolers with an opportunity to comprehend an informational text at a high level. What is innovative about this endeavour is combining the use of the principles of language and aesthetic literacy in order to analyse the meaning of comprehension. Based on this, it was observed that the range of goals for the proposed teaching practice expanded, and aimed to have the children approach the text both as a source of information and as a springboard for creating new knowledge based on the information. In particular, seven objectives were determined (prediction, background knowledge activation, questioning, summarizing, connecting elements of the text with personal experiences, multifaceted engagement in the process and interpreting elements of the text), which could be achieved in seven discrete stages, of which the first four arising from language literacy must precede the next three, which are based on aesthetic literacy. The existence of seven clear-cut stages could point the way to criteria which can be used to analyse the efficacy of this teaching practice which should be implemented repeatedly and improved.



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