USING A DIRECT-INSTRUCTION APPROACH

With the Life Series Readers

A conversation with Renée Coffee

BY SHIRLEY ANN FREED

n the U.S. Department of Education publication *What Works*, direct instruction is listed among other techniques that teachers can use to increase their effectiveness. In the never-ending search for ways to improve instruction, it is refreshing to find SDA teachers who risk much to try new strategies. Renée Coffee is one such teacher. She is currently teaching a grade 3-and-4 combined classroom at Gobles Junior Academy in Gobles, Michigan. She has been acquainted with a direct-instruction method since 1990 and has actively implemented major portions of the program in her reading and language-arts instruction. Here she discusses her use of the program.

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What approach do you use?

I use a direct-instruction approach linked with mastery. All students are expected to reach high levels (90-100 percent) of mastery on all skills taught. The program uses positive reinforcement to elicit correct responses from all students.

Can you briefly explain the program?

It has been developed by the Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction

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Shirley Ann Freed

(ECRI), located in Utah. The technique has been developing since the 1960s under the direction of Ethna Reid, who studies children, how they learn, and which teaching techniques result in the greatest growth. It's listed as an exemplary program by the National Diffusion Network (NDN), part of the Division of Educational Replication of the U.S. Department of Education. The NDN provides information and assistance for teachers who are incorporating improved practices into their own programs.

Can you use the Seventh-day Adventist Reading Series to accomplish the goals of ECRI?

Yes. It's very easy because ECRI is a methodology that can be used with any set of basal readers. For instance, I use the vocabulary words as listed in the teacher's manuals to teach vocabulary.

What kinds of things do you do that are different, then?

Well, after I have the vocabulary words for one unit, I go through a series of steps to ensure that the students really do learn the vocabulary. I teach them directly how to spell, write, and use each word in context. In the process of teaching one word, the students may hear the word or use it themselves 25 to 30 times. Then they practice spelling, writing, and reading the word until they feel they've mastered it. I have a chart where they can place a card indicating to me that they want to be tested. During the

practice time when everyone is getting ready for mastery tests, I test individually each student who indicates readiness.

It sounds as if it would take a lot of time to get through all the words and do a lot of individual tests, too. How do you manage all that?

The secret to the success of the program is the use of specific directives. These are set phrases like these: "You will provide the missing sounds and letters in this word"; "This word should be _____"; "Say_____"; "What sounds are missing?" "What letters make those sounds in this word?"; "Spell the sounds so I can write them"; "Read"; and "Spell and read." While this method initially seems very verbose, these directives soon almost totally fade into the background because the routine has been established and each word is taught with similar directives.

But don't the students get bored with all that repetition?

No. I am always amazed that they love the structure and feel so secure about what is happening. And it's great because the same is expected of everyone. They all have to respond; the most shy or inhibited child has to participate. And those with special needs are immersed in a process that involves a lot of physical activity.

You mean they respond in unison?

Yes. And if the teacher is quick to reward students who are responding, soon everyone is involved. Because many opportunities are given for response, students hear others and therefore know how to respond appropriately. The teacher is able to provide immediate feedback and correct any errors students may be making.

How do you use the SDA readers?

First, the Informal Reading Inventory is critical to the success of this program because a student must be placed at his or her instructional level. I teach difficult vocabulary words before the students begin to read. Students are required to read

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Renée Coffee introduces each word before the children read their stories.

each story orally, silently, or both. I often ask students who need practice for fluency to read the story more than once.

And you listen to each student reading each story?

Oh, no! This happens during practice time [see example of practice time checklists], when I am giving mastery tests and holding individual conferences. The students mark off each of the items on their own charts as they practice.

But your classroom must be totally chaotic during this time. Are *all* the students reading orally?

Yes. But that's not all! During this time, the students may be practicing for their mastery tests, which means they may be timing themselves as they say the words as fast as they can. Or they may be having spelling tests, in which one student gives the other his or her spelling words. Someone passing the room may think it's chaotic, but the students learn to concentrate and they really like helping one another.

This sounds too good to be true! Do all the students really stay on task while so many different things are going on around them?

Usually. I was surprised at first, too! Of course, I continue to reward students who are on task. That helps a lot.

Can you explain this reward system to me?

Well, I have a 3" x 5" card taped to their desks, and I give them points when I see them doing what I want them to do. At the end of the week, we total up the points. On Friday morning they can buy things at my store with their points. Some of them are really frugal and save up points for a long time if they really want a big item like goggles. Others spend their points each week on pencils, stickers, gum, and other small items.

How is your use of the SDA readers and the ECRI method different from more traditional approaches?

Well, first of all, by using this methodology I am able to coordinate reading, literature, spelling, penmanship, and creative writing. The students learn the vocabulary, and then, using those same words, they read, spell, write, and practice penmanship. The repetition assures mastery. So I don't have extra spelling or pen-

manship books.

Second, with this method students can progress at their own rates. When they finish reading a story and pass their mastery test of spelling words, they go on to the next story. It really is motivating and makes them independent learners.

Third, students are required to attain a high level of fluency, and this helps their comprehension.

Also, there is time for enrichment reading, so students read much more than just the basal stories.

Do you find that the students progress satisfactorily?

Definitely. I have students who have progressed three grade levels in one year. The mastery approach requires students to learn the words and therefore develops their confidence.

Then do all the students get "A's"?

A large number do. I still use the cri-

ECRI is a methodology that can be used with any set of basal readers.

terion tests that accompany the Life Series as unit tests. Students do well on them.

Is there anything in the program that allows for creativity? It all sounds very structured.

There are several avenues for creativity. The first is the discussions that I hold with groups of students who have read the story. During this time, students have a lot of freedom to talk about anything they wish.

Second, when I have individual conferences with the students, I systematically ask them four different levels of questions:

literal, inferential, critical, and creative. The last two types allow for a lot of individualism to come into the program.

Finally, during writing time the students have opportunities to use creative thought. The emphasis during this time is on fluency and not so much on correct grammar and spelling. If they write something that flows and makes sense for them, I'm very happy.

In summary, could you share your own feelings about using the ECRI method with the Life Series readers?

I love the combination of direct instruction and mastery, which allows my students to succeed. The feelings in my classroom and with parents are so positive. I believed I was a positive teacher before I started using ECRI, but now I realize I wasn't nearly so encouraging as I am now. And I'm not just talking about points. I find myself saying things like: "Thank you for having your eyes on the screen" and "I

What Is Direct Instruction?

Although direct instruction has many shades of meaning, most educators who use it agree that it requires a systematic presentation of small steps, followed by checking for understanding and active practice by students. Three main orientations toward direct instruction exist in the literature:

First, Rosenshine[1] uses the term "direct instruction" to describe behaviors of effective teachers as summarized in the research. He found that effective teachers use six strategies: review, presentation of new material, guided practice, feedback and corrections, independent practice, and weekly and monthly reviews. In presenting new materials, effective teachers give a short behavioral objective and proceed step by step with many examples. They then model the desired behaviors, and ask questions to check comprehension. Others have verified the close relationship between direct instruction and teacher-effectiveness research.[2]

Second, the University of Oregon Direct Instruction Follow Through Program has been cited by Baumann as "perhaps the classic example of the original instruction/assessment conception of direct instruction."[3] This first example of direct in-

struction is clearly based on the philosophy of behaviorism.[4] In small groups, children are taught symbol-action activities, blending tasks, and rhyming tasks using preplanned, prepared materials with a written dialogue for the teacher. In a study comparing the Follow Through model with eight other approaches, researchers found that the direct-instruction model resulted in a more-effective reading instruction. Students ranked highest in both subject-matter learning and in self-esteem measures.[5] The highly structured, scripted Follow Through lessons later became commercially available as the Distar program. The ECRI (Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction) method described in the interview with Renée Coffee is similar to Follow Through.

Lehr suggests a third use of the term "direct instruction": "simply . . .the deliberate teaching of something (vocabulary, for example) as opposed to indirect or no teaching."[6] In defining direct instruction, Baumann said:

In direct instruction, the teacher, in a face-to-face, reasonably formal manner, tells, shows, models, demonstrates, teaches the skill to be learned. The key word here is teacher, for it is the teacher who is in command of the learning situation and leads the lesson, as opposed to having instruction "directed" by a

work sheet, kit, learning center, or workbook.[7]

The original research on direct instruction involved primary-grade children from low socio-economic populations. The Follow Through Program was developed to help at-risk children. Its direct instruction approach is most beneficial for teaching various skills. This can be advantageous since such basic skills as reading, writing, and mathematics are prerequisites for problem-solving and complex thinking. Several authors point out that teachers must consider *what* is to be taught and *who* is to be taught. Peterson[8] showed that high-achieving, task-oriented students did worse in direct instruction. Ross and Kyle observed that "during low-level primary skill lessons, direct instruction seems applicable and effective. During reading comprehension and writing sessions, direct instruction seems less applicable."[9]

Currently, direct instruction is experiencing a resurgence in popularity as educators realize the value of using this method for teaching story structure with reader-response groups,[10] summary writing,[11] social skills,[12] process writing,[13] and following directions.[14]

Direct Instruction in the Seventh-day Adventist System

Training - Every other summer (odd years), the Andrews University School of Education offers a four-week training in direct instruction using the Life Series readers and the ECRI (Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction) method. To date, approximately 60 teachers have been trained and are using the method successfully in a number of different settings, including multigrade and small classrooms, inner-city schools, and with students for whom English is a second language.

Materials - Support materials for teaching the Life Series in a direct-instruction format can be purchased through the Andrews University Reading Center. More than 1,300 black-line masters are readily convertible to overhead transparencies and practice sheets. Each level has 100 to 200 pages, and levels can be purchased separately. Contact Shirley Freed at (616) 471-6163 for more information.

PRACTICE TIME CHECKLIST

Name: _____   Book: _____

	Date	Date	Date	Date	Date
I. STORY					
1. Read title/Predict what story will be about.					
2. Read story silently/State main idea.					
3. Read story orally with expression.					
II. WORD LIST					
1. Read each word two times.					
2. Spell and read each word.					
3. Skywrite, spell, and read.					
4. Write, spell, and read.					
5. Proof and correct.					
6. Take Pupil-Partner Spelling Test.					
III. IMPROVED SPELLING ACTIVITIES					
Choose two of the following:					
1. Use clay to form, spell, and read difficult words.					
2. In cornmeal or sand, write, spell, and read words missed.					
3. Write rhyming words for five spelling words.					
4. Write five sentences using spelling words.					
5. Play Spelling Game - (obtain game from learning center)					
IV. IMPROVED COMPREHENSION ACTIVITIES					
Choose one of the following, varying your selection:					
1. Write a letter to someone, telling why he or she should					
or should not read the story.					
2. Draw a poster of what you liked best in the story.					
3. Pantomime a point in the story.					
4. Locate a cause/effect sentence in the story.					
5. With a partner, make story sequence picture cards.					
6. Write a riddle to go with the story.					
7. Write a poem, commercial, or jingle to go with the story.					
8. Read with expression some of your favorite quotes from the story.					
V. MASTERY TEST					
1. I put my mastery test card in the pocket on the wall.					

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Each child writes out the new words with their definitions and puts them in a folder.

By testing each student separately on word recognition, spelling, and reading, Ms. Coffee keeps track of individual practice and problems.

really appreciate it when I see you saying the main idea." Making such statements is really just as effective as the points given. I'm also so thankful that I can use this methodology to teach reading without having to sacrifice the use of the Life Series books. They were developed with character-building in mind, and I'm glad to be able to incorporate that aspect into my program. I love this method and hope I never have to go back to the old method. ✐

The secret to the success of the program is the use of specific directives.

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