

Basic Teaching Principles

Every student has an individual learning style based on his unique set of learning strengths and weaknesses. How can teachers present information in ways that suit various learning styles? What procedures should they follow to ensure that students understand and master language arts skills? The following teaching principles are universal; they represent good pedagogy for any instruction setting, but they are particularly effective for students with learning disabilities.

Apply Multi Sensory Strategies

Multi sensory instruction means teaching that utilizes all learning modes, including visual, auditory, and tactile-kinesthetic. As early as 1936, pioneers of reading instruction for struggling readers recognized that some children could not learn to read simply by sight word methods. Anna Gillingham and her colleague Bessie Stillman developed a technique “based upon the constant use of associations of all of the following: how a letter or word looks, how it sounds, and how the speech organs or the hand in writing feels when producing it.” (GILLINGHAM AND SPILLMAN, 1956, PG. 17). In their teaching manuals, the first edition published in 1936, Gillingham and Stillman direct teachers to provide children with numerous visual, auditory, and tactile-kinesthetic opportunities. For example, a child first sees a letter, then traces it, and says the letter name or sound (HENRY 1998). Beginning in the 1960’s at the Reading Research Institute Summer Programs, and later at the Landmark School, Dr. Charles Drake trained teachers to add a kinesthetic component to instruction. He recommended having students write letters or words with their index finger on a rough surface, which he found especially useful in teaching vocabulary and correct spelling. A tactile-kinesthetic strategy (through the use of mouth, hand and/or body) adds a motor memory component to learning (DRAKE ET AL 1978).

The principle of multi-sensory instruction is useful beyond simply teaching reading and spelling. It should be used to teach any information or skill. Educators should encourage students to see, hear, re-verbalize, read, copy, write, discuss, and touch what they are learning. When teachers present information, they should appeal to all three modes of learning: visual, auditory and tactile-kinesthetic (SEDLITZ 1989). Students need to be shown as well as told how to do something. Whenever possible, teachers should give an example or demonstrate skill.

Practice to the Point of Automatization

Automatization means learning a skill to the point that the student can accomplish a task with ease, speed, and little deliberate attention. Automatic reading occurs when a response to a letter, syllable or word becomes so established that the student does not have to consciously try to select an appropriate response. All common sound-letter associations, syllable recognition, and word attack skills should become automatic for good reading skills. To develop automaticity in reading, students must overlearn these basic patterns and practice them in complex words (BRYANT, 1965). Perfetti and Lesgold suggested a “bottleneck theory” to

explain why some students appear to have reading comprehension deficits when in fact their comprehension is simply impeded because they have not automatized decoding skills. “Poor decoding skills coupled with the limitations of working memory create in a poor reader a “bottleneck” in information flow with severe repercussions for comprehension” (PERFETTI AND LESGOLD, 1979). Significant practice and time on task are crucial to achieving automatization. (SEDITA 1978).

Automatization is not only essential to reading. Automatization is important for all language arts tasks. Every writing, spelling, comprehension, organization, and study skill should be practiced until it becomes a habit (e.g., spelling rules and patterns, strategies for identifying and formulating main ideas, grammar and punctuation rules, sentence and paragraph structures, and study skills strategies such as note taking and summarizing).

Micro-Unit and Structure Tasks

Micro-uniting, also known as task analysis, means breaking down a skill or task into a series of smaller steps or units. Each step is taught in turn, and then eventually combined to learn the larger skills or complete the larger task (SEDITA 1978). The hierarchical nature of language structures lend themselves quite well to micro-united instruction. For example, students should learn and practice each step of the decoding scope and sequence (i.e., consonant and vowel sounds, consonant blends, double vowel combinations, etc.) so they can eventually apply these combined decoding skills to read text.

Often, assignments such as writing a composition or reading a text chapter can be overwhelming much in the same way that hiking a mountain might be to a novice hiker. When the hiker is given a trail guide that provides step-by-step directions and information about each part of the trail, the once formidable task becomes a series of manageable steps, each building upon the other. If teachers micro-unit their instruction, and teach students how to apply their own micro-uniting strategies to complete assignments, students will see a larger, overwhelming task in terms of manageable steps that they are confident they can complete (SEDITA, 1989).

Structure is key to micro-uniting. Tutorial goals should be clear and specific. Tutorial lessons should be planned and presented step by step. Directions should be clear and given one at a time.

Provide Direct, Systematic Instruction

Although some students are able to intuit the structure of language and strategies for developing language arts skills, most need explicit, direct instruction in methods for reading, spelling, writing, and study skills. Instruction should be systematic, starting with the most basic element of a skill, and progressing to more advanced elements (SEDITA, 2001). There is a scope and sequence for learning reading, spelling, writing and study skills, and it is best to follow those sequences without skipping steps. Teachers should be careful not to make assumptions about what skills students possess. Some students may appear to have some fairly

advanced skills, such as writing an essay or taking notes, but at the same time they may be lacking in some very basic skills, such as telling time or spelling common sight words. The older and/or more cognitively adept a student is, the greater the temptation to make assumptions about skills.

Review and Spiral Back

Sometimes students appear to learn something only to forget it a day, week, or month later. To achieve automatization, students need to constantly review and spiral back over previously learned skills and information. Do not assume that one demonstration of mastery is sufficient over a length of time. Teachers should provide frequent repetition of “old” skills, while slowly introducing and practicing new skills (BRYANT 1965, SEDITA, 1989).

Provide Immediate Feedback and Opportunities for Success

Many students with learning disabilities have experienced some degree of school failure, resulting in frustration, lack of self-confidence, a fear of certain language arts tasks, or a proclivity for avoiding tasks that are difficult. It is important that students experience success in the classroom. There are several strategies that will provide opportunities for success while at the same time challenging the student to learn new skills.

First, identify the student’s lowest level of competency for each language arts skill (e.g., consonant blends for the decoding scope and sequence, or sentence structure for writing). Start where the student is, and move forward with more challenging tasks. Plan and modify the presentation of tasks and materials on the basis of the student’s performance so that he is correct in most of his responses. Intersperse easier tasks with more difficult ones. This will ensure success through small and gradual steps, resulting in less frustration and resistance when tasks become more challenging (BRYANT 1965).

Second, provide immediate, specific feedback. When students make a mistake, you should offer corrective negative feedback, which doesn’t threaten or harm their confidence, but does allow them to see their mistakes. “Can you do this another way?”, or “You did this part O.K., but then what happened?” are examples of corrective feedback questions. The feedback must be given as immediately as possible so the student does not repeat the mistake or learn an incorrect pattern.

Finally, offer praise that is genuine. When the student does something well, provide positive feedback, but not to the point that it becomes meaningless with overuse.