Moving From Subject-Centered to Student-Centered Objectives: Literacy in the Content Areas

Pamela White-Cheatham, Ed.D.
Stephen F. Austin State University

Abstract

Hasn't the education scene had enough pointing of fingers as to whose job it is to teach students literacy strategies? The best answer to this might be found in Moje's (1996) statement, "teachers should be encouraged to examine their beliefs about students' needs and what it means for student to be successful in relation to their beliefs about subject matter and literacy in secondary classrooms" (p. 192). Perhaps instead of students being the only ones to have questions asked of them, teachers should regularly ask themselves, or be asked by administrators, quality type questions regarding what they are doing to meet every the needs of every student. Rather than pointing fingers, this article is intended to make content area teachers aware of the research proving teaching literacy strategies within their discipline, which is key to empowering students with the ability to develop critical thinking, thus flourishing.

This work was presented at the 2013 TALE Conference as the session, *Content Area Literacy Strategies for Preservice and In-Service Teachers.* Carolyn Stufft was the co-presenter for this session.

———————————

Introduction

We have officially arrived into the 21st century. While some aspects of how literacy plays out in the educational process may be recognizable, or maybe even habitual, others might seem foreign to the educator. The definition of literacy alone has taken on a whole new meaning. Traditionally, literacy has been referred to as the ability to read and write. But today, Kane (2007) states, "the term has broadened to accomplish a wide range of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and other language tasks associated with everyday life" (p. 19). A little over three decades ago, Herber (1978) began a significant study to understand the cognitive processes involving literacy and how they specifically relate to content-area subjects, if at all.

After Herber's research surfaced onto the educational scene, Moje (1996 & 2000) noted state departments of education across the United States began to examine state and national assessments, indicating students, particularly grades 7 through 12, were struggling with planning and critical analysis while they were engaged in reading and writing activities. As a result of these observations, mandates were made requiring content area preservice teachers to include literacy in content areas as a required course of their educational degree. These mandates opened a floodgate of research to measure if there was any correlation between the teaching strategies being used in secondary content areas gained through content area literacy instruction. The results of these researches began to unearth the fact that the majority of content area teachers were not implementing strategies learned during the required undergraduate content area literacy course.

Review of Literature

Valuable instructional strategies have been developed and proven to be successful for nurturing the ability to think and react cognitively for secondary students . These approaches, used by teachers to teach subject matter are collectively referred to as content literacy strategies; just like there is not a single definition for literacy, there is not a uniform list of literacy strategies. Rigorous strategies listed by Fisher & Frey, (2008) did include anticipatory activities intended to connect, stimulate interest, activate schema, connecting vocabulary, use of graphic organizers, students asking the questions, reciprocal teaching, note-taking, and writing to learn activities (p. 247).

Multiple researchers have confirmed that an alarming 70 percent of ninth graders are reading several years below grade level (Nichols, Young, & Rickelman, 2007, p. 98). While most secondary students have been equipped with decoding skills necessary to read content area material, they lack the ability to comprehend the words they have processed. This tends to be an area secondary teachers struggle with, not being able to help these students connect words to meaning. In Moje's (1996) study (as cited in Davey, 1988; Hinchman, 1987; Ratekin, Simpson, Alvermann, & Dishner, 1985; Readence, Konopak, & Wilson, 1991; Smith & Feather, 1983), observation of classroom instruction documents

infrequent use of literacy strategies used by teachers, (p. 172). Why is it that teachers do not, or do so infrequently, use the strategies they have gained during their mandated literacy in content area, preservice teacher course as an undergraduate? Quality questions, such as this one, can be answered by a plethora of answers or what some may consider to be excuses.

Asking teachers to switch the focus of their learning and thinking processes can be difficult because it can imply their instructional practices and content knowledge are not valuable. According to Wright, (2007), "Improving students' academic achievement through teachers' altering pedagogical approaches to emphasize literacy, critical thinking, and learning processes does not come easily: it is neither linear nor straightforward nor a technical process" (p. 422). There is no "one size fits all" process for teachers to implement; instead, it involves teachers' professional identities. While change for teachers is complex and often times uncomfortable, it is pertinent if reform is to occur. The major contributing factor in effective instruction is the teacher, which in return produces greater student learning.

Opposition of teachers to employ literacy strategies may not be an act of defiance, but rather could a result of them not being able to simply recognize how literacy could play a part in their discipline. Could our university instructors of content area literacy be to blame for secondary teachers not utilizing literacy strategies within their discipline? Shanahan & Shanahan (2008) suggests when instructors do not understand valued disciplinary literacy practices, they do not prepare teachers of specialized subjects to meet the needs of students who will likely struggle with the reading and writing required in particular content areas. These courses should be the place for preservice teachers to "grapple with what adolescents should know in their content areas, how that information can be engagingly introduced and taught, and to be become better prepared to become more student-centered teachers" (Gritter, 2010, p. 167). When these courses fail to provide preservice teachers with experiences in classroom contexts then it will become more difficult to convince teachers, particularly preservice teachers, of the usefulness of literacy strategies. This message and opportunity to practice implementing these strategies must be conveyed before preservice teachers will find value. Without value, there will be no motivation for

utilization. A challenge for university professors could be that they should not only be concerned with teaching literacy methods and strategies but to change their deep beliefs regarding classroom interactions and also encourage teachers to modify theirs as well.

While it is essential for teachers to practice these strategies to improve students' critical thinking processing, perhaps one explanation for why they do not implement them could be that while they took the required literacy in content area course during their undergraduate studies, they do not feel their knowledge and ability to teach these strategies is adequate. Following the research of Fisher and Frey (2008), content area teachers have been observed not using literacy strategies to assist their struggling students. Hopefully, this is not the result of being defiant, but instead, teachers' lack of implementation could be a result from feelings of unfamiliarity, not feeling comfortable with the purpose and/or delivery, insecurity of messing things up then creating further confusion for the students, and/or in general just needing more information. It is the belief of Nichols, Young, and Rickelman (2007) that "improving teachers' knowledge of instructional strategies and methods, teachers will have a better understanding of the value these when teaching in their classroom" (p. 101). An assumption can be made when teachers do not, or seldom, use literacy strategies within their content area it could be they recognized they lack the knowledge to execute them properly and effectively.

Taking a closer look at the knowledge and understanding obtained by some content teachers may reveal their beliefs and practices stem from their past learning experiences when listening, reading, and writing were the routes one took to learn formally. While there is value in these strategies and they have proven to be beneficial for learners for many decades, 21st century students now learn through a much broader range of venues, such as technologies, than many veteran teachers were ever exposed to during their childhood and adolescent years. As Wright (2007) points out, many teachers tend to concentrate attention on the content of their subject domains in which they have become expert, rather than the learning process and social practices practiced through literacy strategies (p. 421). Therefore, many teachers are guilty of simply teaching content rather than teaching a learning process and generally

become fairly defensive when suggested they should be concerned with more. Perhaps instead of students being the only ones to have questions asked of them, teachers should regularly ask themselves, or be asked by administrators, quality type questions regarding what they are doing to meet every the needs of every student.

While teachers' primary focus should be to equip students with learning and thinking tools necessary to navigate, make sense of, and critically examine subject content, unfortunately, they do not get this privilege due to challenges they face as a result of school's requirements and restraints. Teachers really have no control over the amount of time allotted for teaching and unfortunately within this limited amount of time, many are required to deliver a standard set of curricular which is not tolerable of deviation. If school administrators are not supportive of allowing teachers to teach learning instead of content, then this will require the teachers to be creative and to intentionally find ways where literacy strategies can be incorporated into their content. By doing so requires time and many teachers reported by Fisher and Frey (2008) claim they lack the time to devote to this.

A common theme of the reviewed articles was facilitating change of instructional delivery within content areas produced positive learning outcomes for both teachers and students. By teachers creating and actively incorporating literacy-enriched environments within their classrooms, they modified their beliefs of what learning and teaching meant. These beliefs were not kept behind the doors of the classrooms. Teachers shared ideas and experiences within and beyond their discipline creating a network of ongoing professional development without a formal presenter and at no cost to the schools. As teachers began to adopt the belief that teaching should be focused more toward helping students learn how to learn, they began to value and meet the learners' needs and interests. As teachers began to understand what literacy strategies are and how powerful they are in influencing students' learning they began to look for ways they could effectively apply them to their content area. Wright (2007) reported that when teachers increased their experimentation with literacy-oriented approaches, students responded positively indicating the approaches made learning more accessible and comprehensible, increased

enjoyment and engagement, and improved their disposition towards the subject (p. 423). Positive attitudes give students a sense of empowerment, which according to Moje (1996) is critical to understanding.

So where might a good starting place be for tying all of this research back into the original question, "If teachers of content areas are aware of the research proving teaching literacy strategies within their discipline is key to empowering students with the ability to develop critical thinking, thus flourishing, then why are the majority not using them in their instruction and what is the solution to getting more teachers to accept and put them into practice?" The best answer to this might be found in Moje's (1996) statement, "Teachers should be encouraged to examine their beliefs about students' needs and what it means for student to be successful in relation to their beliefs about subject matter and literacy in secondary classrooms" (p. 192). Once teachers have inventoried themselves, allowing them to share their needs and concerns can add value to their person and their role of a teacher. Following a five year study of a school's attempt to reform student success by incorporating content literacy strategies, Fisher and Frey (2008) noted the importance of listening to the teachers' feedback. Adding value to their voices can contribute greatly to the continued growth of a school as it seeks to improve teaching and learning (p.261).

If it is our belief that teachers need to be more aware of and educated in their instructional design and strategy selection in relationship to the learning goals. However, they lack the knowledge of what they are and how to implement them. It then only makes sense to provide teachers with meaningful training through ongoing professional developments. Reflecting on the work of Dillon, O'Brien, and Sato (2011), in order for professional development to be meaningful and effective, it must be relevant to the teachers' needs. Nichols, Young, and Rickelman (2007) stated, "It is imperative professional development moves beyond 'one-shot training' and begins to make the most of the time allocated to such an important cause" (p. 99). Traditional approaches of short-term professional development for teachers must change. Traditional professional development of single-day courses emphasizing classroom strategies and

activities must become second to developing understanding of the learning process. Torgesen, Houston, & Rissman (2007) provide a model that districts could use for training their content area teachers. Focusing on the research-based instructional strategies that are most frequently discussed in terms of improving upper level students reading skills, this guide concentrates on: (a) comprehension strategies, that include before, during, and after strategies that enable students to consciously apply to their understanding and learning from text; (b) discussions facilitated by the teacher or structured discussions among students in cooperative learning groups, providing opportunities for deeper, more sustained discussion of content from text; (c) setting and maintaining high standards for level of text, conversation, questions, and vocabulary reflected in discussions and reading and writing assignments; (d) reading-writing connection to improve student opportunities to reflect on the meaning of text and receive feedback on their reflections; (e) creating more motivating and engaging classrooms and interacting with students in a way that promotes internal motivation for reading as they learn to process text more deeply; and (f) content learning, teaching content knowledge to ensure learning of the most essential concepts by all students by using instructional methods such as graphic organizers or concept comparison routines.

Because research has proven literacy strategies within the content are the vehicle to lead students to become successful learners across the board, it is crucial for the focus of teachers to move from subject centered to student-centered strategies. Content area teachers should not be held responsible to teach struggling readers basic reading skills, but it is imperative that they are able to identify such students and be able to teach them strategies to help improve their ability to comprehend text. "Professional development that presents important research-tested practices and ideas in creative manners that are sensible to the practicing teacher, have a greater opportunity of being implemented" (Nichols, Young, & Rickelman, 2007, p. 112).

Theoretical Framework

In order for teachers to reinvent their pedagogical practices to sustain students' current and future learning needs, a framework supporting teachers' professional knowledge, based on their social, educational, and physical contexts will need to be established. Nichols, Young, & Rickelman (2007) suggests, "Effective teachers incorporate theory into practice and do not rely on a single instructional strategy or method to meet the learning needs of their students" (p. 102). Because many instructional practices can be associated with multiple theories, three theories of learning support this framework, which include: constructivism, social learning perspectives, and information/cognitive. These theories of language and literacy development highlight the relationship between cognition, language, literacy, and social and cultural interactions.

Research Question

Thirty years after Herber's influential work, several reasons attempt to explain why so many content area teachers do not teach literacy strategies within their respected content area. The neglect to not do so is believed to account for students who struggle to catch up and keep up with valuable cognitive strategies. To summarize the problem, if teachers of content areas are aware of the research proving teaching literacy strategies within their discipline is key to empowering students with the ability to develop critical thinking, then why are the majority not using them in their instruction and what is the solution to urge more teachers to accept and put such strategies into practice? Perhaps by answering this question, a solution can result in getting content area teachers to find value and implement literacy strategies into their teaching.

Future Research

Throughout this paper, the history, purpose, trends of use, and research proving there is a correlation to content literacy strategies being associated to equipping students with the cognitive strategies that allow them to proceed and critically investigate subject content has been synthesized.

When teachers realize the importance of moving from subject-centered to student-centered objectives, they must be proactive, providing whatever is necessary in order for their students to be successful.

Extending this topic for future studies could include a focus on professional development, which have proven to be successful at convincing and leading resistant content area teachers to incorporating literacy strategies within their discipline. A further extension for research could be to concentrate on the implication of administrators' informal, follow-up, formative teacher evaluation, focusing on observing teachers to ensure they are implementing the recently learned best practices for teaching gained during the course of professional development, which would almost certainly ensure teachers are instilling new practices into their instruction. With a non-threatening evaluation of this nature, teachers would have the opportunity to display newly acquired teaching techniques and administrators could see first-hand a solution at work to increase students' success. Because evaluation systems have largely failed to achieve quality assurance, a paradigm shift in teacher evaluations must be considered by educational agencies for results in improved learning for all students to occur.

References

Davey, B. (1988). How do classroom teachers use their textbooks? *Journal of Reading, 31,* 340-345.

Dillon, D.R., O'Brien, D.G., & Sato, M. (2011). Professional development and teacher education for reading instruction. *Handbook of Reading Research, 4*(26), 629-660.

Fisher, D. & Frey, N. (2008). Student and teacher perspectives on the usefulness of content literacy strategies. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 47,* 246-263.

Gritter, K. (2010). Insert student here: Why content area constructions of literacy matter for preservice teachers. *Reading Horizons, 50*(3), 147-168.

Hinchman, K (1987). The textbook and three content-area teachers. *Reading Research and Instruction, 26,* 247-263.

Kane, S. (2007). *Literacy & learning in the content area.* Scottsdale, AZ: Holcomb Hathaway, Publishers.

Moje, E. (1996). "I teach students, not subjects": Teacher-student relationships as contexts for secondary literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly, 31*(2), 172-195.

Moje, E. (2000). Reexamining roles of learner, text, and context in secondary literacy. *The Journal of Educational Research, 93*(3), 165-180.

Nichols, W.D., Young, C.A., & Rickelman, R.J. (2007). Improving middle school professional development by examining middle school teachers' application of literacy strategies and instructional design. *Reading Psychology, 28,* 97-130.

Ratekin, N., Simpson, M.L., Alvermann, D.E. & Dishner, E.K. (1985). Why teachers resist content reading instruction. *Journal of Reading, 28,* 432-437.

Readence, J.E., Konopak, B.C., & Wilson, E.K. (1991). *An examination of content teachers' beliefs and instructional choices and their actual planning and practices.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, Palm Springs, CA.

Shanahan, T., & Shanahan, C. (2008). Teaching disciplinary literacy to adolescents: Rethinking content-area literacy. *Harvard Educational Review, 78*(1), 40-59.

Smith, F.R., & Feathers, K.M. (1983). The role of reading in content classrooms: Assumptions vs. reality. *Journal of Reading, 27,* 262-267.

Torgesen, J., Houston, D., & Rissman, L. (2007). *Improving literacy instruction in middle and high schools: A guide for principals.* Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.

Wright, N. (2007). Building literacy communities of practice across subject disciplines in secondary schools. *Language and Education, 21*(5), 420-433.