



Application Report

International Reading Association

Teacher as Researcher Grant 2009

Application Data

Short Title	In the Absence of Background Knowledge
Short Summary	This research study seeks to determine ways in which a select reading comprehension strategy "making connections" can help fourth-grade students construct meaning from nonfiction literature (informational and content-based) despite the absence of student background knowledge. The study relies on the use of quantitative-dominant sequential research methods, and will be used to help my intermediate-level students grasp the challenges of their content-rich curriculum while also providing my elementary-level teaching colleagues with unique variations of this well-known strategy as it can be targeted to the needs of their intermediate-level learners.
Application Type	Individual
Requested Amount	\$3,000
Research Methods	Descriptive Research; Experimental/Quasi-Experimental; Historical; Meta-Analysis/Quantitative; Naturalistic/Case Study; Survey; Time Series Analysis; Other
Grade Levels	Early Childhood/Elementary
Referral Source	Other

Research Description

You will be able to update and edit until you submit your application. Save changes as you work and return at any time to complete the application. The description of proposed research should be as specific as possible and follow the outline typically used for dissertation or sponsored research proposals. Follow APA style and format guidelines. Do not include the name(s) of the submitter(s) and institutional affiliation(s). Do not use underline, bold or italic text. Character counts include spaces and punctuation.

1. Full Project Title *

(150 characters maximum)

In The Absence of Background Knowledge: New Directions in Comprehension Strategies To Aid Intermediate-Level Learners with Content-Area Literature.

2. Abstract *

(700 characters maximum) Describe the purpose, method, and potential significance of the proposed research.

As a fourth-grade teacher-researcher, I'm aware that students have great difficulty grasping nonfiction, content-based literature when their background knowledge is limited. For example, as students read about the Revolutionary Period, they are inundated with new, often unimaginable concepts. Sadly, some students perceive their comprehension strategies as 'useless' and abandon them as they read this literature. Through research undertaken in this study, I plan to utilize effective ways of adapting one comprehension strategy (making connections) to help students creatively use background knowledge to construct meaning and make the unimaginable, imaginable.

3. Proposed Support Start Date *

(mm/dd/yyyy)

09/03/2009

4. Proposed Support End Date *

(mm/dd/yyyy)

05/30/2010

5. Research Description *

(3,000 characters maximum) Describe your role as a teacher researcher

- How will you benefit specifically as a teacher researcher?
- How did you become interested in this question?
- What do you already know about the question from any professional literature and from your own experiences that will help you with the project?
- How will you as a teacher researcher, your students, and the broader school community benefit from this research?

Determining intermediate-level applications for this well-known strategy (and its coordinated use with others) will improve the effectiveness of my instruction. It will also enable me to explore ways to extend and differentiate my instruction to meet my students' diverse needs.

I became interested in this question following an informal survey I conducted with my students several years ago; I asked if students felt they could effectively use comprehension strategies we learned while reading a work of fiction, while reading nonfiction. Over 75% believed they would not be able to 'make connections' if they lacked explicit experience with concepts appearing in the nonfiction literature. Since then, I have informally observed how the few highly skilled or "expert readers" (ERs) in my classes have used this strategy while reading content-area or nonfiction literature despite their absence of explicit background experience; through discussions during our small group instruction and in my informal review of their work (in which they demonstrate in writing, their application of this strategy and others), I have witnessed how these readers make creative connections to early Native Americans, the Colonial and Revolutionary Periods, Government, and other 'distant' concepts. Systematically exploring their authentic processes and then determining how to duplicate them within my instruction is the direction I wish to take my ten-year experience with intermediate-level and content-focused, strategy-based comprehension instruction.

I am well-versed in the effectiveness and use of directed reading, guided reading, and strategy-based comprehension instruction, components of which are presented in studies dating as far back as 1946 (Betts) and extending into recent practitioner-focused works (Fountas & Pinnell, Keene, and others). I am also intrigued by transformations that have occurred to the "connections" strategy; today there are four recognized subcategories: text-to-self, text-to-world, text-to-text, and text-to-heart. It appears that this strategy has much flexibility and continues to be reshaped. Also in this research study, I consider the importance of background knowledge (and the need to develop it). Studies abound based on Vygotsky's Schema Theory, and the matter has recently attracted a new level of urgency with the call for improvement in content or "domain knowledge" (Moss, 2005). Still, there have been few studies of how intermediate students use and apply their knowledge of individual (and coordinated) strategies in content literature.

From this research, I hope to uncover new avenues of instruction for the "making connections" strategy so

intermediate-level readers can adapt it to construct meaning in the absence of explicit background experience and knowledge. On a broader scale, the research will enable practitioners to consider new ways to assist intermediate-level learners transition from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn.'

6. Rationale *

(2,000 characters maximum) Describe your teaching context (e.g., school setting, community, classroom environment).

- What role do you play in this context and what is the nature of your role as a teacher researcher?
- What is the question or issue as a teacher researcher that drives your proposed inquiry?

I am a fourth-grade classroom teacher and have been providing instruction at this level for ten years. My main role as teacher-researcher is to plan, organize, conduct, and analyze the study while working with all students within my classroom and a selection of others, expert readers, from other 4th grade classes, in accordance with my standards-based curriculum. Specifically, I plan to uncover how the expert reader group successfully uses the aforementioned comprehension strategy within our language-arts curriculum and then determine how to incorporate these findings into my instruction. Presently, my language-arts curriculum is aligned with our standards-based social studies curriculum, enabling me to investigate many aspects of my students' content-based literacy behaviors. Likewise, I currently provide strategy-based reading comprehension instruction to small, homogeneous groups of students using a variety of content-based, leveled nonfiction reading materials. I am thus able to delve into my students' use and views of the strategies.

In addition to this role, I am also responsible for participating in a collaborative discussion group with colleagues (inside and outside of my district) who share an interest in applying strategy-based comprehension instruction at the intermediate levels.

The focus of my research is: In what ways can fourth-grade students use a familiar reading comprehension strategy to make meaning from content-based, nonfiction literature when their background experience and knowledge is inherently limited? The questions that drive this research are: What are students' current views on the versatility of their comprehension strategies?; How do expert readers adapt a comprehension strategy that favors background knowledge when it is inherently absent?; and What changes can I make in my instruction to integrate these adaptive methods so all students can benefit from them?

Research Methods

Describe the research methods you will employ in your study. Follow APA style and format guidelines. Do not include the name(s) of the submitter(s) and institutional affiliation(s). Character counts include spaces and punctuation.

7. What are you proposing to do in your classroom that will help you explore your question? *

(500 characters maximum)

I will review 3rd grade state tests and new 4th grade literacy benchmarks from six, 4th grade classes and identify expert readers (ERs). I will observe/analyze how this ER group (est. 24 students) makes connections to content-area and nonfiction literature. I will then identify emerging processes and incorporate them into my small-group reading instruction. Lastly, I will observe/analyze the transferability of these processes within my classroom group. I will also use extensive peer modeling.

8. What forms of documentation do you plan to use as part of your inquiry? *

(500 characters maximum) E.g., journals, student work samples, video and/or audio recordings. Be specific about what will be done and how this documentation will help guide your inquiry.

Documentation from the ER group will include a phenomenological inquiry, periodic interviews and surveys, and teacher interviews. For my classroom group, documentation will include surveys, anecdotal notes from group reading instruction, transcripts from student work samples, and strategy-application assessments. Documentation for both groups will also include pre and post reading level (Fountas & Pinnell) and strategy-use benchmarks. I also plan to keep a teacher journal.

9. How will you organize, reflect on, and analyze data? *

(500 characters maximum) Be specific about how you will examine your data (e.g., qualitative, case study, generate categories).

The overall nature of this study is quasi-experimental, and I will use historical data analysis, as well as surveys and interviews, which will adopt a conversational interview format (Gambrell). All will be piloted prior to their administration. Data from anecdotal notes and student work samples will be analyzed using descriptive statistics. As information will be collected over time, the course of five instructional units, my research will reflect grounded theory research.

10. Will you be working on your own or with colleagues? *

(250 characters maximum) If the latter, explain their contribution.

I will be working informally with five of my grade-level colleagues. We plan together, deliver the same guided-reading units, and use the same resources. They will help collect data (ER group), provide work samples, and participate in interviews.

Dissemination

Describe ways you see yourself sharing the results of your inquiry with colleagues and members of the International Reading Association (e.g., journal articles, workshops, conference presentations). Be specific. Follow APA style and format guidelines. Do not include the name(s) of the submitter(s) and institutional affiliation(s). Character counts include spaces and punctuation.

11. What will you be able to change in your classroom as a result of your research? *

(750 characters maximum)

I will be able to provide more direction and guidance within my direct instruction and within my instructional materials for students who are beginning to establish the foundations of their background knowledge. Helping students to build their literary confidence within the content curriculum areas could also result in improved student motivation and self-directed instruction. Likewise, this study will help guide me as I consider other intermediate-level application of the comprehension strategies, especially as they transfer to content-area and nonfiction literature. Lastly, relying on cross-reading-level peer models to help demonstrate creative processes will add dimension to my instruction.

12. In what ways will you share the results of your inquiry with colleagues and members of the International Reading Association? *

(750 characters maximum) E.g., journal articles, workshops, and conference presentations

I will share information with grade-level and district colleagues as a teacher leader. I also plan to incorporate the results into workshops that I provide on strategy-based reading comprehension for our regional teaching center, our cooperative educational institution, and for neighboring districts. Additionally, I would incorporate the findings in proposals I plan to submit to our regional and state reading associations as well as for participation in the May 2010 IRA Conference (including a workshop session as well as a research poster session). Finally, I would seek publication of the results in an IRA journal and as a component of a larger publication on intermediate-level guided reading in the content areas through the IRA.

13. Include a timeline indicating when you expect your inquiry to be completed. *

(1,000 characters maximum) List dates for data gathering, data analysis, and reporting activities.

Sept/Oct '09
Analyze 3rd grade data
Analyze new assessments & confirm ER group
ER Survey 1

Deliver Unit 1/Comp. Strategies Intro. - gather anecdotal notes & samples
Unit Assessment/Analysis
ER Survey 2

Teacher interview
Classroom Pre-Survey-nonfiction strategy use & analysis

Oct/Nov '09
Deliver Unit 2/Native Americans-gather anecdotal notes & samples
Unit Assessment/Analysis
ER Survey 3
Teacher interview

Nov/Dec '09
Interpret & analyze patterns/themes

Dec '09/Jan '10
Deliver Unit 3/Colonial Period/Peer Modeling-gather anecdotal notes & samples
Unit Assessment/Analysis
ER Group Interview

Jan/Feb'10
Deliver Unit 4/Revolutionary Period/Peer Modeling-gather anecdotal notes & samples
Unit Assessment/Analysis
ER Group Interview

Feb/Mar'10
Deliver Unit 5/Government/Peer Modeling-gather anecdotal notes & samples
Unit Assessment/Analysis
ER Group Interview

Mar/May'10
Post-test assessments
Classroom Post Survey-nonfiction strategy use
Comparative analysis of pre and post data
Journal analysis
Compile and report findings

Budget

Describe and explain the rationale for each budget line item. Enter "0" in amount and "none" in descriptor if necessary. For more information please review budget guideline. Character counts include spaces and punctuation.

14. Personnel Amount

\$575

15. Personnel description and rationale

(200 characters maximum)

Research Assistant - three hours for each of five units = 15 hours x \$25. per hr. = \$375.
Transcriber - eight hours x \$25. per hr. = \$200.

16. Materials Amount

\$200

17. Materials description and rationale

(200 characters maximum)

Video tapes, DVDs, printer ink cartridges, paper

18. Travel Amount

\$1,500

19. Travel description and rationale

(200 characters maximum)

Airplane transportation to IRA, May '10, for presentation of findings and registration fee (for myself and one grade-level colleague)

20. Computer Amount

\$400

21. Computer description and rationale

(200 characters maximum)

Assistance with data preparation & analysis from computer specialist. Six hours of assistance @\$50. per hr. Assistance with video recordings & editing. Two hours @\$50. per hr.

22. Office Expenses Amount

\$50

23. Office description and rationale

(200 characters maximum)

Copies of student work samples over five units of instruction.

24. Clerical Support Amount

\$75

25. Clerical description and rationale

(200 characters maximum)

Five hours of support (one hr. per unit) @ \$15. per hr.

26. Other Amount

\$200

27. Other description and rationale

(200 characters maximum)

Honorariums for assistance piloting survey and interview questionnaires. Four honorariums @ \$50. ea.

28. Amount of outside funding

\$0

29. Sources of outside project-related funding (if none, enter "none")

(200 characters maximum)

none

30. Total Project Budget *

\$3,000

31. Total Requested from IRA

\$3,000