

**The Use of Narrative Mode in a Special Education Resource
Class Enable the Students to Demonstrate Improvements in
Recalling Definitions of Their Spelling Words**

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Joyce Gill Howard
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Introduction

It is a Monday morning in a 6th grade Language Arts resource class. As usual, the students are complaining because they are asked to write definitions for their weekly spelling words. The teacher is standing in front of the class giving her Monday morning speech, and she notices that eyes are rolling and that one student has developed a headache and requests to go to the clinic. The teacher is holding the spelling words for the week in her hands, and the students are complaining because they don't want to write definitions for their spelling words.

Every Monday I give my Language Arts resource students twenty spelling words to define. I observe from the students' oral expressions and body language that writing the definitions are not likely to accomplish much learning. The students will eventually write their spelling words, but when the students do an activity in which they have to fill in the blanks with spelling words, they are lost. The students are having a hard time with spelling words that are on the fourth grade level. They are also having trouble with vocabulary terms in science and social studies, which are written at the sixth and seventh grade level.

My desire to do this study comes from observing special education students struggle in their academic subjects. The reason I chose defining spelling words as my focus for this research is because I use direct instruction programs for my other subjects. Direct instruction is an explicit, intensive, teacher directed method of teaching. I also integrate reading with spelling in the students weekly spelling activities. I would like to find another method to use to enhance the effectiveness of my classroom instruction.

During my search for another strategy I found Narrative theory. Narrative theory relies on a method of learning based on students using their perceptions of day to day experiences (Zigo, 2001, p. 1). In narrative mode of thinking the students tell a story and make their own connections from their story. I will use this approach with my middle school language arts resource students. I thought that if I allowed the students to tell a story about each spelling word, the meaning would stay in their memory longer. If the students are able to understand the meaning of the words, this should help in their spelling as well. I would like for my research to be focused around the question, Will implementing the use of the narrative mode in a special education resource class enable the students to demonstrate improvements in recalling definitions of their spelling words?

Knox County Schools Special Education Department follows no set curriculum other than state guidelines. As such, there is a wide range of programming and instructional options available for the special education setting. Direct instruction programs are generally recommended for special education settings. Due to the fact that a research program such as direct instruction is not normally used in classrooms outside of the special education classrooms, students should benefit from the use of other types of strategies such as the narrative mode. By using strategies which aid in long term memory, special education students could improve skills which could help them in classes outside of the special education setting.

In my resource Language Arts classes, the students are having difficulty understanding and retaining the meaning of their spelling words. When the students are given a test on the assigned words, they seem to forget these words without developing the skills needed to use these words in context. In my review of the literature, I describe

the narrative theory and the connection between the narrative theory, storytelling and culture. I will also discuss the implications for teachers using the narrative theory in a classroom setting.

My research question is: Will implementing the use of the narrative mode in a special education resource class enable the students to demonstrate improvements in recalling definitions of their spelling words?

Review of Literature

Introduction

Narrative theory is a belief that learning can be enhanced by relating classroom tasks to personal experiences. There are different uses of narratives. I will discuss a few. According to Bruner, narrative mode is a distinct form of cognition, of making sense of the world in a way that differs from the more analytic, linear paradigmatic stance. But narratives do much more than just mirror the social world. According to Czarniawska (1997), they are a kind of cognitive and cultural ether that permeates and energizes everything that goes on. Wells (1986) suggested that a narrative “has its roots in the perceptual and cognitive processes through which, as individuals, we make sense of our experiences” (p.2). Egan (1999) suggested that storytelling reflects “a set of powerful and effective mental strategies” (p.7). In addition to serving as a cognition tool relied upon by individuals, Egan asserted that storytelling serves as a significant tool for shaping the understanding and meaning given to events. This last statement is an area that has drawn me into having my students engage in thinking and analyzing events through the storytelling mode.

Narrative and Storytelling

Alex Haley wrote a book called “Roots”. This is a book about his family history. Mr. Haley said that he obtained the information in his book from listening to stories told by his grandmother and other family members. Humans have always learned from experience and recounted that experience through stories. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state, “People lead storied lives and tell stories about those lives” (p.1). According to Bruner, “Meaning is attributed to our lives through stories. Seeing our lives from the narrative perspective provides a means for rendering otherwise chaotic, shapeless events into coherent whole filled events with meaning” (p.1). In short, we are much more likely to have a deeper understanding of words and terms when those words and terms have a personal connection in our lives. By developing a deeper understanding of terminology, we are much more likely to use the terminology in the right context.

Narrative in the form of stories is also a central form of expression and understanding. Cassidy (2001) tells us that narratives illustrate the importance of framing and debriefing in a personal manner that emphasizes feelings and context in order to make connections to participants’ life stories. Cassidy (1995) is supported by Witherell, Tan Tran & Othus in asserting that

“narrative can serve as an interpretive lens for reflecting the storied nature of human lives, for understanding the moral complexities of the human condition, and enabling classrooms to expand their borders as interpretive communities” (p.40).

The use of storied narrative is a good way to show similarities between the life of students and the story.

Narrative and Culture

I think that it is very important to understand my students’ culture due to the fact that I work in an urban school. I once heard a speaker at a diversity workshop ask the

question, how can you teach children if you don't know them? Bruner (1996) argues, "It is only in the narrative mode that one can construct an identity and find a place in one's culture. Schools must cultivate it, nurture it, cease taking it for granted" (p.42). This theory leads us to believe that when a child is involved in a classroom discussion based on the child's cultural experiences, the child's self esteem is enhanced.

Implications for teachers using the narrative theory

Studies by Hynds and Marshall have shown that students are much more likely to remember information when the information has a personal connection. Teachers often lead classroom discussions. If teachers do not take the time or make the effort to allow significant feedback, the meaning of the information being provided in the classroom will take on the teachers meaning.

In using the narrative theory, teachers who know their students on a personal level possess a big advantage. By understanding the student's preexisting point of view, the teacher has a better opportunity of making a faster connection. When students are suddenly placed into an area of learning which is outside of their personal comfort zone, the learning level can drop drastically.

According to Bruning et al (1995), studies have shown that the deeper the processing or reflection, the more likely a student will remember the new information. We learn through our everyday experience. Narrative helps us to give meaning to experience which will assist in creating a context for information to be stored in the brain. In class, a student was reading a sentence where he had a choice of two words he could use to complete the sentence. The words were painter and teller. The student chose painter. The correct word was teller. I asked if he had ever been to a bank. His reply

was “no”. This example shows that the student’s experience would not have lead him to pick teller. Without prior knowledge , the link will go unnoticed and lead to misunderstanding.

Summary

The success a student can experience through the use of narrative strategies illustrates the importance of allowing the learning process to occur within a comfort zone. The use of the storytelling strategy and relating exercises to cultural familiarities are both methods which allow for deeper understanding and more effective long term recall. By using research strategies in developing long term memory, I hope to enable students to recall definitions of spelling words with comprehension of the words. Researchers have provided evidence that using narrative experiences in a classroom setting enhances student comprehension.

Method and Procedures

The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of using narrative approaches with special education middle school students. They will tell a story about each spelling word. By telling a story, the students will be able to make their own connection to the words. Students use **checkpoint** and **story pages** because these activities focus on understanding of word usage and meaning. These activities will also serve as a means for me to assess the students understanding of the spelling words. Data collected from the assessments could be used as the basis for a recommendation for using narrative strategies in developing vocabulary skills in the general curricula classes. My research question is: Will implementing the use of narrative activities in a special

education resource class enable the students to demonstrate improvements in recalling definitions of their spelling words?

The participants are sixth, seventh and eighth grade students with identified learning disabilities attending an urban middle school. Each student's Individual Educational Program (IEP) contains present levels of functioning, individualized goals and objectives, and program recommendations. Eight of the participants are African American males, and one is a Caucasian male. These students receive language arts instruction for one period (55 minutes) of the day in a classroom with one certified special education teacher and one assistant.

This is an urban middle school (6th – 8th grade) in a mid-sized city in Tennessee. The past several years, the school has experienced dramatic changes in student population. The increase is due, in large part, to the draw of the Magnet program. With the inception of the Magnet program, students from outside the immediate community were allowed to enroll. The school as of today is a multi-cultural, multi-racial magnet middle school for the performing arts and sciences.

The majority of the students come from local families. These families are of low to modest income levels. The school serves approximately 600 students. The African population in the school is 440 students, the Asian population is 4, the Hispanic population is 4, the Native population is 1, and the White population is 160.

All of these students receive spelling instruction using the Steck-Vaughn Spelling series. The students were given a placement test and it was determined that these students are spelling on a third to fourth grade level. The spelling instruction starts with a word analysis page, which introduces the list of spelling words. The word analysis page

is followed by Checkpoint, a series of meaning-based prompts in the form of definitions, context clues, analogies, synonyms, antonyms, and word plays for writing each word. The next pages are the Story pages, which are devoted to a structured reading passage. The passage allows students to work with meaning in the cloze style. A cloze procedure is a structured fill-in-the-blank activity that emphasizes word comprehension and context clues. The students must use context clues as they complete the passage using their spelling words. The activities in the Steck-Vaughn Spelling program can be used to address the difficulty some students have in spelling.

During spelling instruction I will explain to the students that they will not have to write definitions for their spelling words. I have noticed that these students have difficulty with instructional changes, so I will need to discuss the changes first. On this day the students will say their words orally with me. Then I will explain that they will complete the checkpoint and story activities before they tell their stories about the words. Next, I will explain that the reason they are doing it this way is because they can see that using a different strategy can improve their ability to define their spelling words. The students will feel like they are a part of their learning experience.

On a Friday, the first day of spelling instruction, the students will be given a pre-test using the checkpoint exercise from their spelling lesson. Following the pre-test, each student will be assigned two spelling words. Two students will be assigned three words each because there are twenty words and nine students in the class. The students will be informed that in order to complete their assignment, over the weekend, they must create stories using the assigned words. Starting on the following Monday, five words will be taken from the list and the students, will be allowed to tell their respective words. This

activity will last through Thursday. On each Friday the will be give a post-test by using the story pages from their spelling lesson. This procedure and schedule will continue for the next six weeks.

The implementation of the study will began on January 18, 2003 and end on March 7, 2003. At the end of the six weeks, the students and I will compare the Checkpoint and Story pages data together. The results from the pre-test will be compared to the post-test results each week in order to determine if there is an increase in the students' ability to correctly recall the definitions of the words following the story telling activities. The post-test results from week one will also be compared to the post-test results from week six in order to determine if there is a significant increase in the students' ability to recall the definitions of the words after the narrative theory has been used continually over the six week period.

Findings

The main purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of using narrative approaches with special education middle school students. The data that were taken suggest that narrative approaches are strategies to use. The students were evaluated by using Checkpoint activities from their spelling lesson. The Checkpoint activity has a series of twenty meaning-based prompts in the form of definitions, context clues and word plays for writing each word. The students told stories about their spelling words. The story telling was a narrative activity which was conducted after a pre-test was given.

In presenting the study's findings, I use a table that shows individual pre and post test scores for three weeks. I also use a double bar graph to show the average pre and post test results (See Figure 1). The students were give five points for each correct

answer. The scores ranged from zero to one hundred points. (zero for no correct answers to one hundred for all twenty correct answers).

Table 1 contains individual pre and post test scores for week 1 of the study. There are two students who scored 0 on the pre test but scores 10 to 15 points on the post test. This is significant because any increase shows progress. There are students who scored in the higher level range, from 70 to 90 points on the pre test, who scored 80 to 100 points on the post-test. The level of progress between the pre and post test was essentially the same for lower and higher level students.

Table 1 also contains individual pre and post test scores for week 2 of the study. There were two students who scored 0 and 5 points on the pre test and 10 to 35 points on the post test. There were three students who scored 75 to 100 points on the pre test and scored 95 to 100 points on the post test. In looking at the class as a whole, there was a steady increase from week 1 to week 2. This demonstrates that the narrative activity is helping students improve their score.

Table 1 contains individual pre and post test scores for week 3 of the study. During the third week, no student received 0 on the pre test. There were three students who received 100 points on the post test. The results show slight increase in the pre and post test scores. The fact that there was a steady increase on the post test scores shows that the students seem to be adapting to the narrative instruction.

Figure 1 shows the average pre and post test results for week 1 of the study. The students' pre and post test scores were added together and the total was divide by nine to come up with the average scores. The average pre test score was 36% and the post test average score was 51%.

Figure 1 also shows the average pre and post test results for week 2 of study. The average pre test score went from 36% to 44% and the post test score went from 51% to 67%. These results show a gain of 8 and 16 percent respectively. The average increase reflects that the students are making a favorable response to the instruction method.

Finally, Figure 1 shows the average pre and post test results for week 3 of the study. The average pre test score went from 44% to 46% and the average post test score went from 67% to 72%. The post-test average increased to 72%. The students, have once again, showed a significant increase in their comprehension of the spelling words.

The findings show that in a special education class with students on different ability levels that all students demonstrated improvement. There was a 20% increase in the average pre test scores from week 1 to week 3. There was 21% increase in the post test scores from week 1 to week 3. This trend seems to demonstrate that the increase was significant and steady. These results reflect the successful use of the narrative method and a consistent level of participant from all the participants.

Conclusions

My interest in narrative approach began when I observed my students struggling to recall the meaning of their spelling words. I noticed a pattern in students' learning. Most of the students could write the definition for their spelling words but they could not complete the Checkpoint assignment without asking for my help. When I told them the definition of the word, some still could not determine the correct answer.

The outcome of this study is that narrative approaches can help students to recall the meaning of words. When students are allowed to tell stories in their own words, the students tend to make lasting connections with the meanings behind the stories. In

addition, this technique has helped my special education students to build up their confidence level. The success that they have experience is likely to aid them in their other academic areas.

What I found out in this study fits very well with what Egan (1999) said, “Story telling serves as a significant tool for shaping the understanding and meaning given to events.” In short, this study demonstrates Bruner’s theory of how stories attribute meaning to our lives. Bruner (1986) stated, “Seeing our lives from the narrative prospective provides a means for rendering otherwise chaotic, shapeless events into coherent whole filled events with meaning.” I am convinced that students have a greater opportunity of succeeding when they are able to make a personal connection to the course work.

Discussion/Recommendations

The positive results of this study are that the students were able to keep the meaning of their spelling words in their memory to complete the Checkpoint activity without asking for help. During this process, they learned not to give up if they did not know the first answer. The students would answer questions they knew, then come back and figure out the answers they did not know through a process of elimination. The students’ self-esteem became stronger because, during oral story telling of their assigned words, they were able to tell a story that they knew and understood. Even the students who are low performers on paper could tell great stories. This activity gave everyone a chance to shine.

I found that time was a limitation of the study. Each student was assigned two or three words to tell a story about. There were a total of twenty spelling words, and it took

about fifteen minutes to complete this activity. It also took some students the entire class period of fifty-five minutes to complete the pre and post test. My study was done with nine students. With a larger class, the story telling would take a longer period of time.

At the beginning of this study the students were given two activities to complete. They were given Checkpoint for the pre test and the Story pages for the post test. After three weeks I noticed that some of the students were becoming frustrated and were not completing the Story pages. The Story pages are devoted to a structured reading passage presented in a cloze style format. The cloze procedure is a structured fill-in-the-blank activity. I decided to scrap this part of the plan... For the next three weeks, the students were given the Checkpoint for the pre and post test. Because some of the students were not completing the Story pages, I could not determine if the narrative activity was beneficial to this activity.

During the time frame of the study there were snow and in-service days which meant school was closed and the planned schedule had to be adjusted. During the first weeks of the study I was unable to obtain sufficient data. This did not hurt the study because the remaining three weeks gave results that showed that the narrative activity did have measurable results. I concluded the study after the planned six weeks. I am confident that the results will continue to improve.

There are several things I would change about the study. First, I would change the time of year the study was implemented. The snow days that were incurred during the winter session caused for several schedule changes. Secondly, I would change the format of the pre and post test. The Checkpoint proved to be the best method to use during this study. The classes would operate more smoothly by deleting the use of the

story pages. Lastly, I would change assigning words, instead allowing the students to choose their own words. This method would add to the effectiveness of narrative instruction.

Allowing special education students to use the narrative activity of the type used in this study should be considered as a possible learning strategy. The students are able to make their own connection and take ownership in their learning. This activity may be especially important for difficult classes, such as science and social studies that include students without strong memory skills. For these reasons I recommend using the study.

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Table 1

Results from Students' Pre- and Post-Tests for Three Weeks

Student	Pre-1	Post-1	Pre-2	Post-2	Pre-3	Post-3
1	10	30	15	90	30	80
2	70	100	75	95	70	100
3	50	85	85	85	55	90
4	90	100	100	100	100	100
5	20	25	0	10	15	35
6	0	15	25	35	15	35
7	0	10	5	10	10	30
8	70	80	60	90	70	100
9	10	10	30	85	45	80
Averages	36	51	44	67	46	72

Figure 1

