

Direct Instruction for L2 Children

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Abstract

The “Reading Mastery” reading proficiency course (RM) is aimed at developing L1 children’s reading ability using Direct Instruction.

I tested the course on my four-year-old son. As a result, he went from basic phonetic, single letter articulation, to reading graded, short stories in a period of 3 months - far beyond my expectations.

Accepting the obvious differences between the son of a native speaker that has copious contact time with the target language, and a class full of L2 children, this paper looks into the feasibility of introducing elements of such a pedagogy into a primary school English class for Japanese children.

Reading Wars

A debate about the best way to teach reading (sometimes called the “Reading Wars”) has been continuing for decades [1]. This debate centers around whether English teaching should be guided by phonics (learning how to read hitherto unknown words through the systematic breakdown of sounds) or “whole language” (learning words pictographically without reference to the constituent phonic parts - AKA “Look and Say”); some have cynically called this the science vs non-science debate.

In 1955 Rudolf Flesch wrote the seminal “Why Jonny Can’t Read” book, a then explosive condemnation of the American English education system for failing to teach phonics: “Students were expected to learn to read by memorising words, using simple books like the Dick-and-Jane readers.

Confronted with words they hadn’t memorised — like kid — they would hit a wall.” [2] This Look and Say teaching technique, devoid of phonics, has been convincingly argued against in scientific circles but, even now, it still has a strong grip on present day schools - 70 years down the road [2].

In response to this apparent sidelining of phonics, Siegfried Engelmann and Wesley C. Becker co-developed a teaching technique called Direct Instruction (a generic pedagogy for the explicit teaching of a skill-set using scripted instruction [3]) which in turn lead them to develop DISTAR (Direct Instruction System for Teaching Arithmetic and Reading) in 1965.

First introduced in the University of Illinois, it was designed to accelerate the progress of historically disadvantaged/underprivileged pre-school and primary school children who weren’t responding to classic teaching methods and, specifically (in regards to English), the Look and Say method of language acquisition. In short, the children were given a second chance. The change of style proved very successful: “In numerous head-to-head comparisons over the years with other classroom approaches, Direct Instruction has been the winner.” [4][5]

The Book

In 1983, Engelmann adapted DISTAR (now known as “Reading Mastery”) and wrote “Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons”. Aimed squarely at parents, it promised to shoehorn decades of DI research into a bite sized book that even mummy and daddy could follow.

I was that daddy. And my four-year-old son was raring to go, so I gave it a go.

I'll be honest, the title didn't inspire confidence. It rings of a 50's TV commercial promising whiter than white teeth. On top of that, the book itself is unwieldy and intimidating for all concerned: it's close to B5 size, 400 pages, heavy, and virtually picture-less. On top of this, the page layout and word density is very similar to a large dictionary. The thought of sitting down with my son and going through the book on a daily basis gave me pause. Make no mistake, this is a no-frills instruction manual that makes no pretence of being fun or entertaining. Whereas modern day children's textbooks try to kindle interest and look attractive through colourful pictures and easy to digest page layouts, Engelmann's book unashamedly makes no effort to placate in any way. Such warm feelings are reserved only for any potential satisfaction the student may receive when sensing their own improvement down the road.

As with all DI materials, the flow and content are heavily scripted. So much so that the forward instructs the reader to read the script verbatim with no deviations.

Two colours are used throughout: red denotes what you (the instructor) say, black denotes what you should be doing, such as where to point and what to emphasise. Again, everything must be said and nothing can be skipped. It is designed so that whether you're an advanced instructor or just a motivated parent, the results will be the same. This level playing field approach takes the instructor out of the equation and lets the huge base of research filling the pages, work. On the flip side, If you're experienced, this sacrifice of not being able to exercise your skills and ideas, can prove to be a hard pill to swallow.

Each lesson is broken down into around 6 sections, varying as the book progresses, along the following lines:

- Sounds Introduction Introduce and practice a new letter/phoneme.
- Sounds Revise previous letters/phonemes.

- Word reading Word reading revision with a handful of words, recycling previous lessons.
- Reading Read a short story. Early units start with a 3 word "story" ("Sam is mad") increasing to 150-200 words in later units.
- Picture Comprehension QA based on a simple line drawing.
- Writing Writing practice.

Script

Of special note is the script used throughout the book.

Although we have 26 letters in our alphabet, English contains 44 unique, immutable sounds (phonemes). Through context, rules, and memorisation, we learn to extrapolate those core sounds from our 26 letters without recourse to graphemes (unique symbols representing those phonemes). For example, when presented with the words mat and mate, we can distinguish between the short vowel "a" and the long vowel "a" even though the words use the same letter.

The DISTAR alphabet/script expands the 26 letters to 44 graphemes, with each phoneme being uniquely represented by a letter or a symbol that looks like a letter. For example, mat would stay as mat, and mate would become mâte.

While still eminently readable to the uninitiated reader, these special characters offer vital pronunciation clues for the new reader. This careful balance of satisfying both camps, and the book's deft progression of moving slowly between them, is what makes the system so accessible and successful.

Early units rely heavily on this script. Later units slowly phase it out until finally, towards the end of the book, only the 26 characters are used.

Book Usage

As the title suggests, there are 100 separate lessons in the book. Lessons 1 and 2 focus solely on single letters (m and s), the reading of lone words starts from lesson 13 and multiple words from lessons 15.

The child is encouraged to follow the instructor's finger - from left to right - to develop the concept of reading flow even when there is only a single letter. Where this method differs from other similar approaches (such as the "bouncing dot") is that dots, lines and arrows printed beneath the letters show you (the instructor and eventually the student) exactly where to place, and when to move, your finger.

The basic technique is as follows: In the case of reading a single letter, you first place your finger on a starting dot just to the left, under the letter. When ready, you move your finger slowly to the right along a line without stopping. Only when your finger is directly below the target do you say it's sound. Depending on whether its voice or unvoiced, the sound continues until your finger reaches the end of the line to the right of the letter.

This seemingly pedantic, mechanical reading habit formed in the early units, comes to fruition - and is essential for the technique to succeed - as you proceed through the book.

L 1 Application at Home - Introduction

While for many years I have always kept my eyes open for new ways to teach English to my Japanese students, the reality of my baby boy soon becoming 4 years old made my desire to explore effective reading techniques all the more focused.

Through daily practice with ABC cards (keeping it as light and fun as possible), my son already had a rudimentary understanding of some vowel and

consonant sounds.

Within a few weeks I tried to move on to words like Cat, Dog and Mat (using flash cards) but, although the letters represented by these words had already been covered, it was clear that his aural reproduction was being prompted by the picture on the card and not the word. Sensing this phonics deviation, I decided to regroup and avoid words altogether for the time being.

Every day, I showed him a 5 minute DVD from the Alphablocks series: "...a computer-animated children's television series that is designed to teach children how to spell with the use of animated blocks representing each letter" [6]. There are 26 cartoon characters, A to Z, each with their own unique personality/physical characteristics alluding to the sound of the letter they represent: The letter P p.. p.. p.. pops all around the screen, F is always being blown up like a balloon with the corresponding exhaling air sound, etc. The stories are funny, bite-sized, and simple - bereft of much else to think about other than the letter sounds. (Digraphs such as qu are also represented when 2 characters physically stick together - think 3 legged race).

In a period of approximately 6 weeks, viewing 5 to 10 minutes a day, he was displaying excellent proficiency in sounding letters out; the connection between the pictograph and the phonetic sound (without pictorial hints), was clear and present.

L 1 Application at Home - Using the Book

As a teacher in the classroom, I have a healthy, undercurrent of nervousness when trying something new. To my surprise, I experienced this very same feeling when sitting down with my son, trying this new book; I not only want him to improve, but I don't want to put him off learning.

After just over 3 months, we stopped short of the

100 units at Unit 80. The “reading concept” and phonics ability was already so solid that I decided that it was time to move on to (far more fun) graded readers.

Without going into too much detail in regards to the daily process (a paper in itself), I’ll summarise by saying that it reminds me of learning the piano: on a day to day basis, it’s hard - sometimes joyless - work (think scales) and there are times when you just don’t want to do it, but the positive result is undeniable. The book itself is often like reading a dictionary, but the research behind it simply works; my son can read.

Supplementing this 10-30 minute daily study time with fun reading time from Dad, sticker charts, little presents every 10 units, etc., is a must for sanity and survival for all concerned.

Something that sticks in my mind is how he suddenly realised he could read. Around unit 30, the process started to click, and confidence began to appear. The next 50 units were, therefore, just a means of expanding his phonetic repertoire. Seeing this mild awakening also inspired me to continue with a book which was, up until that point, an unknown entity.

L 2 Application

I could, logistically, PDF the whole book, present it to the class using the overhead projector, and try with all my might to recreate the same learning experience I had at home with my son, to a group of 30-40 children. But this would be going against the grain of the book and it’s intended audience of one.

I’ll summarise my experience (with my grade 2 class) in the following points:

Presentation

With an eye on entertaining the class while presenting the book’s content, I made a Keynote presentation (The Mac equivalent of PowerPoint) that showed, sequentially, all 44 phonemes (using a-z letters only) complete with fun bouncy animations and transitions. A testing of the water before I invested more time in this technique.

The Script

There is no doubting the efficacy of the script in priming young learners in the early mechanics of reading. But introducing new graphemes (“symbols”) to represent sounds to learners who, not so long ago, were learning to write ABC, proved a little too big a step to take. It also didn’t sit well with the other materials we were concurrently using that, naturally, don’t use this script.

I eventually compromised on just using the bar symbol (as in the previous “mâte” example), with the option of expanding the set at a later date.

The Order

The actual order the phonemes are taught is very important. A natural impulse would be to teach vowels first but, this will take you longer to build a large enough lexical set to create example words and, eventually, sentences, in order to contextualize progress.

The first ten are: m, s, a, d, t, e, r, l, n (which already gives you a possible 1000 words). I have been unable to find documentation in regard to the linguistic reasoning for this order but the more I use the set, the more I see the sound thinking behind it (such as separating b,d,p and q).

The example words/sentences/stories

L2 primary school children don’t understand the example sentences and, on the whole, the words. They are just sounds. This black balls a surprisingly

large part of the book.

Conclusion

Over a period of a month while I was trialing this in the classroom, the children were responsive to being presented with a mechanical method of reading a word - as opposed to just being told what it says and remembering it - and producing the target language. To this end, the rousing of this concept in them was beneficial.

Where it needs developing is connecting the two dots of the science of reading (which the book excels at), and the imagery of meaning (I can read sun but what does it mean?). The book itself is bereft of pictures that explain a word's meaning because L1 learners already know what "sun" is.

L2 students, not having this background, find themselves participating in a purely aural/oral exercise without the understanding required to move forward.

A balance has to be made between creating a method that requires the student to mechanically breakdown the phonetic structure of words (without recourse to someone telling them what it says) and, presenting the meaning of words - perhaps pictorially - to solidify their understanding and memory.

L1, One Year Later

Children absorb information and improve skills using multiple sources in ways that are unique to each child and sometimes unknown to the instructor. After a year of trialing the aforementioned technique on my now five-year-old son, the results have proved to be an objective success.

But my son lives with his English father. He has English books read to him on a daily basis, and his home life was (mostly) English. These "multiple

sources" could possibly cloud empirical evaluation of how he learned to read but I believe we can safely deduce the efficacy of this teaching method. While there's a possibility the book simply fast-tracked a process that may naturally occur as a child grows, plays and learns in a native environment, it's clear that it proved instrumental in guiding his thoughts and developing the concepts of the mechanics of reading.

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