Voyager: Reading and Writing for Today’s Adults

Instructional Practices Used in Voyager: Reading and Writing for Today’s Adults
[information provided in response to requirements of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998 (Title II of the Workforce Investment Act)]

Introduction

Voyager: Reading and Writing for Today’s Adults is a two-stage theme-based program that takes adult students from the beginning stages of reading and writing through the fourth reading level. The series consists of four student books, four teacher’s resource guides, and a placement tool. Voyager is published by New Readers Press of Syracuse, NY.

This sheet outlines instructional practices used in Voyager and lists research that validates the Voyager approach.

Voyager’s Features

Here are features that distinguish Voyager:

• In the early books, phonics and other word recognition strategies are combined with reading comprehension instruction.
• Later books emphasize comprehension and meaning.
• Each lesson integrates reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking skills.
• A theme-based approach unifies units. Activities and skill-building exercises in Voyager are related to the topic of the reading selection, the core of the lesson.
• Lesson passages include high-quality literature, information-rich articles, and adult student writing.
• Students can work independently or collaboratively ... in a variety of settings.
• Voyager provides additional support via teacher’s resource guides, and photocopy masters.

Overview of Voyager’s Stages

• Voyager Introduction and 1: In the first stage, “Learning to Read,” the emphasis is on short reading selections containing common words; phonics instruction; and writing, speaking, and listening activities to teach basic skills and build confidence.
• Voyager 2 and 3: In the second stage, “The Emerging Reader,” emphasis is on literary and informational reading selections; phonics and other word recognition strategies; comprehension and critical thinking strategies; and writing, speaking, and listening skills.

A Scope and Sequence Chart in each of the teacher’s resource guides tells which skills are taught in each lesson.

Instructional Practices

The following information is in response to instructional practices requirements of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998. It describes some of the instructional practices employed by Voyager.
Phonemic and Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is awareness of the sound system of one’s language. The term refers to spoken, as opposed to written language. Phonemic awareness, a part of phonological awareness, is awareness of phonemes, the smallest of the individual sounds of words. Someone who is weak in this area has difficulty hearing these sounds. For example, he or she would have difficulty identifying the three phonemes in cat: /c/, /a/, and /t/. As will be explained in the next section, phonological awareness is critically important to reading. According to Lyon and Alexander (1996), who review a variety of research studies, the core characteristic of poor reading is poor phonological processing ability.

The authors of Voyager put emphasis on phonological awareness. Voyager’s speaking and listening activities, particularly in the lower levels, provide many activities to help the student become proficient at identifying word sounds. The teacher’s resource guides provide extensive instruction on how to help the student in this area.

Importance of Phonemic and Phonological Awareness

• According to Jane Fell Greene (1998), “Phonemic awareness is the most potent predictor of success in learning to read—even more powerfully predictive than I.Q. Conversely, lack of phonemic awareness is the most powerful determinant of failure to learn to read….“
  “Successful programs begin with the intensive teaching of phonemic awareness, followed by direct teaching of phonics.”
• Stanovich (1991) claims that phonological awareness is the key to reading and says that it is one of the most important concepts to come out of the past 20 years of reading research.
• According to Shaywitz et al. (1992), 80-90% of school children with poor reading skills display poor phonological processing ability. Also, Knight (1998) says that children do not outgrow their poor reading skills. Instead, they become adults with poor phonological processing ability.

Systematic Phonics

Numerous researchers have pointed out the importance of teaching systematic phonics (the relationship between sounds and letters) in helping people learn to read. The first four levels of Voyager combine the direct teaching of systematic phonics and other word recognition strategies (including using context clues, decoding compound words, learning to recognize prefixes, roots, and suffixes, syllabication, and building sight vocabulary through use of flash cards and a personal dictionary) with reading comprehension instruction. Voyager not only provides a traditional phonics approach, but also encourages students to think about and talk about the words in each lesson that contain the lesson’s targeted phonics principle(s). The Voyager teacher’s resource guides provide additional help in teaching phonics.

For the higher levels of Voyager, although emphasis is on comprehension and meaning, students review phonics and other word recognition strategies as needed to develop automaticity and increase their sight vocabularies. As students decrease the amount of time and effort they have to put into decoding words, they can increase the amount of attention they pay to meaning.
Importance of Systematic Phonics
The phonics that is taught in Voyager is integrated with all other parts of a given lesson (e.g., with the reading selection). The emphasis on phonics and on a balanced approach is validated by numerous studies, for example:

- Schofield (1998) makes these comments: “The one big piece of the puzzle that has been missing [for adult reading students] is an awareness and understanding of the phonetic structure underlying the written language…. The concepts and the process [of phonological awareness] have never before been explained to them in small, easily digestible steps. That a sound-symbol system governs the written language is a revelation to them.”
- Hiebert (1991) discusses the need for a balance between phonics instruction and “authentic literacy tasks”: “A regimen of skill and drill [for students in schools] fails to help them become readers and writers who engage in thoughtful, avid literacy as a lifelong pursuit…. The opposite of the skill-and-drill syndrome, however, is not the answer either. As part of authentic tasks, students benefit from modeling and discussions about features of written language, including the graphophonic system.”
- Weaver (1998) advocates teaching phonics in the context of reading and writing, and states that “a balanced reading program focuses on using skills like phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge in the service of strategies for constructing meaning from text.”
- Linnea Ehri (1991) questions the teaching of phonics rules: “Although phonics instruction promotes acquisition of phonological recoding skill, phonics rules bear only a superficial resemblance to the rules which the fluent reader has internalized. Rules of phonics are taught as conscious, explicit statements, whereas the rules that readers use are unconscious and implicit. To illustrate, many readers can decode cibe and cabe correctly ... but cannot state the rules. The important capability for recoding is pronouncing unfamiliar spellings correctly, not vocalizing rules.” Per Ehri, Voyager teaches sound-symbol relationships without overemphasizing phonics rules.
- According to Tompkins (1997), it’s important to help learners use multiple cues for getting words by implementing explicit instruction and rich literature discussions.

Fluency
Students read fluently when they can read a passage without hesitations or mistakes and use intonation patterns that are consistent with the passage’s meaning. Students who read text fluently recognize all or most of the words they are reading. Until students achieve reading fluency, they tend to have trouble with comprehension.

Voyager offers the teacher a wide variety of strategies for helping the student improve reading fluency. For example, it explains how to:
- read aloud to students while they listen or follow along
- read a sentence aloud and then have students read the same sentence aloud
- read aloud simultaneously
- read a sentence or paragraph aloud to students, and have them read the next
- encourage independent reading

Importance of Fluency
- Samuels (1994) suggests that, in order to help improve the fluency of students whose attention is on decoding rather than comprehension, one provide texts that are easier to read.
And also, for beginning readers, he suggests having one’s students read the text several times until the meaning becomes clear. The first time or two, students read the text, emphasizing decoding; once they are able to decode the words, they switch their attention to meaning.”

- Rasinski (1991) shows that with repeated practice in the reading of stories, students learn to recognize words automatically.

**Reading Comprehension**

*Voyager* helps students understand what they read in a variety of ways. Here are some examples:

- In each lesson, a “Before You Read” section helps students tap into knowledge they already have and also provides prerequisite knowledge they need to understand the selection.
- Each lesson also provides students with a reading comprehension strategy appropriate for the reading selection in the lesson, such as recalling background knowledge, setting a purpose (e.g., what students want to find out from the reading), skimming, prediction, or retelling. Students apply the strategy as they read the selection and in the “After You Read” section, they evaluate their success with the strategy.
- Each lesson contains a “Think about It” section, usually 2-pages in length, that directly teaches a reading skill associated with the reading passage in the lesson. Each “Think about It” begins with an explanation and examples of the skill. In the second part, students work through guided practice. The final part in each “Think about It” gives students independent practice in the skill. Skills covered include making inferences, drawing conclusions, cause and effect, main idea and detail, problem and solution, fact vs. opinion, compare and contrast, sequencing, plot, characterization, theme, tone, point of view, etc.
- In a variety of ways, students are encouraged to find relevance in their lessons. For example, after students have read a selection, they are encouraged to integrate what they have learned with what they already know and to apply the information they’ve gained from the reading to situations in their own lives. This fosters better understanding of the text and is also motivational.

**Importance of Reading Comprehension**

The *Voyager* approach to reading comprehension is reflective of the work of various authors/researchers:

- Tierney, Readence, and Dishner (1995) report that “throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, several research studies were pursued in which deliberate and carefully planned attempts were made to explore the instructional characteristics of effective reading comprehension instruction. What emerged from these research pursuits was Explicit Teaching of Reading Comprehension. Its features include:
  1. **Relevance:** students are made aware of the purpose of the skill or strategy.
  2. **Definition:** students are informed as to how to apply the skills by making public the skills or strategy and modeling its use.
  3. **Guided practice:** students are given feedback on their own use of the strategy or skill.
  4. **Self-regulation:** students are given opportunities to try out the strategy for themselves and develop ways to monitor their own use of the strategy or skill.
  5. **Gradual release of responsibility:** the teacher initially models and directs the students’ learning; as the lesson progresses, the teacher gradually gives more responsibility to the student.
6. **Application**: students are given the opportunity to try their skills and strategies in independent learning situations.

Explicit Teaching is a generic plan for developing a wide range of strategies. It seems to be an appropriate framework for teaching students at all ages.”

• Goodman and Goodman (1982) argue that “literacy should be an extension of natural language learning.”

• Anderson (1984) makes these suggestions: “First, I urge publishers to include teaching suggestions in manuals designed to help children activate relevant knowledge before reading. This means that special attention should be paid to preparation for reading … Second, the teachers’ manuals accompanying basal programs and content area texts ought to include suggestions for building prerequisite knowledge when it cannot be safely presupposed. Third, I call for publishers to feature lesson activities that will lead children to meaningfully integrate what they already know with what is presented on the printed page.”

• Paris et al. (1983), citing research by Ryan, says that “We know that good readers use more strategies as they read and they use them more effectively than poor readers… A large body of evidence reveals that poor readers do not skim, scan, reread, integrate information, plan ahead, take notes, make inferences, and so forth as often as more skilled readers.”

• Tierney and Pearson (1992) say that “The ideal curriculum would focus on processes grounded in a search for content… What we need are activities in which students explore, discover, and think critically while they are searching for content that they can use to serve their personal informational goals.”

**Some Teacher Comments**

“Students like the materials because they realize they can succeed with them.”

   Bob Strobe
   Tacoma Community House
   Tacoma, WA

“The stories and the exercises are better than any other resource that I've used with this level of students. All-in-all, **Voyager** is definitely superior to all other series I've used.”

   Sid Zimbalist
   Oakton Community College, Alliance for Lifelong Learning
   Skokie, IL

“The students really enjoy **Voyager**—they really get into the material and talk about it. The readings just give everyone lots of ideas and lead to terrific discussions.”

   Richard Allen
   Oakland Public Library Second Start
   Oakland, CA

“It's really one of the better new series I've seen, and I'm always going to conferences and looking at new materials. In a word, it works … it really works.”

   Donna Brouillette
   Bloomington, IL
References
The following citations support the use of the instructional practices described in this paper.


