A study of the teaching methods of comprehension through isolation and context

Mahlon A. Smith

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California State University
San Bernardino

A STUDY OF THE
TEACHING METHODS OF COMPREHENSION
THROUGH ISOLATION AND CONTEXT

A Project Submitted to the
Faculty of the School of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of
the Degree of
Master of Arts
in
Education: Administration Option

by

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San Bernardino, California
1986

APPROVED BY:

[Blacked out signatures]
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I. INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of reading instruction using isolation and context teaching methods. Reading instruction too often emphasizes the teaching of reading as a set of isolated skills. The writer of this project believed that the context method of instruction would produce more effective readers.

Procedure

This research was conducted in three seventh-grade reading classes at Arrowview Intermediate School in San Bernardino. The text for all groups was *Sun Spray*, Scott, Foresman and Company. One class served as the control group and received instruction in a basal reading program. The other two classes served as experimental groups. Experimental group A received instruction in reading comprehension in isolation. Experimental group B received instruction in reading comprehension in context.

All study groups were tested before and after the treatment period. The t-test for related measures was used to compute the difference between pretest and posttest mean scores in each group.

Results

The results of this study show that techniques used in comprehension instruction are related to student performance in reading. The
isolation treatment did improve test scores. The context treatment did not improve test scores. Both experimental groups did show an increase in mean performance between pretest and posttest measurements.

The basal treatment did not improve test scores nor did the mean performance of this group increase in the posttest measurement.

Conclusions and Implications

This study has failed to show that the context method of instruction will produce more effective readers. The difference between mean pretest and posttest scores of the context study group were not significant.

A review of the literature on the teaching of reading in context over isolation has identified knowledge and skill areas that the writer believes the principal must know to be a more effective supervisor of reading instruction. Knowledge of the techniques used in comprehension instruction will help the administrator evaluate both classroom reading instruction and the school reading program.
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Educators want their students to learn to read effectively, but there is controversy over what methods work best in reading instruction. Experts say that the two approaches commonly used in reading instruction, which are context and isolation, are not equally effective in teaching students to read. In the isolation approach comprehension skills are introduced, discussed, and practiced prior to reading a story. Students read a story after completing this activity. The story provides experience to build and reinforce the comprehension skills studied earlier. This isolation method is emphasized in the popular basal reading program.

Reading instruction in context involves having students read and discuss a story. Lessons include activities in listening, reading, and discussion to identify important ideas from the story. Students learn to read as ideas relate to form the story's meaning. The following reviews will show how these techniques are used to teach vocabulary and comprehension skills in reading instruction.

Learning to read requires knowledge of a vocabulary. A study conducted by Barbra Nemko compared two instructional methods for introducing new vocabulary words to students. Statistically significant

differences were found between groups trained and tested in isolation and groups trained and tested in context. The results of this study favored instructional method in isolation. The implication of this research is that isolation may be a good method for teaching a new vocabulary.

In another study researchers used a context instructional technique to teach students the meaning of new vocabulary words. Two groups were selected for this research. The first group received instruction in context. No individual instruction was given. The second group was given instruction in isolation. Corrective feedback was given to the isolation group. Results of this study showed that the context treatment produced a higher score than the isolation treatment, and both methods produced a change in the level of knowledge of the learner.

Either isolation or context instructional methods may be effective in teaching reading vocabulary; however, other research suggests that the context method may be the best technique for teaching reading comprehension.

Michelle Linden and Merlin C. Wittrock studied the effect of context instruction in reading comprehension. In this research subjects were given a story to read, and ideas were discussed relative to the readers personal experiences. Subjects constructed a context for the story based on this discussion. Student performance in comprehension

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increased as a result of the context treatment. Results of this study show that context instruction will increase reading comprehension.

A study undertaken by Linda B. Gambrel and associates determined the effectiveness of recall in reading comprehension using retelling and illustrating methods: both are a variation of the context method used in reading instruction.\(^5\) Two treatment groups were selected in which students read and discussed a story. Treatment group A retold important events from the story, while treatment group B illustrated important events from the story. Results showed significant differences between groups in favor of the retelling method. This research shows that discussion is a stronger context method than illustrating, and retelling has a positive impact on test performance in reading comprehension.

If the context method is indeed a more successful approach in teaching students to read, it becomes important to determine if there are differences in comprehension performance between boys and girls the same age. Researchers have conducted a study to show the relative performance of boys and girls on three levels of reading comprehension: recall, inference, and high inference.\(^6\) This study did not attempt to prove the effectiveness of one instructional method over the other, but results did provide other useful information. Performance in inferential reasoning was lower than that of recall, and performance on identical comprehension tasks was similar for boys and girls. Recall tested more favorably than

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combined inference tasks, but the sex of the learner did not limit his/her performance on equal comprehension tests.

The controversy which questions the effectiveness of one method of reading instruction over the other can be decided upon in a summary of this review. Research studies show that both context and isolation instructional approaches are effective in teaching a new vocabulary. The research also shows that context techniques are more effective in comprehension instruction.

The writer sampled from among hundreds of studies available in the field of reading instruction. The examples used in writing this project were selected from among thirty-five articles considered to be most directly related to the purpose of this study.
III. NULL HYPOTHESIS

There will be no statistically significant difference in comprehension performance in each of three independent groups taught by different reading methods at the .05 level of significance.
IV. DESIGN

A nonequivalent control group design was used in this study.\(^1\) Three classes of reading students were selected from Arrowview Intermediate School in San Bernardino. Classes consisted of students who had been placed in a seventh grade reading text according to reading placement scores. Two classes were chosen from the researcher's teaching schedule. The third class was offered from a colleague's teaching schedule. One class served as the control group, and the other two classes served as experimental groups.

Participants were selected alphabetically from class attendance rosters. Thirteen students from each class participated in both pretest and posttest measurements. Ethnic group and sex were not considered in this research, although each study group included male and female students from black, hispanic, and caucasion backgrounds (see table 1).

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The text for all groups was *Sun Spray*, Scott, Foresman and Company. The isolation treatment was given reading instruction in comprehension in isolation. Each lesson included a written comprehension workbook activity, independent reading, and a written story summary. In this group students practiced comprehension skills in reading workbooks before reading a story. Students read independently and wrote a two paragraph summary at the end of each story. Summaries were reviewed in a follow-up discussion among students and the teacher.

The context treatment group was given reading instruction in comprehension in context. Lessons included discussion, guided reading, and a written story summary. In this group the teacher lead participants in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black (1)</td>
<td>Hispanic (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation Experimental Group</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context Experimental Group</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basal Control Group</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a discussion during and after reading a story. Students wrote a two paragraph summary after completing each story. Summaries were reviewed in a follow-up discussion among students and the teacher.

The control group was given reading instruction in a basal program. The reading lessons focused on vocabulary, study skills, and instruction in comprehension in isolation. The teacher introduced learning activities for practice and discussion before reading a story. Summaries were collected, reviewed by the teacher, and returned to the students.

The Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test was given before and after the treatment period of six weeks. Classroom teachers administered the tests in each of the study groups. Several students were absent during the posttest measurement but were given the test when they returned to school. The reading test is presented in the measurement discussion.
V. MEASUREMENT

Students were tested using the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, Level E, Form 1. A formal measure was taken before and after the treatment period of six weeks. Raw scores were obtained in vocabulary and comprehension. The total reading score was used to compute mean pretest and posttest scores for each study group.

Test groups were given instruction in comprehension in isolation, instruction in comprehension in context, and instruction in a basal program. The t-test for related measures was used to determine the difference between mean pretest and posttest scores in each of the study groups.
VI. LIMITS OF STUDY

The reading test in this study measured reading comprehension and vocabulary. In order to calculate the t-value within each group individual scores were represented in composite. Only the total reading score was used to determine the performance of each of the study groups. This technique limited the results of the study to a general meaning of reading comprehension.

Student attrition affected the size of each study group at the onset of this research. The original study samples contained twenty-one students each. Several participants transferred from the context treatment group after the third week of instruction and no longer participated in this research. It became necessary to reduce study samples to thirteen participants per class. The final study samples were determined alphabetically from participants remaining in each class.

There will be no follow-up activity to determine the long term product of this work. Transfer of the comprehension skills taught in this study to future reading tasks will not be observed. Inferences on the long term effect of a given instructional method (isolation or context) may not be made from this study.
VII. FINDINGS

The t-test for related measures was used to compute the difference between pretest and posttest mean scores within each of the three groups studied in this research. The purpose of this test was to determine if each of these groups would produce similar results on each of the two measurements taken. Total comprehension scores were used to compute the t-value within each group. The following is an account of test results.

Test performance was significantly different between pretest and posttest measurements of the isolation study group (see table 2). A t-value of 2.251 was obtained in this group. The t-value that is significant at the .05 level for 12 degrees of freedom is 2.179. Since the computed t-value is greater than 2.179, it is concluded that the isolation treatment did improve test scores.

There was no difference between mean pretest and posttest scores of the context group (see table 3). A t-value of 0.997 was obtained in this group. The t-value that is significant at the .05 level for 12 degrees of freedom is 2.179. Since the computed t-value is lower than 2.179, it is concluded that the context treatment did not improve test scores.

---

### TABLE 2
DIFFERENCE SCORES OF THE ISOLATION STUDY GROUP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Pretest Score</th>
<th>Posttest Score</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>-06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>-02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>-09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>-06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>-09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>-03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S8</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S9</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S10</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>-02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S11</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>-08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S12</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>-06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S13</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>+03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 3
DIFFERENCE SCORES OF THE CONTEXT STUDY GROUP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Pretest Score</th>
<th>Posttest Score</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1'</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>+01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2'</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>+10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3'</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>-03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4'</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>-06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5'</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6'</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7'</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>-04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S8'</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>-05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S9'</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S10'</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>-09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S11'</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S12'</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S13'</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The difference between mean pretest and posttest scores of the control group were not significant (see table 4). A t-value of 0.694 was obtained in this group. The t-value that is significant at the .05 level for 12 degrees of freedom is 2.179. Since the computed t-value is less than 2.179, it is concluded that the control treatment did not improve test scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Pretest Score</th>
<th>Posttest Score</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1&quot;</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>-04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2&quot;</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>-05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3&quot;</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>+06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4&quot;</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>-03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5&quot;</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6&quot;</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7&quot;</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td>S8&quot;</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>+21</td>
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<td>S9&quot;</td>
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<td>+01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The null hypothesis for this study was designed to say that there is no relationship between performance in reading comprehension and instructional technique. Instructional method had little impact on test results in two of three groups studied in this research; however, a third group did show a significant difference between pretest and posttest measurements. This shows a definite link between comprehension performance and instructional method. This research finds a type I
error and rejects the null hypothesis.
VIII. APPLICATION TO SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

A review of the research on the teaching of reading in context over isolation and conducting this study in a seventh grade reading classroom has identified knowledge and skill areas that the writer believes a principal must have to become a more efficient and effective supervisor and evaluator of instruction in the area of reading. In this section the writer will discuss these knowledge and skill areas.

The principal makes decisions which affect the classroom and the school. If the principal is informed and knowledgeable in the areas of reading instruction and the supervision of teachers he will make better decisions. The following paragraphs will describe how understanding different instructional techniques will strengthen the administrator's role as an evaluator of classroom reading instruction and the school reading program.

The principal evaluates classroom reading instruction. Maria A. Nash, instructor in the department of education at the University of Texas, says, "The administrator can determine the kind of instruction that is appropriate for the school."¹ The principal must therefore be familiar with the instructional techniques commonly used in comprehension instruction. This will help him make informed

decisions about reading instruction in the classroom and in the school. An understanding of context and isolation techniques will enable the principal to recommend appropriate instruction in a given classroom.

A teacher may lack the training needed to teach effectively. The principal can help to identify problem areas and help the teacher improve his/her instructional skills. Sharing information about different instructional techniques would be the first step in assisting this teacher. Terry C. Ley, assistant professor in the department of education at Auburn University, explains that teachers can work more effectively by becoming aware of at least 10 concepts about reading instruction. The administrator could share ideas about the context and isolation instructional approaches discussed in this research. This would help the teacher gain knowledge about his/her field and would provide ideas for improving reading instruction in the classroom.

A good teacher may lack ideas on how to teach some areas of reading. This problem is typical of the reading teacher who is teaching a class outside his/her field. The district will sometimes place a teacher in a temporary assignment, pending the arrival of trained personnel. Manuel Tenorio, vice principal at Arrowview Intermediate School in San Bernardino, believes this project is a valuable resource for the school administrator. It provides

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information which administrators do not generally possess. The ideas of instruction in context and instruction in isolation will be helpful in advising the teacher who otherwise lacks ideas for reading instruction.

Teachers of content subjects can improve their skills by using different instructional techniques. Jack Bagford, teacher of undergraduate reading at the University of Iowa, developed a teacher instruction inventory which identifies student study behaviors desired in the reading and content classrooms. The inventory does not specify the use of a given instructional technique to produce these behaviors. But a careful reading of the instrument reveals the implied use of a context instruction methodology. Bagford stresses the importance of "process" considerations in the teacher evaluation as he explains how the inventory can help the school administrator be more effective in supervising the classroom and school reading programs.

Knowledge of techniques commonly used in comprehension instruction will help the administrator evaluate classroom reading instruction. Understanding these techniques can also be helpful in assessing the total school reading program. Both of these are major responsibilities of the principal.

The principal may choose from summative and formative approaches in program evaluation. The summative method is performed at the end of the year and measures student progress against curriculum goals and

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objectives. Joan Mangieri, professor of education at the University of South Carolina, advises not using this approach alone in evaluating the reading program, since it provides no information about how well the student has achieved his/her reading potential. Mangieri recommends an ongoing evaluation that is conducted throughout the school year.

The formative evaluation is performed at intervals throughout the school year. This procedure provides immediate feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the reading program. Mangieri explains that teachers can act on this information to correct procedures which may adversely affect student performance.

Evaluation will show if instruction is effective. Program evaluation can include a study of the effectiveness of instructional technique on student achievement in reading. As a program evaluator the principal would first determine study behaviors which characterize effective reading instruction. Michael Madrid, principal in the South Whittier School District, believes effective reading instruction must include lessons in writing and discussion. He explains that using these communication skills in reading lessons help students think in context enabling them to learn to read more effectively. The principal can look for these desirable writing and speaking behaviors in the classroom during his evaluation of the school reading program.

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5 Joan N. Mangieri, "Reading Programs: Suggestions for Principals," NASSP Bulletin 63 (March 1979):60.

Madrid's plan for an effective reading classroom and the context approach commonly used in comprehension instruction are similar. They both use communication skills in the development of the student's reading potential, solicit the active participation of students in a given lesson, and claim to be effective in teaching students to read. Using the formative evaluation approach recommended by Mangieri the principal can conduct an ongoing evaluation of the reading program and periodically visit classrooms to determine if context techniques are being used by classroom teachers. Measures of student performance would be motivation and interest in the lessons. The principal would identify strengths and weaknesses in reading classes schoolwide and share findings with instructional leaders and other faculty members.

The principal can influence productive changes in reading instruction both in the classroom and in the school reading program. A knowledge of context and isolation techniques used in comprehension instruction will make the principal a stronger change agent. It has been the intent of this research in reading instruction to show that different techniques will produce different results in student achievement. The principal can use this information to make decisions that will determine how teachers will teach reading in the classroom.
IX. APPENDIX
### Questions for Comprehension Discussion (all groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Pages--Teacher's Edition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patty Wilson's Magnificent Marathon</td>
<td>370, 371, 372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spirit of Michael Naranjo</td>
<td>399, 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Soccer Orphans</td>
<td>491, 493, 494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Planet in Danger</td>
<td>518, 519, 520, 522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Valliant Potter</td>
<td>68, 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have Fun in the Snow--but be Careful</td>
<td>117, 119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lesson Outline
Isolation Study Group

First Week: Drawing Conclusions
Patty Wilson's Magnificent Marathon, pages 369-75
Skills Workbook, pages 103-06
Summary Paragraph

Second Week: Recognizing Fact and Opinion
The Spirit of Michael Naranjo, pages 398-403
Skills Workbook, pages 115-16
Summary Paragraph

Third Week: Recognizing Bias
The Soccer Orphans, pages 409-99
Skills Workbook, pages 131-34
Summary Paragraph

Fourth Week: Recognizing Propaganda Techniques
A Planet in Danger, pages 517-23
Skills Workbook, pages 139-42
Summary Paragraph

Fifth Week: Cause-Effect and Sequence Relationships
The Vaiiant Potter, pages 68-75
Skills Workbook, pages 17-20
Summary Paragraph

Sixth Week: Main Idea and Supporting Details
Have Fun in the Snow—but be Careful, pages 117-20
Skills Workbook, pages 35-38
Summary Paragraph
Lesson Outline
Context Study Group

First Week: Drawing Conclusions
Patty Wilson's Magnificent Marathon, pages 369-75
Summary Paragraph

Second Week: Recognizing Fact and Opinion
The Spirit of Michael Naranjo, pages 398-403
Summary Paragraph

Third Week: Recognizing Bias
The Soccer Orphans, pages 409-99
Summary Paragraph

Fourth Week: Recognizing Propaganda Techniques
A Planet in Danger, pages 517-23
Summary Paragraph

Fifth Week: Cause-Effect and Sequence Relationships
The Valiant Potter, pages 68-75
Summary Paragraph

Sixth Week: Main Idea and Supporting Details
Have Fun in the Snow—but be Careful, pages 117-20
Lesson Outline
Basal Study Group

First Week: Drawing Conclusions
Patty Wilson's Magnificent Marathon, pages 369-75
Vocabulary Workbook, pages 72-73
Skills Workbook, pages 103-06
Summary Paragraph
Skills Test 24

Second Week: Recognizing Fact and Opinion
The Spirit of Michael Naranjo, pages 398-403
Vocabulary Workbook, pages 78-79
Skills Workbook, pages 115-16
Summary Paragraph
Skills Test 27

Third Week: Recognizing Bias
The Soccer Orphans, pages 409-99
Vocabulary Workbook, pages 94-95
Skills Workbook, pages 131-34
Summary Paragraph
Skills Test 31

Fourth Week: Recognizing Propaganda Techniques
A Planet in Danger, pages 517-23
Vocabulary Workbook, pages 98-99
Skills Workbook, pages 139-42
Summary Paragraph
Skills Test 33

Fifth Week: Cause-Effect and Sequence Relationships
The Valiant Potter, pages 68-75
Vocabulary Workbook, pages 12-13
Skills Workbook, pages 17-20
Summary Paragraph
Skills Test 4

Sixth Week: Main Idea and Supporting Details
Have Fun in the Snow—but be Careful, pages 117-20
Vocabulary workbook, pages 21-22
Skills Workbook, pages 35-38
Summary Paragraph
Skills Test 8
Writing the Summary Paragraph

1. The summary paragraph may be written after all other work from the study unit has been completed.

2. Write a two paragraph summary which describes the plot of the story. Say if you did or did not like the story. Give specific reasons for your opinions.

3. The teacher will select two examples from among student work and discuss these with the class. All other paragraphs will then be collected, reviewed by the teacher, and returned to students.
X. SOURCES CONSULTED


Ehri, Linnea C., and Roberts, Kathleen T. "Do Beginners Learn Better in Contexts or Isolation?" Child Development 50 (September 1979): 675-85.


Finn, Chester, Jr., and McKinney, Kay. "Reading: How the Principal can Help." Principal 66 (November 1986): 30-33.


