Gradual Release of Responsibility Instructional Framework

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The gradual release of responsibility model of instruction suggests that cognitive work should shift slowly and intentionally from teacher modeling, to joint responsibility between teachers and students, to independent practice and application by the learner (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). This model provides a structure for teachers to move from assuming "all the responsibility for performing a task . . . to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility" (Duke & Pearson, 2004, p. 211).

The model is built on several theories:

- Jean Piaget's work on cognitive structures and schema (1952).
- Lev Vygotsky's work on zones of proximal development (1962, 1978).
- Albert Bandura's work on attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (1965).
- David Wood, Jerome Bruner, and Gail Ross's work on scaffolded instruction (1976).

Taken together, these theories suggest that learning occurs through interactions with others, and when these interactions are intentional, specific learning occurs.

Our own implementation of the gradual release of responsibility has four components (Fisher & Frey, 2008a):

1. Focus Lessons. Here, the teacher establishes the purpose of the lesson and models his or her thinking. The purpose should be based on the expected learning outcomes, such as standards, and be clearly communicated to students. Teacher modeling should provide students with examples of the thinking and language required to be successful.

2. Guided Instruction. In guided instruction, the teacher strategically uses questions, prompts, and cues to facilitate student understanding. This can be done with whole groups of students but is probably more effective with small groups that are convened based on instructional needs. During guided instruction, the teacher focuses on releasing responsibility to students while providing instructional scaffolds to ensure that students are successful.

3. Productive Group Work. Students work in collaborative groups to produce something related to the topic at hand. To be productive, the group work must involve students using academic language and being individually accountable for their contribution to the effort. This phase of instruction should provide students with an opportunity to consolidate their understanding before they apply it independently.

4. Independent Learning. Finally, students apply what they have learned in class and outside of class. Many independent learning tasks are used as formative assessments, designed to check for understanding and to identify needs for reteaching. Of course, independent learning tasks should not come too soon in the instructional cycle, since students need practice before they can sufficiently apply knowledge in new situations.

Though we present the components in this order, they can be used in any order, as long as every lesson contains all four of them. For example, a science colleague of ours starts with an independent writing task (a journal entry) designed to activate students' background knowledge. She then asks each student to discuss his or her response with a partner (productive group work) and add notes from this discussion to the journal. She then establishes the lesson's purpose and models her thinking while she reads from the science text (focus lesson). With this added information, she asks partners to join with another pair to form groups of four. Together, students create collaborative posters that synthesize and summarize their understanding of the question (productive group work). Students write in differently colored markers on the poster for individual accountability and talk about what they are writing. As they do so, the teacher moves around the room and checks for understanding (guided instruction). Students know that she will stop and ask them about what they've written, so they refrain from writing something that they don't understand. When she stops by one of the groups, she notices that the group included incorrect information on the poster. She asks about this information and then gives the group a prompt to encourage critical thinking about the comment (guided instruction). When this does not result in understanding, she cues the students to reread a specific paragraph of the text, at which time they understand the mistake and correct it.