



Essential Components for Presenting Efficient Small Group Instruction

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Mini Review

Students demonstrating persistent, significant learning challenges - which means their academic achievement is deemed to be multiple grade-levels below their age-appropriate grade level - must be provided systematic instruction designed to remediate their academic achievement deficits. In the United States, it has been estimated that 5%-10% of a school's students will present persistent, significant learning challenges that require ongoing remedial instruction [1].

Both students with and without disabilities are among those requiring remedial instruction [2]. With respect to students with disabilities, their learning characteristics include learning at a slower rate, learning less content overall, and challenges with maintenance and generalization [3-5]. Hence, once aspect of their instruction must be calculated to increase their rate of learning which would, across time, result in learning more content overall. That is to say, not only do they need to be provided effective instruction, which is instruction that results in their acquisition of new content, but their instruction also must be efficient.

Instructional efficiency is a concept that refers to the amount of resources involved with presenting effective instruction. A more efficient instructional strategy is one that requires minimal or no additional resources to implement, and then results in students' acquisition, maintenance, and generalization of more content. Moreover, this outcome is realized after spending less time, overall, in instruction [6].

For example, a student could receive instruction that focused only on teaching her to name the numeral 5, which would result in the attainment of one new academic skill. However, if, while focusing on teaching the student to name the numeral 5, the

teacher also quickly exposed the student to the number word, five, and a demonstration of counting five objects, then if the student happened to learn these three skills the second instructional scenario would be considered more efficient than the first scenario. That is, with the expenditure of a few more resources in terms of teacher time and effort, the second scenario resulted in the student's acquisition of three academic skills whereas the first scenario resulted in the acquisition of one skill.

A major consideration when planning to present efficient instruction to students manifesting persistent, significant learning challenges is the type of instructional arrangement to use. An instructional arrangement refers to the pupil: teacher ratio during a lesson. Among the instructional arrangements that are used with these students are independent seatwork, one-on-one instruction (i.e., one student working with one teacher), and small group instruction [7]. The last arrangement, small group instruction, has been identified as a mainstay for the type of remedial instruction these students need to be provided [8,9]. More specifically, a small group consisting of between 2-4 students and one instructor has been identified as preferable, even with respect to a one-on-one arrangement [2].

Given this circumstance, teachers need to be cognizant of several essential components for presenting efficient small group instruction. In particular, in order to realize instructional efficiency, a teacher must address essential considerations pertaining to the (a) structure of a small group and (b) presentation of instruction therein.

The structure of a small group refers to the configuration of the components that set the occasion for the presentation of

instruction. Three essential structural components for increasing instructional efficiency are presented next.

a) **Group size.** A teacher should establish the group's size in accordance with the students' levels of academic achievement deficits. Simply stated, the greater the students' deficits, the smaller the group [8]. A lower pupil: teacher ratio will allow the students more opportunities to respond, or practice, followed by the teacher's provision of immediate, specific feedback. As Gersten et al. [10] remarked, students manifesting academic achievement deficits require 10-30 times more practice opportunities, per skill, than their peers who are demonstrating grade-level performance.

b) **Physical positioning.** Position the students so that they have clear lines of sight to the teacher, every other student in the group, and all of the instructional materials. This positioning sets the occasion for incidental and observational learning, which are discussed below [7].

c) **Homogeneity.** Homogeneity refers to the extent to which the students in a group are similar in instructionally important ways [11]. In the context of this discussion, what is most important is that the students share the need to master the same academic content.

The presentation of instruction refers to the execution of planned teaching procedures. Three essential instructional considerations for increasing instructional efficiency are discussed below.

a) **Maximize opportunities to respond.** Teachers can maximize the students' opportunities to respond by first allowing for choral, or unison, responding. This means that every student in the group would make a response at the exact same time. Secondly, a teacher should provide immediate, behavior-specific feedback that, in a way, serves as a proxy for an opportunity to respond [12]. Affirmative feedback can confirm a correct response while enabling students to see the teacher model the skill the student just performed (e.g., the teacher says, "Good job. You just said the numeral's name, which is five."). Conversely, corrective feedback can inform the student his response is incorrect and, if this feedback is configured properly, will afford the student another opportunity to make a correct response (e.g., the teacher says, "No, the name for the numeral is five. Say five.")

b) **Setting the occasion for incidental learning.** This phenomenon refers to learning content, referred to as non-target or incidental information, that is presented during instruction and does not involve a student response [13]. In the example presented previously, the teacher's presentation of the number word five and demonstration of counting five objects are examples of non-target information that, if acquired by the student, would result in incidental learning.

c) **Encouraging observational learning.** Observational

learning results when one student in the group makes a correct response and is reinforced for doing so, and this academic skill is learned by another student who just watches the event [14]. Just like incidental learning, observational learning does not involve a response by the student who demonstrates this type of learning.

By presenting systematic instruction that accounts for the essential considerations just mentioned, teachers will increase the probability they will present efficient instruction. This instruction will address some of the characteristics of learning ascribed to students requiring remedial instruction, particularly learning at a slower rate and learning less content overall. Altogether, this type of systematic instruction will work in favor of remediating one or more aspects of a student's academic achievement deficit.

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