International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 2012, 4(3), 489-506.

The Interpretive Strategies Utilized by Elementary Students with and without Learning Disabilities in Comprehending Poems

Georgette G. LEE*
University of Illinois, USA

Marie Tejero HUGHES
University of Illinois, USA

Received: August, 2012 / Revised: March, 2012 / Accepted: April, 2012

Abstract

Poetry is a genre that supports all aspects of literacy, and it is the first to which most children are exposed through motherly lullabies. Yet, while many studies have been conducted on prose comprehension, there is little empirical research on poetry comprehension, and none published on the specific strategies elementary students with learning disabilities (LD) utilize in understanding poems. The purpose of this study is to examine the interpretive strategies used by students in comprehending poetry. Participants were 16 fifth and sixth grade students with LD and 16 of their typical peers, who individually listened to poems and answered questions about them. Students with LD effectively used as many interpretive operations as their peers, adopted an aesthetic stance to reading, and performed more like experts than novices. Furthermore, the difficulty of the poems did not appear to have affected the students' enjoyment of them.

Keywords: Poetry Comprehension, Learning Disabilities, Strategies

Introduction

The study of the classical poets in particular and of poetry in general has steadily declined over the years, and poetry lacks the prestige of other literary genres (Harris, 2008). Some literacy researchers have even down-played poetry, viewing poetry reading and writing as less fundamental to literacy development than stories (Dyson & Ganish, 1994), despite the many benefits that poetry is purported to offer. Poetry is a useful tool for enhancing all aspects of literacy: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Early elementary school teachers use nursery rhymes to help in the development of phonemic awareness skills, one-to-one correspondence, and vocabulary, while repeated poetry read-alouds help to produce fluent

* Georgette G. Lee, University of Illinois, 133 Lake Hill Drive, Steger, IL 60475 USA, Phone: 708-754-4205 (H); 708-224-7806, E-mail: glee24@uic.edu

ISSN:1307-9298

www.iejee.com

and expressive readers (Gasparro & Falleta, 1994; Manning, 2003). Poetry instruction has helped third graders who were struggling readers with their fluency, building conceptual understanding, their attention to the reading process (Sekeres & Gregg, 2007), and word recognition and confidence (Wilfong, 2008). Regarding poetry writing, Kucan (2007) found that having fourth graders write poetic responses ("I" poems) about people and places encountered in stories deepened their literary understanding of the characters, plot, conflict, and narrative point of view. Along with these benefits, there is an abundance of literature available on how to teach poetry in elementary schools (e.g., Certo, 2004; Lenz, 1992; Linaberger, 2004), yet, there is nothing on the poetry comprehension of students with Learning Disabilities (LD).

Poetry Comprehension

An early study by Harris (1948) identified translating, summarizing, inferring tone, mood, and intent, and relating technique and knowledge as four operations necessary for literary text comprehension (inclusive of poetry). Translating may be viewed as a reader's attempt to derive meaning from a text through the understanding of words and phrases, idioms, figurative language, and structural elements. The theory of 'defamiliarization' (Miall & Kuiken, 1994) represents a kind of translating process, where literary stylistic devices such as metaphor forces the reader to move away from the familiar word meaning to generate a personal meaning. Closely related to translating is summarizing, which entails grasping the main idea of the poem. Readers may summarize the poem's subject or characteristics of its persona. In inferring tone, mood, and intent, the reader makes inferences about the poet's attitude toward the subject matter, his or her emotions, and purpose for writing the poem. The final strategy outlined by Harris (1948) as necessary for interpreting a literary text like poetry is relating structure and meaning. The reader takes into account the poet's use of rhyme, line structure, figurative devices and such elements to derive the deeper meaning of the text. This exceeds the plain sense interpretation of the poem. Poetry readers must adopt an aesthetic stance, by paying more attention to style and how it affects their understanding to fully comprehend a poem.

Other more recent studies which examined poetry comprehension specifically utilized participants who were of high school age and beyond. One such example, a landmark study on how experts construct meaning when reading poetry, was conducted by Peskin (1998). She utilized an expert-novice Think-Aloud (TA) format with 8 expert English PhD candidates, and 8 relative novices who were either second-year English undergraduates, or high school students in their final two years in a school with in-depth poetry instruction. Participants read and responded to two period poems. The experts used significantly more structural cues (binary oppositions, rhythm, and word play and language) than novices to help in understanding the poems. Even when novices recognized the binary oppositions in one of the poems, they dismissed them as confusing, instead of looking for the poem's meaning in the nucleus of the seemingly contradictions. These findings were supported by Braun (2003), who, in a similar expert-novice study, examined both cognitive and affective processes involved in poetry comprehension. Participants were 12 English literature undergraduates (novice group), and 12 English literature graduate students (expert group), who responded to one intellectual and one emotional poem, in a TA condition. Experts had a text-reader orientation, which was typified by more metacognitive comments, an attention to style of text (especially sound, rhythm, and structure), and embodied reflection. Novices, on the other hand, were more text oriented in their approach to meaning making. They looked solely to the text for emerging meaning, and unsure of what exactly to look for in the text, they were drawn to things that were perceived as being different from what they expected

(Braun, 2003). In addition to these cognitive experiences, affective experiences also accompany the task of interpreting and comprehending a poetic text.

Eva-Wood (2004) explored the role of affect in poetry comprehension. Students trained in a think and feel aloud method were better able to identify stylistic devices, analyze themes, and recognize figurative language than those trained in a think aloud method alone. Furthermore, a poem's difficulty may diminish the reader's interest. As Peskin (1993) demonstrated, experts were more inclined to express an interest in poems than novices. The problems novices faced in constructing meaning prompted them to express frustration with difficult poems. Other affective strategies were identified as helping high school students to understand poems (Eva-Wood, 2008). These students examined the emotional connotation of words in identifying the poem's mood, and engaging in and interpreting its figurative language. Sensory-based responses like visualization served to expand the interpretation of imagery and to foster a visceral experience of the poem's tastes and textures. In identifying with the speaker, students drew on "empathetic understanding" that allowed them to enter imaginatively into the perspective of another. Based on the studies reviewed, successful engagement with the poetry genre necessitates deliberate attention to both cognitive and affective processes.

Poetry remains an understudied topic in empirical research, especially at the elementary level, and with students with LD. Given the lack of research focusing on poetry comprehension for elementary students, the purpose of the current research is to examine and describe the interpretive strategies used by fifth and sixth grade students with and without LD while interacting with poetry. These specific strategies have been previously identified as being pertinent to literary text comprehension (e.g., Gersten, et al., 2001; NRP, 2000; Oakhill & Cain, 2000). The research aims to fill a gap in the literature by supplying information about the types of strategies used by elementary-aged students with and without LD in comprehending poetry. The study seeks to answer the following: (1) What interpretive strategies are upper elementary students with and without LD making use of in comprehending poems? (2) How does the use of the interpretive strategies of students with LD compare and contrast with that of their typical peers? (3) Is students' enjoyment of poetry influenced by the poem's complexity and the difficulty they may experience while attempting to comprehend the poem?

Methods

Participants

The research was conducted in three randomly selected elementary schools from one public school district in a large Midwestern state. The suburban district serves primarily African American (91.9%), Hispanic (3.7%) and Asian (3.4%) students coming largely from low-income households, with approximately 96% of students receiving free or reduced-cost lunch. Approximately 4% of the students in the elementary schools from this district have been identified as having a LD. The combined population of students with LD in grades 5 and 6 of the three schools was 18; of which 17 (94%) returned parental forms, but one withheld consent, leaving 16 eligible students who formed the students with LD group. AA students are the corresponding number of students from the general education classes in grades five and six performing in the mid range for these schools based on grade equivalent (GE) scores on the STAR Reading test, a computer-based test that determines the reading level of students, and measures their individual and collective growth. Thus, average STAR reading scores of the grades 5 and 6 students were calculated and a 1.6 year range was established. Students then were eligible if their STAR reading GE scores were between a range of 3.5 – 5.1 for grade 5, and 4.5 – 6.1 for grade 6. Students were matched by grade,

gender and ethnicity, and if more than one person met the 'match' criteria, the one with the higher STAR Reading GE score was selected. Thirty-two students participated, half of whom were students with LD (see Table 1). Note that all participants, though housed in separate home rooms, received their grade-level reading and language arts instruction together in inclusive settings.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Research Group*

	Group			
	LD			AA
	N=16			N=16
Gender				
Male	9			9
Female	7			7
Ethnicity				
African American	12			12
Hispanic	4			4
	M	SD	M	SD
Grade	Age in years			
5	11	0.8	11	1.0
6	11	0.8	12	0.5
STAR Reading GE	2.6	1.8	4.8	0.8
Verbal IQ	85	3.7		

Materials

Poems. Two poems were selected for the research study, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening (Frost, 2004), and "October Saturday" (Katz, 1990). The first poem is a traditional one, and the other, a more contemporary verse, based on the following criteria: (a) they were difficult enough to encourage careful thought, but not to discourage accessibility of weaker comprehenders, (b) they were unlikely to have been read by the students, and (c) they exemplified some figurative device (e.g., metaphor, simile). (See Table 2 for a Compare/Contrast Chart of the poems). To reduce the effect of readability on comprehension, the researcher personally taped-recorded and played the poems, while students followed along on individual copies. This introduced a read-aloud format, while allowing students to follow along on their scripts, and to "look back" at the text to assist with answering questions.

Table 2. *Compare/Contrast Chart of Poems*

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening	Similarities	October Saturday
Traditional		Contemporary
20th century		21st century
About winter	Describe a season Set outdoors Use of vivid imagery	About fall
4 lines each stanza	4 Stanzas	Varied-length stanzas
End Rhymes: aaba scheme		Free-verse; one end rhyming pair
Uniformed sentence length		Varied sentence length

Table 2 (Continue). *Compare/Contrast Chart of Poems*

Inverted sentence structure Archaic nouns	Repeated words and lines for emphasis	Common sentence structure Familiar nouns
Hyperbole, alliteration repetition, synecdoche	Figurative devices:	Hyperbole, onomatopoeia, personification, metaphor
Title directly reflects content		Title may lead to various predictions of content
Vocabulary, concepts, syntax	Possible Challenges	Metaphor/Extended Metaphor

Instruments

Comprehension Prompt. Geared at assessing 10 predetermined interpretive strategies, 12 questions for each poem were generated by the researcher. Prior to using the prompts with the students, the poems and questions were given to 10 expert readers (middle and high school English teachers) who read the poems, wrote answers, and suggested rephrasing of questions for clarity. This level of teachers was chosen as English experts who were more likely to be specialists in the area of literature than elementary teachers. After examination of the experts' answers and suggestions regarding the wording of questions, slight modifications were made. A second reliability and validity check was conducted with 10 middle school students, half of whom were identified with LD. Students listened to the taped recorded poems and then wrote answers to the questions. This helped to shed light on possible difficulties that might be encountered in answering the questions by the research participants, and the time-frame of the interactive poetry session.

Interview. At the start of the initial poetry session, and prior to reading the poem, students were asked four questions to reduce any anxiety and to set a friendly, comfortable atmosphere. These questions also solicited pertinent information about the students' general attitude toward poetry. The questions are: What types of things do you like to read about? Do you like poetry? Do you know any poems by heart? (If yes, please recite the poem); and Do you know the names of any poets? (If yes, please name them).

Procedures

During the latter part of the fall semester, the two poems were presented to the students on separate days. To control order effect, the presentation of poems was counterbalanced between students, so that half of the students received the traditional poem first. Students were pulled out from their class individually by assigned number for about 20 minutes per session. The researcher did not know at the time of the session if the student had a learning disability or not. For the first session, the researcher began with an interview that contained a few general questions. Students were read the title of the poem and the name of the poet by the researcher, and were asked to make a prediction. After, they were provided with a copy of the poem and told to listen to the recorded poem and to follow along on their individual copies without interrupting. Following the first reading, the researcher asked the students if they had read the poem before to ascertain any prior knowledge. Students were told to listen for the second reading, and encouraged to interrupt to make comments or to ask questions. This was followed by the questioning session. All proceedings were audio taped.

Data Analysis

Discourse analysis. The term discourse analysis, refers to a number of varying qualitative approaches researchers use to investigate written or spoken discourse. Such approaches have been developed to study ways in which knowledge is socially fashioned in diverse classrooms and other educational settings (Gee & Green, 1997). Research in reading has utilized discourse analysis as an approach to investigate specific mental operations or processes mirrored in the oral and written discourse of participants (e.g., Eva-Wood, 2004, 2008; Janssen, Braaksma & Rijaarsdam, 2006). Here, the major theoretical assumption is that these mental realities are constructs of language, and reflect any underpinning processes that produced the specific utterance. It was further assumed that, since the questions targeted specific strategies, student answers would reflect their use or non-use of those strategies. Data were analyzed using open coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The students' use of interpretive strategies was captured by qualifying the important aspects of their verbal responses as categories of the poetry comprehension process. While the questions largely determined the categories that were identified, specific subcategories were developed based on student responses. For example, student responses to the meaning of the poems identified four main subcategories: surface meaning, inference about topic, limited generalization about topic, and a broader generalization about life. Categories were developed through a three-tiered process of open, axial, and selective coding. In the open coding, through inductive and deductive processes, certain hypotheses were proposed from previous research and the experts' pilot data, and constantly checked against the student data to come up with broad initial categories and subcategories. During axial coding, in an ongoing interaction with the data, these categories and subcategories were then organized and combined. Finally, in the selective coding, broad conceptual categories were selected.

Reliability of the coding of the data was established according to the parallel criteria of Guba and Lincoln (1989) and included a) peer debriefing, b) intercoder reliability, and c) triangulation of data collected. A trained graduate student independently coded a subsample of 20% of randomly-selected protocols. Training included a discussion of the questions, the intent of the questions, and how to code the responses to each question. The degree of agreement between the assigned codes and category placements by the researcher and the second rater was the measure of reliability of the rating process. Training continued until 90% mean interrater agreement (IRA) was achieved. The mean IRA was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the number of agreements plus disagreements, and multiplying by 100. Agreement with the researcher's coding on transcripts from the study was 95%.

Results

Poetry Profile

From four interview questions at the first poetry session, information regarding the students' reading preferences and experiences with poetry was obtained.

Reading preferences. Students' responses to the question about the types of things they like to read indicated that they enjoy reading a broad spectrum of genres, including poetry. Results show that 56% of students with LD expressed a preference for fiction, which included myth, mystery, fantasy, and humor, compared with 75% of AA students. A greater number of students with LD (41%) than AA students (25%) mentioned a preference for nonfiction, inclusive of social studies, health, and sports.

Poetry experience. When asked if they like poetry, more than half of the students (63%) indicated that they enjoy poetry, which represented an equal number of students with LD

and their AA peers. Thirty-eight percent of students with LD, compared to 25% of AA students, said that they did not like poetry, while 13% of AA students said that they liked poetry only "sometimes". Students were further asked if they knew any poems by heart, and if they did, they were required to recite them. Seventy-eight percent of all students said that they did not know any poems by heart, or had forgotten any previously known. Of these, 88% were students with LD, compared to 69% of AA students. Students who could recite a poem from memory referred only to "regular poems like *Roses are Red*" (an AA 6th grader). Her grade-level peer with LD responded, "Yes, Roses are red/Violets are blue/Sugar is sweet/And so are you… a valentine poem". No one named a "serious" poem. In addition, all of the students said that they had not heard of either poem that was part of the study. Eighty-eight percent of students with LD and 81% of AA students could not name any poets. None of the students mentioned hearing of Bobbi Katz, but 13% of them remembered hearing of Robert Frost.

Poem 1: "October Saturday"

The more contemporary poem, October Saturday, is a free verse that features a child, the speaker, who spends the entire day with dad raking "millions and millions" of leaves, while mother is in the house packing away their summer clothes. The activities of the day render the child tired and "dreaming of the box marked summer". This poem uses an extended metaphor that makes it structurally challenging. In this section, the interpretive strategies used by students with LD in comparison with their AA peers are discussed. These strategies are presented under the conceptual category of Poetry Comprehension, which is portrayed by four subcategories of Preview, Author's Craft, Interpretation, and Personal Response.

Poetry Comprehension

Preview. This subcategory highlighted the strategies of predicting and confirming. Students were read the title and asked to make a prediction and later confirm their predictions. Only one student with LD did not make a prediction. Using the title, as cue to meaning, all others referred to "October" and/or "Saturday" in their prediction. An interesting occurrence is that both groups of students went beyond the lower inference of using verbatim the words in the title to make higher order inferences about the season, weather conditions, and celebrations associated with a Saturday in October. Moreover, 44% of students with LD, compared to 19% of AA students associated the month of October with Halloween and predicted that the poem would be about that celebration:

"It's going to be October, and I think they will be celebrating a birthday on a Saturday. I think they will be preparing for Halloween, buying costumes and candy" (Grade 6 LD).

Sixty nine percent of students with LD confirmed their predictions, with 50% recognizing that their predictions were only partially confirmed. On the other hand, 81% of AA students confirmed their predictions, with 50% agreeing that only a part of their prediction actually happened in the poem ("Partly. It was October and a Saturday, but buying costumes did not happen" [Grade 6 LD]).

Author's craft. In this subcategory, the interpretive strategy of using poetic devices such as rhyme and figurative language to facilitate meaning was examined. There was only one end rhyming pair in this free-verse poem, which half of the students from each group overlooked. Students were also asked to identify literary devices, and to explain why the poet used the particular device, or how it helped them to understand the poem. Almost without exception, students did not know the technical terms for the literary devices, but undoubtedly recognized and understood how they functioned in the poem. For example, one fifth grader

with LD responded, "All the leaves have turned to cornflakes. They are comparing leaves with cornflakes."

The dominant figurative devices identified in this poem were comparisons, personification, and repetition. Students with LD (50%) outnumbered AA students (44%) in recognizing comparisons (metaphor) in the poem, and the only person to give an example of alliteration was a student with LD. Half of the students with LD (50%), and 44% of AA students were able to identify an example of personification. In explaining what the device meant, one grade six student with LD answered, "Personification- the leaves are nervously chattering, that means the wind blows the leaves and they rattle." Overwhelmingly, students (88% LD, 80% AA) recognized that Katz consistently repeated words and phrases like "raking, piles, and millions". Furthermore, when questioned about the purpose of the repetition, 75% of students with LD and 81% of AA students proffered plausible explanations showing that the poet wanted to illustrate a point; such as, A) explain what the leaves looked like, B) describe a repetitive action, and C) describe how the leaves sounded:

(A) "The leaves are crunchy like cornflakes and they are orange like cornflakes. This helps me see what the leaves act like-- like cornflakes. (B) The raking, raking lets me know that they keep on doing the same thing over and over, and they feel tired. (C) The leaves are nervously chattering lets me know that the leaves are making a bunch of sounds" (Grade 6 LD).

Students who mentioned that the literary device was used to make the poem interesting or to give details were all AA students (13%); while 25% of students with LD and 6% AA students, did not proffer any reason for the poet's use of the identified literary devices (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Interpretive Strategies Used in the Preview and Author's Craft Subcategories by Poem*

Subcategory	Interpretive Strategy	October Saturday		Stopping by Woods	
		LD %	AA %	LD %	AA %
Preview	Make prediction	94	100	94	100
	Confirm prediction	69	81	81	88
Author's craft	Identify literary devices				
	Rhyme	50	50	88	88
	Repetition	88	80	63	100
	Comparison	50	44	-	-
	Personification	50	44	-	-
	Alliteration	-	-	0	13
	Use of devices				
	Repetition				
	Reflect speaker's tiredness	-	-	56	75
	Create interest/excitement	0	13	6	19
	Illustrate a point	75	81	0	0
	Get reader's attention	0	0	6	0
	Alliteration				
	Create beat/rhythm	-	-	6	13

Interpretation. Questions in this subcategory examined the students' ability to use higher order strategies like making inferences, identifying theme, and using visual and sensory details to come up with underlying ideas and personal meaning. Students were asked to speculate why might the person in the poem be "dreaming of the box marked summer".

Sixty-two percent of students with LD, and 94% of their AA peers gave a response. Of these, 38% of students with LD and 50% AA students used existing schemata to focus on the items in the "box marked summer" (bathing suits, clogs, and flippers) to infer that the person wanted to swim and have fun. Forty-four percent of students with LD and 38% of AA students decided that the person was dreaming of the box marked summer because they simply could not wait for summer to arrive. On the other hand, a smaller number of students with LD (13%) than their AA peers (31%) proposed that the speaker was tired of fall or of raking. Some students offered more than one reason:

"Because she probably dreaming of the best summer ever… and she wants her summer to be good. She wants it to be summer soon because she's tired of the fall and all the leaves she has to rake". (Grade 6 LD).

Another question required students to determine the message or theme of the poem. Two distinct levels of analysis were evidenced here. The tendency of not moving beyond the plain sense of the poem, or of making a literal interpretation was mirrored in this research, where 38% of the students with LD and 25% of the AA students offered the basic story line as the poem's message: "(The message is)…that the leaves and the boy, and they were raking them, and they were millions and millions of cornflakes flying around, and they were chattering" (Grade 5LD). At the second level, 50% of students with LD and 69% of AA students demonstrated a higher level of analysis by venturing beyond the story line to offer a generalization about the poem's message. Nevertheless, the generalization was restricted to an object or idea specifically mentioned in the poem (e.g., raking leaves): "When you (are) raking leaves, it can't always be fun. Sometimes you get tired and then you want to lay down and dream of not raking" (Grade 5 LD). The remaining students did not generate a theme/message.

Personal Response. Questions in this section required students to make intertextual connections with the poem, to visualize and create sensory images of the poem's events, and to ask the poet questions. The answers to these questions portrayed the students' idiosyncratic and subjective interpretations of and reactions to the poem (see Table 4). Almost without exception, students (94%) made a personal connection with the poem. An equal number of students with LD and their AA peers (81%) made a connection with the family raking leaves, and 19% connected with the hard-working speaker. Fewer students made text-to-text connections (19% from each group). In the text-to-world category, AA students (66%) more than doubled the number of students with LD (31%) who made a connection.

In the visualization and creating sensory images subcategory, students went beyond the visual images of the poem's characters at work, or the changing colors of the sky, to give sensory details. Indeed, 75% of students with LD and 88% of their AA peers recalled hearing the noisy, blowing leaves. Some students even made the sound of the wind blowing. One quarter (25%) of students with LD, as compared to 38% of AA students recounted smelling the leaves or the fall air; and 31% from each group touched the crunchy leaves or felt the chilly air: "I see a dad and son raking. I see the leaves, and they pick up the leaves. The leaves are red, green, yellow, orange, and brown. I hear the wind blowing and the leaves making crunching noises. I smell the wind" (Grade 5 LD).

Students were given the opportunity to generate questions. Students with LD and AA students equally asked a total of 29 questions about the poem. About the poet, students with LD generated 18 questions, and their AA peers 25 questions. Twenty-five percent of students with LD, compared to 13% of AA asked questions that communicated their confusion about the poem's extended metaphor (e.g., "What does she mean by the 'giant's

baby brother had tipped the box'?"). Another 69% of the questions of students with LD and 63% of those of AA students focused on if the poet and the poem's speaker were the same individual. Questions also reflected the students' interest in the techniques of writing poems. Sixty three percent of students with LD and 50% of AA students asked questions about the poet's preferences and family life.

Students' Interactions

Interruptions. Placed in this subcategory were the interruptions made during the reading of the poem, since these may have offered an insight into the students' metacognitive activity as they sought to make meaning of the poem. Students interrupted to confirm a prediction, "All the leaves… My prediction was confirmed because I said the leaves would be falling" (6% of students with LD, 0% of AA students); make a connection, "Me and my brother rake the leaves into piles, too" (6% from each group); comment on the author's craft, "He repeating the words… Dad and I, and raking, raking" (6% of student with LD, 0% of AA student); or ask a question (0% students with LD, 13% of AA students).

Poem's effect. A major glimpse of the poem's effect on the students was gained through their recount of how the poem made them feel. Sixty-nine percent of students with LD, compared to 38% of AA students, responded with an emotion aroused by the poem (e.g., "Happy, because sometimes, when you read a poem, you can do the things that are in the poem in your life"), and what Hansson (1996) termed "evoked emotions". Thirteen percent of students from each group mentioned that the poem prompted them to want to perform an action like raking leaves, or working.

Ninety-four percent of students with LD and 88% of AA students reported that they enjoyed the poem. Eighty-one percent of students with LD versus 56% of AA students enjoyed the poem because they could relate to the topic or the speaker: "Yes, I liked 'I'm dreaming of the box marked summer,' because I'm dreaming of summer now". A further 19% of students with LD, compared to 50% from the AA group enjoyed some element of the author's craft or use of specific literary devices. Again, some students gave more than one reason for their enjoyment.

Poem 2: "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

"Stopping by the Woods on A Snowy Evening," the more traditional poem, tells about a man who delays his journey to stop and watch the "lovely, dark, and deep" woods fill up with snow. The vocabulary, syntax, and unfamiliar concepts add to the challenge of this poem.

Poetry Comprehension

Preview. As with Poem 1, most students demonstrated knowledge of using title as cue to the poem's content. Eighty-one percent of students with LD, and 88% of their AA peers used words from the title to predict what the poem would be about. Predominantly, students (100% LD, 94% AA) made inferences about the types of activities in which the poem's speaker would be engaged, and most students speculated that the person stopped to cut wood, or a tree: "I think the (poem) is going to be about one day when he went to the woods on a snowy evening, and he probably cut a tree down to decorate it" (Grade 5 LD). Predictions were fully confirmed by one quarter of students with LD (25%) and 44% of AA students, while 56% of students with LD and 44% of their AA peers said that their predictions were partially confirmed.

Table 4. *Interpretive Strategies Used in the Interpretation and Personal Response Subcategories by Poem*

Subcategory	Interpretive Strategy	October Saturday		Stopping by Woods	
		LD	AA	LD	AA
		%	%	%	%
Interpretation	Make inference	63	94	88	88
	Identify theme				
	Surface meaning	38	25	50	31
	Inference about topic	0	0	25	13
	Generalization about topic	50	69	13	50
	Broader generalization about life	0	0	6	6
Personal response	Make connections				
	Text-to-self	94	100	75	100
	Text-to-text	19	19	50	31
	Text-to-world	31	66	50	75
	Provide sensory details				
	Sight	88	81	100	100
	Hearing	75	88	63	88
	Smell	25	38	6	0
	Touch/Feel	31	31	88	44
	Taste	6	13	6	31
	Generate questions				
	About poem				
	Meaning	25	13	13	6
	Poem's content	0	0	63	69
	Speaker	69	63	38	63
	Writing poems	19	50	56	69
	About poet				
	Family life, preferences	63	50	38	44
	Poet's writing	25	50	44	56

Author's Craft. The literary devices identified in this poem were repetition, alliteration and rhyme. All AA students and 63% of students with LD took note of the repetition of the poem's final line ("And miles to go before I sleep"). Students with LD did not offer rhyme as a literary device, while 31% of AA students did; however, rhymes were identified by 88% of both students with LD and AA students. Alliteration was pinpointed by 13% of AA students, but by no students with LD. Another 25% of students with LD did not recognize any literary devices in the poem, compared to 6% from the AA group. More than half of students from each group (56%, LD, 75%, AA) suggested that the poem's repetition was used to show that the speaker was tired or sleepy, or that he had a great distance to go (e.g., "He wants you to know that the person is maybe tired, and he got far to go before he can sleep"). Six percent of students with LD and 19% of AA students reported that the repetition was used to make the poem "interesting".

Interpretation. Students were required to infer if the speaker loves the snow. An equal percentage of students with LD and AA students (88%) decided that the speaker loves the snow because he stops to enjoy the snow even though he has "miles to go," and/or that he describes the snowy woods as "lovely, dark, and deep". In identifying the poem's message or theme, students used four distinct levels of analysis that seem to reflect varying levels of complexity. At the first level was the literal interpretation, where 50% of students with LD, and 31% of AA students recounted the story line as the poem's message ("Snow by the

woods. It was like snowing"). At level two, 25% of students with LD and 13% of AA students perceived the message as an inference about the topic ("He's saying that he enjoys the snow being out in the woods"). The third level of analysis was when students (13% of students with LD, 50% of AA students) offered a generalization about the topic as the poem's message ("When you are outside in the forest, when it is snowy, it looks beautiful and lovely, and you should admire nature even though you have a long way to go"). The fourth and highest level was attained by one student with LD and one AA student whose message was a broader generalization about life (e.g., "In life, you should stop for a little while to see or do something you enjoy").

Personal response. Most intertextual connections were of the text-to-self type, with 75% students with LD, and 100% AA students making a personal connection with the snow and the darkened evenings of winter. More students with LD (50%) made a text-to-text association than AA students (31%). The poem reminded 6% of AA students of another poem. In making a text-to-world connection, 50% of students with LD compared to 75% of AA students associated the poem with a movie, television show or something they had heard or seen on the news. In creating visual and sensory imagery, all students painted a visual picture of the speaker out in the snowy woods, but it was interesting the range of speakers that students "saw" in the poem, ranging from "the little girl," to "a boy," and "a man". Unlike "October Saturday," this poem was, for the most part, silent. Sixty-three percent of students with LD and 88% AA students heard sounds of the bells, wind, and imagined animals. Students with LD (88%) doubled AA students who touched or felt the snow and its effect. Thirty-one percent of AA students, but only 6% students with LD, used their sense of taste to interact with the poem ("I can taste the snow like water"). Students with LD generated a total of 32 questions about the poem, while AA students asked 30. Most questions asked about this poem were related to the poem's content with 63% of students with LD and 69% AA of students asking questions like, "What promises he had to keep?" Twice as many students with LD (13%) than AA students (6%) had a question about the poem's meaning, "What does he mean by 'the sweep of easy wind and downy flake'"?

Students' Interactions

Interruptions. Interruptions made during the reading of this poem were sparse with 78% of students not interrupting, although encouraged to do so. Six percent of AA students interrupted the reading of the poem to confirm a prediction and to offer a summary of the poem, while no students with LD did. Another 6% of students with LD and 25% of AA students paused the reading to ask the meaning of the words "queer" or "harness-bells".

Poem's effect. When asked "How did the poem make you feel?" most students (75% of students with LD, 63% of AA students) responded favorably with an emotion evoked by the poem. For example, a grade 5 student with LD sided with the speaker, "Good. It makes me feel like I can love snow". Students said that the poem prompted them to want to perform an action. A few students (13% LD, 6% AA) even articulated a sensory effect, and said that the poem made them feel "cold". Students were further asked if they enjoyed the poem and to state why or why not. Overwhelmingly, students (100% LD, and 94% AA) reported enjoying the poem, with some students offering more than one reason for their enjoyment. For the most part, students (75% LD, 81% AA) relayed enjoying the poem's content or story line. Furthermore, 19% of students with LD and 25% of AA students offered a positive evaluation of the poem as a reason for their enjoyment: "Yes, because it is a lovely poem about the snow."

Discussion

This investigation of interpretive strategies used by students with and without LD reveals much about their interactions with and comprehension of poetry. Students with LD used a broad range of interpretive strategies inclusive of predicting and confirming, identifying and understanding literary devices, making intertextual connections, interpreting theme, questioning, inferring, and visualizing. They performed as well as their AA peers in making sense of two poems with varying levels of complexity. However, some areas of difficulty surfaced in relation to understanding an extended metaphor, not moving beyond the surface meaning of the poems, and in placing more emphasis on evoked emotions than on understood emotions in their poetic processing.

Interpretive Strategies

The interpretive strategy of predicting and confirming is a well established task for facilitating comprehension. Students with LD demonstrated that they were as equally able as their AA peers to use the title of poems to make adequate predictions about the poems' content. Furthermore, students with LD used the title to make inferences about the setting, weather conditions, and activities in which the poems' speaker would be engaged. The responses of students also revealed that they had preexisting schemata which helped them to interpret the title.

Figurative language is an integral element of poetry used to portray and reflect meaning, but poor comprehenders (Cain & Towse, 2008) usually have difficulty with such a device because they tend to be more literal in their reading and interpretation. However, in this research, students with LD, who are often poor comprehenders, exemplified skill in identifying examples of metaphor, personification, alliteration, and hyperbole, though they did not know the technical terminology. Beyond mere identification, students with LD demonstrated an understanding of how the poems' meaning hinged upon these devices. To illustrate, in explaining the poets' use of personification and metaphor, students talked about the noise made by the "nervously chattering" leaves of "October Saturday," and how they looked liked "lots and lots" of cornflakes on the lawn. However, though recognizing the poet's use of metaphor in "October Saturday" in calling the leaves cornflakes, the comments and questions of one quarter of students with LD indicated that they were stunted by the use of the extended metaphor in the same poem, illustrating what Miall and Kuiken (1994) called "defamiliarization". The students appeared unable to reconcile the reality of the speaker's character with the apparent fairy-tale character of a giant, as students with LD voiced their confusion. This confusion also speaks to the tendency of students with LD to read literally and to give a prosaic interpretation to figurative language (Sekeres & Gregg, 2007). Their images of a literal giant in the poem did not fit in with the rest of the poem's characters, thus creating "contextual (in)consistency" (Nesi et al., 2006).

Visualization, and other sensory-based responses, is another type of interpretive strategy that is pertinent to comprehension (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995) across genres. While reading, visualization places an emphasis on sensory responses that could arouse multiple neural pathways that broaden the reader's observations (Holbrook, 2005). In their attempt at comprehending the poems, students with LD adopted an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1995), considering both their cognition and affect in the process. Students entered imaginatively into the world of the poems to identify with the poems' speakers, and to express empathic understanding. Their descriptions of sensory details communicated that they were having a lived-through experience with the poems. Students reported feeling cold from being out in the woods, or feeling tired from "all that raking". Here, the visualizations

enhanced their interpretations and helped them to understand the speakers' experiences, by virtually taking on their perspectives.

The interpretive strategy of identifying theme may also prove problematic to students with LD as it involves higher order skills of making inferences and generalizations. Students exemplified a four-level hierarchy of analysis in identifying the poems' theme or message. The first level was the literal level where students gave the basic "story line" or surface meaning of the poem. For "October Saturday," students with LD made a greater number of broader generalizations than surface meaning responses, indicating that they moved beyond the "plain sense" interpretation, and that this poem was more accessible to them. At the second level, students made inferences about the poems' speaker- his or her thinking and feelings, or about the topic. The latter two levels respectively featured generalizations about the topic, and broader generalizations about life. For the more traditional poem, "Stopping by Woods," fewer than a quarter (19%) of the students with LD, but more than half (56%) of their AA peers moved to this level of meaning, which extended the poems' "plain sense" to include greater "poetic significance" (Harker, 1994), and provided for a more sophisticated interpretation. These results seem to suggest that students with LD operated at the surface level of interpretation for the traditional poem, but went on to greater interpretive significance for the more contemporary poem. It seems that once the students with LD got past the extended metaphor of the "giant's baby brother" spilling his cornflakes that the poem's free verse, contemporary language, and the described activity to which students readily connected rendered this poem "easier". It could be that the greater conceptual and linguistic divide of "Stopping by Woods" reduced accessibility to the students' with LD and limited the recognition of the generalizability of the poem's theme, and their ability to glean deeper meaning.

Students juxtaposed the text of their experiences with the text at hand to aid with the comprehension process. It appeared to the students' advantage that the data collection period took place toward the end of the fall semester, when students had fresh experiences of the falling leaves of autumn, and the early pre-winter snows. In their interaction with the poems, students with LD made intertextual connections, utilizing their background knowledge and references to relate the poems to their personal experiences, and other texts such as poems, books, movies, and various cultural media. Text-to-text connections, however, were the least made. Similar results were reported by Sipe (2000) who found that second graders in response to story book read alouds, made fewer text-to-text connections than text-to-self. Nevertheless, both students with LD and their AA peers realized the connection between poetry and their life experiences, recognizing the significance of poetry as a "lifeworld" or life itself. Gordon (2009) used the term "lifeworld" to refer to "the voice, history, and culture" (Gordon, 2009, p. 166) of an individual- the poet, the poem's speaker, or the reader or listener. Every encounter with poetry, therefore, is a convergence of two "lifeworlds"- that of the reader, and the extended world of the poem, creating other "lifeworlds" as students come away with deeper cultural knowledge and critical understanding.

Another interpretive strategy that was used by students with LD as freely as their AA peers was generating questions about the poems and the poets. The questions asked about the poems from students with LD indicated that they wanted uncertainties settled, inquiring about the meaning of words, figurative devices, and the speaker. Their questions about the poet were mostly about if the poet and the speaker were the same individual, and about writing poems in general. The questions about the poems' speaker basically reflected a narrative approach to the comprehension of the poems; first, identifying the poems' speaker or character, and then, creating a storyline for him or her. These findings are consistent with

Eva-Wood's (2008) research where students in their engagement with poems began with a basic outline of the speaker before going on to deeper analysis of inferring thoughts and feelings, and eventually identifying with the speaker.

Poetry Enjoyment

It seems that, for the most part, the relationship between the complexity of the poems and the level of difficulty experienced in comprehending the poems and students' enjoyment of them did not impact student enjoyment. Most students indicated that they enjoyed the poems regardless of difficulty or challenge. A possible variable that may have influenced the students' enjoyment of the poems was the mode of presentation. In this study, students listened to tape-recorded versions of poems, while following along on personal scripts. Recent research (e.g., Gordon, 2009) has lauded the benefits of "heard" poetry. He investigated how middle and secondary school students reacted to poems they heard (without printed text) and afterward discussed. Teachers reported how the students responded well to the listening activities, asked for specific details to be replayed, and initiated discussion about these details.

The overwhelming number of students who reported enjoying the poems gave insight into their comprehension based on Hansson's (1996) model of poetic understanding. He placed poetic processing on an affective-cognitive continuum with synthetic understanding at the affective end, and analytic understanding at the cognitive end. In reading synthetically, the reader is controlled by primary emotions (evoked emotions) felt while reading the poem. With analytic processing, emotional processes are not as important as cognitive processes, and emotions (understood emotions) are the results of the reader's reflection on the poet's style. Readers then express enjoyment as a result of the poet's craft. From this perspective, students with LD operated more at the synthetic end of the continuum than their AA peers, with only 6% of these students expressing enjoyment of either poem because of the poet's style. On the other hand, half of the AA students attributed their enjoyment of "October Saturday" to some element of the poet's craft, showing an emphasis on understood emotions, while only 19% enjoyed "Stopping by Woods" for the poet's stylistic qualities. Finally, poetic enjoyment by both groups of students was mainly attributed to the poems' subject matter, suggesting that if students can connect with the topic at hand, comprehension may be a less difficult task.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this research offer suggestions for designing curricular activities and interventions to draw elementary students with and without LD to a greater level of comprehension proficiency in general, and poetry comprehension in particular. The types of poems that students were able to recite from memory were either silly or fun verses, showing a lack of knowledge of more serious poems. In addition, none of the children referred to a favorite song or rap as poetry, also demonstrating a limited conception of poetry. Poem selection should reflect what poetry is, that is, a medium for self expression that helps readers (and listeners) develop new ways of seeing and understanding the world (Gill, 2007). It may be that the students' enjoyment of different types of poetry may be enhanced with exposure to a broader and varied selection of poems.

In general, both students with and without disabilities did not know the technical terms for the literary devices identified in the poems. Students must be taught the technical terms, as knowledge of these is critical for poetry comprehension. Students should also be able to identify and distinguish between these devices by name as well as function. Very often these devices occur in classroom texts. Teachers should use these opportunities of exposure to consolidate student knowledge by asking students to name the device and to state what it

means in the context of the reading selection. Students also tend to use metaphors frequently in their everyday speech. For example, "I'm a beast" is commonly said when students exhibit genius in answering a question correctly, or scoring a high grade. Teachers can turn such expressions into teachable moments, by having students explain their meaning, and then pointing out the difference in literal and figurative meaning. In a recent study, researchers Peskin, Allen, and Wells-Jopling (2010) taught 14 and 15 year old students how to use symbolic interpretation of poetry to help with gaining meaning. These students were taught universal meanings of symbols and metaphors, which helped them to look for a range of possible meanings within the poems. Regarding the comparatively small number of text-to-text connections made, teachers must make concerted efforts to provide students with opportunities for making such connections. An emphasis is often placed on making text-to-self connections in the elementary classrooms with having students record these connections during reading. Similarly, text to text connections should be placed along with text-to-self and text-to-world, so that students become equally familiar with this subcategory of intertextual connections.

Finally, students in this research had many questions about how the featured poets wrote poems, indicating an interest in poetry writing. Perhaps, reading/writing connections could be forged by providing student with opportunities for writing their own experiences, life stories, and responses to poetry in narrative and poetic forms. It is interesting the depth of understanding that both groups of students showed from listening to the poems only twice, while following along on personal scripts. One can just imagine how much more students could garner from poetry in a discussion format, and with added background information about the poets and the context of their writing.

Limitations of the Study

The relatively small sample size limits the generalizability of findings. Another limitation of the study is the students' unfamiliarity with the researcher. Interviewing is a social interactional event that is affected by the context of the interview. Some students may have been shy to answer or to ask questions, and non-response may not represent a lack of skill in the use of a particular strategy, as is being assumed in this research.

• • •

References

Braun, I. (2003). *Poetry comprehension: A description of the cognitive and emotional processing of literary experts and novices* (Master's thesis). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. MQ84319).

Cain, K., & Towse, A. S. (2008). To get hold of the wrong end of the stick: Reasons for poor idiom understanding with reading comprehension difficulties. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 51*, 1538-1549.

Certo, J. L. (2004). Cold plums and the old men in the water: Let children read and write "great' poetry. *The Reading Teacher*, *58*(3), 266-271.

Dyson, A., & Genishi, C. (Eds.). (1994). *The need for story: Cultural diversity in classroom and community*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Eva-Wood, A. (2004). How think-and-feel aloud instruction influences poetry readers. *Discourse Processes, 38*(2), 173-192.

Eva-Wood, A. (2008). Does feeling come first? How poetry can help readers broaden their understanding of metacognition. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *51*(7), 564-573.

Gasparro, M., & Felletta, B. (1994). *Creating drama with poetry: Teaching English as a second language through dramatization and improvisation.* Washington, DC: FRIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics (ERIC Document Reproduction Services. ED 568214).

Gersten, R., Fuchs, S. L., Williams, P. J., & Baker, S. (2001). Teaching reading comprehension strategies to students with learning disabilities: A review of research. *Review of Educational Research*, 71, 279-320.

Gill, R. (2007). The forgotten genre of children's poetry. *The Reading Teacher*, *60*(7), 622-625.

Gordon, J. (2009). Sound's right: Pupils' response to heard poetry and the revised National Curriculum for English. *The Curriculum Journal*, *20*(2), 161-175.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Hansson, G. (1996). Emotions in poetry: Where are they and how do we find them? In R. J. Kruz & M. S. M. Nealey (Eds.). *Empirical Approaches to Literature and Aesthetics* (Vol. 52). Norwood: NJ: Ablex Publishing.

Harker, W. J. (1994). "Plain sense" and "poetic significance": Tenth-grade readers reading two poems. *Poetics*, *22*(3), 199-218.

Harris, C. W. (1948). Measurement of comprehension of literature: The nature of literary comprehension. *The School Review, 56*(5), 280-289.

Harris, V. (2008). Selecting books that children like. *The Reading Teacher*, *61*(5), 426-430.

Holbrook, S. (2005). *Practical poetry: A nonstandard approach to meeting content-area standards.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Kucan, L. (2007). "I" poems: Invitations for students to deepen literacy understanding. *The Reading Teacher, 60*(6), 518-525.

Lenz, L. (1992). Crossroads of literacy and orality: Reading poetry aloud. *Language Arts,* 69(8), 597-603.

Linaberga, M. (2004). Poetry top 10: A foolproof formula for teaching poetry. *The Reading Teacher, 58*(4), 366-372.

Manning, M. (2003). A poetic awakening. *Teaching Pre K-8*, 33, 85-87.

Miall, D., & Kuiken, D. (1994). Beyond text theory: Understanding Literary response. *Discourse Processes, 17*, 337-352.

National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Nesi, B., Levorato, M. C., Roch, M., & Cacciari, C. (2006). To break the embarrassment: Text comprehension skills and figurative competence in skilled and less-skilled text comprehenders. *European Psychologist*, *11*(2), 128-136.

Oakhill, J., & Cain, K. (2000). Children's difficulties in text comprehension: Assessing causal issues. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, *5*, 51-59.

Peskin, J. (1998). Constructing reading when reading poetry: An expert-novice study. *16*, 235-263.

Peskin, J., Allen, G., & Wells-Jopling, R. (2012). "The Educational Imagination": Applying instructional research to the teaching of symbolic interpretation of poetry. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 53*(6), 498-507.

Pressley, M., & Afflerbach, P. (1995). *Verbal protocols of reading: The nature of constructively response reading*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1995). *Literature as exploration* (5th ed.). New York: The Modern Language Association of America.

Sekeres, D. C., & Gregg, M. (2007). Poetry in third grade: Getting started. *The Reading Teacher*, *60*(5), 466-475.

Sipe, L. (2000). The construction of literary understanding by first and second graders in oral response to picture storybook read-alouds. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *35*(2), 252-275.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Poems Cited

Frost, R. (2004). Stopping by woods on a snowy evening. In J. Hollander (Ed.), *Poetry for young people:* American poetry. New York: Scholastic.

Katz, B. (1990). October Saturday. In P. B. Janeczko (Ed.), *The place my words are looking for* (p.87). New York: Bradbury Press.