

Direct Instruction Works

There's an ongoing debate about whether direct instruction or discovery learning works best in ELT. Direct learning is when you give students new information explicitly, such as telling them that we form the plural in English by adding -s to the end of words. By contrast, discovery learning is letting students figure out the rules by themselves. It might seem obvious that each has its own place.

However, when I talk to teachers, most seem to prefer discovery learning and use direct instruction only as a last resort. If your students are really struggling, then you can jump in with the explicit information. But, the other day while teaching my four-year old about magnets, I realized how useful direct instruction can be!

Can a four-year old discover magnets?



What does a magnet tell us about direct instruction?

We were doing an activity about kindness. We read a book about

bullying. Then I brought out some magnets and some paperclips. The idea was to teach what magnets are and how they work, while also talking about how kindness attracts people.

Of course, he loved the magnets and he got very excited about picking up paperclips with them. Then he moved on to trying to pick up other things with them. He couldn't figure out what was magnetic and what wasn't.

Now this seemed like a perfect time for discovery learning. Let him try to pick up a bunch of stuff with the magnet, see what works and what doesn't. However, he quickly got very frustrated. We don't have a lot of small metal things that he has access to. So basically it was him not picking things up and getting upset. After a few minutes, I told him magnets only work on metal things. I could then steer him to the refrigerator and the metal near the fireplace (obviously, there was no fire burning).

Without that explicit explanation, I doubt he would ever have figured out what things were magnetic and what weren't. And the reason for that is that he doesn't really know what metal is. He wouldn't really have been able to put together that paperclips, the fireplace cover, and the refrigerator are all metal are all the same material, particularly as the front of the fridge is actually some kind of burnished metal and not magnetic at all. To make it worse, our bathtub is iron, but covered with a layer of porcelain.

Discovery Learning is Contrived

These exceptions reminded me of how contrived a lot of my discovery learning exercises are. You have to pretend the front of the fridge isn't metal and take that layer off the bathtub to expose the metal. I once made a chart comparing present simple to present progressive to help students discover the difference. It was amazing how many verbs I had to exclude because they didn't quite fit the rule I was teaching.

I found that I was creating a very limited and simplified rule for my students to discover. Arguably that's doing them a serious disservice. It would have been better to lay out the ways present simple and present progressive are used, and to give them lots of good examples.

Now, once you've done the explanation, you can set the students off to discover nuances or exceptions or other examples. But if they lack the necessary background knowledge, discovery learning is going to be far too frustrating for everyone.

Bruce Lee, Bruce Lee, Bruce L-Y?

A more ELT-related moment came up the other day. My son has started learning to read. He is obsessed with how to spell words and constantly asks us, "What words are in *boy*?" Or *cow*. Or *perfectly perfect*.



He knows the basic vowel sounds and names of the letters. Thus, he is often frustrated that the long E sound at the end of words like *baby* is made by a Y. And just as he started to figure that out, he discovered that the terminal Y can also make a long I sound in words like *fly*.

At some point, he will get enough information and know enough words that he will be able to spell words and read words accurately. But in order for him to get to that point, he needs a lot of direct instruction. He needs to be told how words are spelled and he needs to

be told that Y at the end of words makes different sounds.

I love discovery learning. Lessons that involve discovery are often a great deal of fun and very communicative, with lots of talking and guessing and meaning-making. But I love direct instruction, too. Without it, students wouldn't know enough to discover anything.