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Increasing Student Engagement Through Opportunities to Respond

Abstract

The evidence for providing sufficient opportunities for students to respond (OTR) has been established in terms of increasing student engagement while decreasing disruptive behavior. Although proven to be effective, teachers are demonstrating low rates of OTR across all grade levels and instructional content areas. Given the potential benefits of increasing OTR, it is critical that teachers find ways to increase the provision of OTR during instruction. This article will discuss the research behind providing sufficient OTR, examine the rate of OTR teachers are providing in schools in relation to optimal rates suggested by research, and provide strategies for increasing OTR during classroom instruction.

Keywords

Instruction, opportunities to respond, OTR, engagement

Academic engagement is a term that refers to the appropriate ways that students can participate and interact during classroom instruction (Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002; Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008). Academic engagement can be classified as either active (e.g., verbally answering a question, writing) or passive (e.g., quietly listening to speaker) engagement. While academic engagement must be present for successful academic learning to occur, it also can play a role in student behavioral outcomes as well. Students who are engaged in the learning process are less likely to exhibit inappropriate behaviors and more likely to achieve academic success (Conroy, Sutherland, Snyder, & Marsh, 2008; Simonsen et al., 2008; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). Conversely, a lack of student engagement can lead to inappropriate behaviors that interfere with instruction and student learning for all. Because there appears to be a relationship between academic difficulties and inappropriate behaviors, research has suggested that the use of effective instructional strategies, such as providing sufficient opportunities to respond (OTR), can impact both academic and behavioral outcomes by increasing academic engagement.

Review of the Literature

An OTR is the interaction between a teacher's academic prompt (i.e., verbal, visual, or written) and a student's verbal, written, or gestural response (Sprick, Knight, Reinke & McKale, 2006). An OTR can take several forms including choral responses, individual responses, student response cards, clickers, responding on a white board, and any other methods that allow students to indicate their response to a prompt from a teacher. Increasing the rates of OTR has been shown to be effective in increasing student engagement (Carnine, 1976; Christle & Schuster, 2003; Davis & O'Neil, 2004; Haydon, Conroy, Scott, Sindelar, Barber, & Orlando, 2010; Haydon, Mancil, & Van Loan, 2009; Sutherland, Alder, & Gunter, 2003). At the same time, it can also result in decreasing disruptive behavior (Armendariz & Umbreit, 1999; Haydon et al., 2010; Haydon et al., 2009; Lambert, Cartledge, Heward, & Lo, 2006; Sutherland et al., 2003; West & Sloan, 1986). Furthermore, the positive effects of increased rates of OTR have been demonstrated across various settings including self-contained classrooms (Sutherland et al., 2003; West & Sloan, 1986) and general education classrooms (Christle & Schuster, 2003; Davis & O'Neil, 2004).

The Council for Exception Children (1987) suggested that the optimal rate for OTR is 4 to 6 responses per minute for new material and between 8 to 12 OTR responses for material being reviewed. While this may be an unrealistic number for the general education setting, Scott, Alter, and Hirn (2011) reported that recent

research has suggested that at least 3 OTR per minute is the optimal rate to positively affect student academic and behavioral outcomes. Although providing sufficient levels of OTR has proven to be effective, teachers are demonstrating low rates of OTR across all grade levels and instructional content areas (Whitney, Cooper, & Lingo, 2015). Given the potential benefits of increasing OTR, it is critical that teachers find ways to increase the provision of OTR during instruction. The remainder of this article describes the implications that providing higher rates of OTR has for teachers and describes specific ways that teachers can integrate higher rates of OTR in their classrooms.

Implications for Practice

While much of the research on the provision of OTR presents a dire picture of the current state of affairs regarding their use in classrooms, the positive news is that with minimal planning and effort, teachers can increase their use of OTR, thereby increasing student engagement and giving students a better opportunity for both academic and behavioral success. There are three primary forms of student responses that can be used in lessons: verbal, written, and action responses. The following sections provide brief examples of ways to provide OTR for each form of response.

Verbal Responses

The most common form of response is verbal. However, teachers often use practices that are not the most effective. These include calling on volunteers and calling on inattentive students. Calling on volunteers can create a situation where the same student or small group of students end up responding to all questions. This also allows students who do not typically engage with the lesson to remain disengaged. Also, calling on inattentive students often creates a situation where the student is doomed to fail because of the inattention to the lesson. This situation will do little to promote engagement of the student and is more likely to cause the student to produce an incorrect response if any at all. This is not a characteristic of effective instruction. Instead, there are more desirable verbal response practices to consider.

The first is random selection. Random selection is exactly what it sounds like; students are called on in a random format to respond to teacher prompts. This can be done in a variety of ways that can be fun for students. Examples include writing student names on Popsicle sticks and drawing student names randomly to respond to questions or prompts. Another would be to have two decks of cards. Tape one card from one deck to each student's desk. Then use the other deck to

randomly draw cards and call on the student with the corresponding card to respond. There also are numerous iPhone or iPad Apps that can assist with random selection of students including *Pick Me!*, *Random Student*, and *Student Callout*. By making the process random using these techniques, it can lead to more students being involved through OTR and potentially increase the number of OTR the teacher is providing.

The second type of verbal response is the Whip Around Activity, used with questions that have multiple possible answers. It entails asking a question, giving appropriate wait time, and then starting at one location in the room and giving multiple students an opportunity to answer the question. If a student wants to, they are allowed to pass. A sample question might be “Tell me a word that ends with *at*.” Another effective verbal response method is choral responding. This involves asking all students the same question, giving wait time, and then giving them a signal that cues them to provide a response in unison. An example would be asking everyone “What is the capital of Kentucky?,” waiting for 5 seconds and then giving the cue.

Written Responses

Another primary response form is through writing, and OTR entails providing students with either response cards or response slates. Response cards would have common responses already written down like True and False, Yes or No, or letters or numbers that would correlate with particular answers. The teacher would ask a True or False question, and students would simply hold up the corresponding card with their answer. This allows the teacher to get a quick read on who is responding correctly without calling attention to a particular child who may have an incorrect answer. The response slate works the same way but it requires students to write their response on a miniature dry-erase board with a dry erase marker.

Action Responses

The final form of response is the action response. While this form of responding to an OTR works generally the same way that the other forms do, it allows students to use their hands to provide a response that indicates either an answer to a question or to indicate a level of understanding of the lesson content. One action response allows students to hold up a finger (i.e., either one, two, three, four, or five) that corresponds with numbered answers that the teacher has either written on the board or projected on a screen. Again, this allows the teacher to do a quick scan of student responses and provide feedback as needed. Another option is

for students to provide a thumbs up or thumbs down to indicate agreement or disagreement with a statement or a given prompt from the teacher. Students also can use action responses to indicate a level of understanding by giving finger signals (i.e., one means little understanding and 5 means great understanding) or by placing their hand at their forehead to indicate high understanding, their neck for moderate understanding or at their abdomen for low understanding.

Summary

The research clearly suggests that teachers are not providing adequate numbers of OTR during instruction. Given the positive impact they can have on both academic achievement and social behavior, it is important that teachers increase their use. With minimal planning, teachers can use a variety of methods to increase their use of OTR, which in turn can increase student engagement, giving students a better opportunity for success in the classroom.

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