Evidence Based Practices Spotlight: Explicit Instruction

Specially Designed INSTRUCTION
The Heart of Special Education

What is Explicit Instruction?

Explicit instruction is a structured, systematic approach to teaching that includes clarity, modeling, and guided practice. When using this approach, educators break down complex skills into manageable steps, clearly state learning objectives, and model strategies to demonstrate cognitive processes. Students are provided with frequent opportunities to respond during instruction, immediate corrective feedback, and cumulative review to reinforce mastery. This approach is proactive and intentional, ensuring that students understand not just what to do, but how and why to do it.

Who Benefits and Why it Matters

Students with learning disabilities, attention challenges, and/or language barriers benefit from the predictable structure and scaffolded support of explicit instruction. This approach is also effective for twice exceptional learners when used to model complex thinking and metacognitive strategies. The clear objectives, step-by-step modeling, guided practice, and immediate feedback are beneficial for all students.

The use of explicit instruction reduces confusion and cognitive overload, making learning more efficient and accessible. This clarity fosters a learning environment that supports focus, builds confidence, and promotes success for students who may struggle with more open-ended or abstract teaching approaches.

Explicit Instruction Is a Teaching Approach That IS:

- Structured and systematic.
- Clear and precise through modeling and guided practice.
- Scaffolded and supported by the educators by embedded feedback, checks for understanding, and opportunities for practice after mastery.

Explicit Instruction Is a Teaching Approach That Is NOT:

- Telling students what to do without modeling it.
- Providing directions but skipping guided practice.
- Requiring students to engage in independent work without opportunities to practice.
- Vague or general.

Explicit Instruction Steps and Examples

Review the charts below to see the steps of explicit instruction side by side during an ELA lesson.

Explicit Instruction Step	*Explicit Instruction Examples*
Step 1: Set Clear Learning Objectives Begin with well-defined goals that students can understand and aim to achieve.	**Teacher says:** "Today, we're learning how to find the main idea and supporting details in a paragraph. By the end of the lesson, you'll be able to explain what the paragraph is mostly about and give two details that support it."
Step 2: Activate Prior Knowledge Connect new learning to what students already know to build relevance and readiness.	**Teacher asks:** "Remember when we talked about topic sentences last week? Let's review what a topic sentence does. Who can remind us?"
Step 3: Break Tasks into Manageable Steps Present content in small, sequential chunks to reduce cognitive load and support mastery.	**Teacher outlines:** "We'll follow three steps: First, read the paragraph carefully. Second, ask yourself, 'What is this mostly about?' Third, look for two details that support that idea."
Step 4: Model the Skill or Concept Demonstrate exactly what students are expected to do, using think-alouds, visuals, and strong examples.	**Teacher reads aloud:** "Let's read this paragraph together about sea turtles. I'll show you how I find the main idea by thinking aloud: 'This paragraph talks a lot about how sea turtles migrate long distances. That's the main idea.' Then I'll underline two details that support it."
Step 5: Provide Guided Practice Work through examples with students, offering scaffolds, prompts, and immediate feedback.	**Students work in pairs:** "Now you try with the next paragraph. I'll walk around and help you underline the main idea and details. Let's do the first one together.
Step 6: Check for Understanding Frequently Use questioning, student responses, and formative assessments to monitor comprehension, adjust instruction, and prevent misconceptions.	**Teacher circulates and asks:** "What did you choose as the main idea? Why? Can you point to a detail that supports it?" *Uses thumbs-up/thumbs-sideways to gauge confidence.*
Step 7: Offer Corrective Feedback Address errors immediately with constructive guidance to reinforce learning.	**Teacher notices a misconception:** "You chose 'sea turtles swim fast' as the main idea, but that's just one detail. Let's reread and ask: What is the whole paragraph mostly about?"
Step 8: Provide Opportunities for Independent Practice Allow students to apply skills with decreasing support to build fluency and confidence.	**Students complete a short passage independently:** "Now try this one on your own. Use the three steps we practiced. I'll check your work and give feedback."
Step 9: Gradually Release Responsibility Transition from teacher-led instruction to student independence, using the "I do, we do, you do" framework.	**Teacher says:** "You've practiced with me and with a partner, now it's your turn to show what you know. I'll be here if you need help."
Step 10: Review and Reinforce Revisit key concepts over time to strengthen retention and support long-term mastery.	**Teacher says:** "Let's review: What are the three steps to find the main idea? Tomorrow, we'll use this skill to write our own summaries."

Example #1: 3rd Grade Math: Understanding Place Value *(Hundreds, Tens, Ones)*

Lesson Objective: Students will identify the value of each digit in a three-digit number.

Step 1: Set Clear Objective

"Today we'll learn how to find the value of each digit in a number like 472. By the end, you'll be able to say what the 4, 7, and 2 each mean."

Step 2: Activate Prior Knowledge

"Remember when we talked about tens and ones? Now we're adding hundreds!"

Step 3: Break into Steps

"We'll look at each digit, say its place, then multiply it by its value."

Step 4: Model

Teacher writes 472 and says: "The 4 is in the hundreds place, so it means 4 hundreds, or 400."

Step 5: Guided Practice

Students work with the teacher to decompose 385 together.

Step 6: Check for Understanding

"What does the 8 mean in 385? Turn and tell your partner."

Step 7: Corrective Feedback

"If you said 8, remember to check the place, it's in the tens, so it means 80."

Step 8: Independent Practice

Students complete a worksheet identifying place value in several numbers.

Step 9: Reinforce Success

"You're using place value like math detectives, great job explaining your thinking!"

Example #2: Grade 7 ELA

Lesson Objective: Students will identify and analyze the tone of a poem using textual evidence.

Step 1: Set Clear Objective

"Today we'll learn how to figure out the tone of a poem, or how the speaker feels, and support it with evidence."

Step 2: Activate Prior Knowledge

"What's the difference between tone and mood? Let's review with a quick example."

Step 3: Break into Steps

"Step 1: Read the poem. Step 2: Look for words that convey emotion, or imagery. Step 3: Ask, 'How does the speaker feel?"

Step 4: Model

Teacher reads a stanza aloud and thinks aloud: "The words 'empty street' and 'cold wind' make the tone feel lonely."

Step 5: Guided Practice

Students annotate a second stanza with the teacher, identifying tone words.

Step 6: Check for Understanding

"What tone do you see in this stanza? What words helped you decide?"

Step 7: Corrective Feedback

"If you said 'happy,' let's look again, do the words suggest joy or something else?"

Step 8: Independent Practice

Students analyze a new poem and write a short paragraph explaining the tone.

Step 9: Reinforce Success

"You used strong evidence to support your tone analysis, just like literary critics!"

Example #3: Grade 10 Social Studies

Lesson Objective: Students will identify and explain the four main causes of World War I using the acronym M.A.I.N..

Step 1: Set Clear Objective

"Today we'll learn the four major causes of World War I, using the acronym MAIN: Militarism, Alliances, Imperialism, and Nationalism."

Step 2: Activate Prior Knowledge

"What do you already know about why wars start? Let's brainstorm."

Step 3: Break into Steps

"We'll look at each cause one at a time, define it, and give an example."

Step 4: Model

Teacher explains Militarism: "Countries were expanding their armies. For example, Germany expanded its navy to compete with Britain."

Step 5: Guided Practice

Students work with the teacher to analyze a political cartoon showing alliances.

Step 6: Check for Understanding

"Which cause does this cartoon represent? Why?"

Step 7: Corrective Feedback

"If you said Imperialism, let's revisit the image, does it show land control or military partnerships?"

Step 8: Independent Practice

Students complete a graphic organizer with definitions and examples of each M.A.I.N. cause.

Step 9: Reinforce Success

"You're connecting historical events to big ideas, this is how historians think!"

Direct Instruction vs. Explicit Instruction: What's the Difference?

While the terms are often used interchangeably, they refer to different instructional approaches:

- **Direct Instruction** (DI) is a specific, scripted teaching model developed by Engelmann and colleagues (Englemann et.al, 1988) follows a tightly structured format with pre-written lessons, fast-paced delivery, and frequent student responses. It's often used in programs like Reading Mastery or Corrective Math.
- **Explicit Instruction**, on the other hand, is a broader teaching practice that emphasizes:
  - Clear learning goals
  - Step-by-step modeling
  - Guided practice with feedback
  - Gradual release to independent work

Explicit instruction is one of the **High-Leverage Practices** in special education and can be adapted to fit any content area or classroom setting (Council for Exceptional Children, 2021).

Resources

- **The IRIS Center** – Offers free modules and case studies on evidence-based instructional practices, including explicit instruction. Available at *iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/resources/high-leverage-practices/*.
- **The CEEDAR Center Course Enhancement Modules** - Free video resources for educators specific to implementation of explicit instruction. Available at *ceedar.education.ufl.edu/cems/high-leverage-practices/domain-3-instruction-in-behavior-and-academics/#tab-id-3*.
- **The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)** - High Leverage Practice 16 Administrators Guide that describes how to implement explicit instruction. Available at *exceptionalchildren.org/*.

References

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