In the quest to maximize students’ academic growth, one of the best tools available to educators is explicit instruction, a structured, systematic, and effective methodology for teaching academic skills. It is called explicit because it is an unambiguous and direct approach to teaching that includes both instructional design and delivery procedures. Explicit instruction is characterized by a series of supports or scaffolds, whereby students are guided through the learning process with clear statements about the purpose and rationale for learning the new skill, clear explanations and demonstrations of the instructional target, and supported practice with feedback until independent mastery has been achieved. Rosenshine (1987) described this form of instruction as “a systematic method of teaching with emphasis on proceeding in small steps, checking for student understanding, and achieving active and successful participation by all students” (p. 34).

In this chapter, we establish the foundation for the remaining chapters by exploring the following topics: (1) elements of explicit instruction, (2) the underlying principles of effective instruction, and (3) the research evidence supporting explicit instruction. We also respond to possible concerns about an explicit approach to teaching.

**ELEMENTS OF EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION**

Educational researchers (e.g., Brophy & Good, 1986; Christenson, Ysseldyke, & Thurlow, 1989; Gersten, Schiller, & Vaughn, 2000; Hughes, 1998; Marchand-
Martella, Slocum, & Martella, 2004; Rosenshine, 1997; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986; Simmons, Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Hodge, 1995; Swanson, 2001) have identified a range of instructional behaviors and elements characteristic of an explicit approach to teaching. These 16 instructional elements are listed and briefly described in Figure 1.1. They are illustrated in more detail in subsequent chapters of this book.

### FIGURE 1.1. Sixteen elements of explicit instruction.

1. **Focus instruction on critical content.** Teach skills, strategies, vocabulary terms, concepts, and rules that will empower students in the future and match the students’ instructional needs.

2. **Sequence skills logically.** Consider several curricular variables, such as teaching easier skills before harder skills, teaching high-frequency skills before skills that are less frequent in usage, ensuring mastery of prerequisites to a skill before teaching the skill itself, and separating skills and strategies that are similar and thus may be confusing to students.

3. **Break down complex skills and strategies into smaller instructional units.** Teach in small steps. Segmenting complex skills into smaller instructional units of new material addresses concerns about cognitive overloading, processing demands, and the capacity of students’ working memory. Once mastered, units are **synthesized** (i.e., practiced as a whole).

4. **Design organized and focused lessons.** Make sure lessons are organized and focused, in order to make optimal use of instructional time. Organized lessons are on topic, well sequenced, and contain no irrelevant digressions.

5. **Begin lessons with a clear statement of the lesson’s goals and your expectations.** Tell learners clearly what is to be learned and why it is important. Students achieve better if they understand the instructional goals and outcomes expected, as well as how the information or skills presented will help them.

6. **Review prior skills and knowledge before beginning instruction.** Provide a review of relevant information. Verify that students have the prerequisite skills and knowledge to learn the skill being taught in the lesson. This element also provides an opportunity to link the new skill with other related skills.

7. **Provide step-by-step demonstrations.** Model the skill and clarify the decision-making processes needed to complete a task or procedure by thinking aloud as you perform the skill. Clearly demonstrate the target skill or strategy, in order to show the students a model of proficient performance.

8. **Use clear and concise language.** Use consistent, unambiguous wording and terminology. The complexity of your speech (e.g., vocabulary, sentence structure) should depend on students’ receptive vocabulary, to reduce possible confusion.

9. **Provide an adequate range of examples and non-examples.** In order to establish the boundaries of when and when not to apply a skill, strategy, concept, or rule, provide a wide range of examples and non-examples. A wide range of examples illustrating situations when the skill will be used or applied is necessary so that students do not underuse it. Conversely, presenting a wide range of non-examples reduces the possibility that students will use the skill inappropriately.

10. **Provide guided and supported practice.** In order to promote initial success and build confidence, regulate the difficulty of practice opportunities during the lesson, and provide students with guidance in skill performance. When students demonstrate success, you can gradually increase task difficulty as you decrease the level of guidance.
11. **Require frequent responses.** Plan for a high level of student–teacher interaction via the use of questioning. Having the students respond frequently (i.e., oral responses, written responses, or action responses) helps them focus on the lesson content, provides opportunities for student elaboration, assists you in checking understanding, and keeps students active and attentive.

12. **Monitor student performance closely.** Carefully watch and listen to students’ responses, so that you can verify student mastery as well as make timely adjustments in instruction if students are making errors. Close monitoring also allows you to provide feedback to students about how well they are doing.

13. **Provide immediate affirmative and corrective feedback.** Follow up on students’ responses as quickly as you can. Immediate feedback to students about the accuracy of their responses helps ensure high rates of success and reduces the likelihood of practicing errors.

14. **Deliver the lesson at a brisk pace.** Deliver instruction at an appropriate pace to optimize instructional time, the amount of content that can be presented, and on-task behavior. Use a rate of presentation that is brisk but includes a reasonable amount of time for students’ thinking/processing, especially when they are learning new material. The desired pace is neither so slow that students get bored nor so quick that they can’t keep up.

15. **Help students organize knowledge.** Because many students have difficulty seeing how some skills and concepts fit together, it is important to use teaching techniques that make these connections more apparent or explicit. Well-organized and connected information makes it easier for students to retrieve information and facilitate its integration with new material.

16. **Provide distributed and cumulative practice.** Distributed (vs. massed) practice refers to multiple opportunities to practice a skill over time. Cumulative practice is a method for providing distributed practice by including practice opportunities that address both previously and newly acquired skills. Provide students with multiple practice attempts, in order to address issues of retention as well as automaticity.

As noted earlier, effective and explicit instruction can be viewed as providing a series of instructional supports or scaffolds—first through the logical selection and sequencing of content, and then by breaking down that content into manageable instructional units based on students’ cognitive capabilities (e.g., working memory capacity, attention, and prior knowledge). Instructional delivery is characterized by clear descriptions and demonstrations of a skill, followed by supported practice and timely feedback. Initial practice is carried out with high levels of teacher involvement; however, once student success is evident, the teacher’s support is systematically withdrawn, and the students move toward independent performance. The 16 elements of explicit instruction can also be combined into a smaller number. Rosenshine and Stevens (1986) and Rosenshine (1997) have grouped these teaching elements into the six teaching functions outlined in Figure 1.2.
**FIGURE 1.2.** Six teaching functions.

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<td>b. Review prerequisite skills and knowledge.</td>
<td>b. Present new material in small steps.</td>
<td>b. Ensure high rates of success.</td>
<td>b. Have students continue practice until skills are automatic.</td>
<td>b. Have students continue practice until they are fluent.</td>
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**UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION**

In addition to the explicit instructional elements outlined in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, several underlying principles of effective instruction have emerged from educational research conducted over the past 30+ years. These **principles** of instruction can be viewed as the underpinnings of effective, explicit instruction, while the **elements** of explicit instruction can be seen as methods to ensure that these principles are addressed in designing and delivering instruction.

In their review of teacher effectiveness research, Ellis and Worthington (1994) have identified and described these principles, and their delineation serves as the basis for this section of the chapter. The principles are briefly listed in Figure 1.3, followed by a detailed explanation of each principle. Ways in which the 6 principles and the 16 elements described earlier in the chapter interact during instruction are elaborated in subsequent chapters concerning lesson structures for teaching basic skills and strategies, concepts and vocabulary, and academic rules, as well as in the chapters describing effective delivery of instruction.
FIGURE 1.3. Principles of effective instruction.

1. **Optimize engaged time/time on task.** The more time students are actively participating in instructional activities, the more they learn.

2. **Promote high levels of success.** The more successful (i.e., correct/accurate) students are when they engage in an academic task, the more they achieve.

3. **Increase content coverage.** The more academic content covered effectively and efficiently, the greater potential for student learning.

4. **Have students spend more time in instructional groups.** The more time students participate in teacher-led, skill-level groups versus one-to-one teaching or seatwork activities, the more instruction they receive, and the more they learn.

5. **Scaffold instruction.** Providing support, structure, and guidance during instruction promotes academic success, and systematic fading of this support encourages students to become more independent learners.

6. **Address different forms of knowledge.** The ability to strategically use academic skills and knowledge often requires students to know different sorts of information at differing levels: the declarative level (*what* something is, factual information), the procedural level (*how* something is done or performed), and the conditional level (*when and where* to use the skill).

**Engaged Time/Time on Task**

The instructional variable of time has two interrelated aspects: how much time is spent teaching and how much time is spent learning. Although these two aspects interact, it is important to note that increasing instructional time alone does not always lead to an increase in time that students spend learning or in the total amount learned. Thus the *quantity* of instruction can be seen as a necessary but not sufficient component of learning; the combination of *quantity* and *quality* of instruction is the key to student success.

Several terms used in the teacher effectiveness literature are related to instructional and learning time. Understanding these terms is a prerequisite to understanding the research findings in this area.

**Available Time**

*Available time* is the amount of time available for all activities during the school day/year. For example, if school hours run from 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. there are approximately 6 hours of available time per school day. Of course, other activities (lunch, taking attendance, etc.) automatically reduce the amount of time available for academic instruction/activities.

**Allocated Time**

*Allocated time* is the amount of time dedicated for instruction in academic content (i.e., how much time a teacher allots or schedules for instruction in content...
areas, such as language arts, math, etc.). Some research in this area indicates that allocated time makes up about 70% or approximately 4 hours of the school day, with the remainder used for noninstructional activities. Increasing allocated time appears to have a slight positive impact on student achievement (Anderson, 1976; Walberg, 1986).

**Engaged Time/Time On Task**

Engaged time/time on task is the amount of time students are actively engaged in a learning task (e.g., listening to the teacher, solving a problem, listening to other students respond, taking notes, reading). Some research indicates that students are engaged during less than half of the time allocated for instruction, or approximately 2 hours per day (e.g., Anderson & Walberg, 1994; Haynes & Jenkins, 1986). The positive correlation between engaged time and achievement, while stronger than for allocated time, is still relatively modest.

**Academic Learning Time**

Academic learning time (ALT) is the amount of time students are successfully engaged in academic tasks at the appropriate level of difficulty (i.e., not too hard or not too easy). There is some indication that ALT occurs, on average, for only a small percentage of the day (i.e., about 20% of allocated time or 50 minutes per day) in many classrooms (Fisher et al., 1978). Such a small percentage is unfortunate, given the strong link between ALT and achievement. It is worth noting that many elements of explicit instruction and many teaching techniques that we describe in the remaining chapters of this book focus on increasing ALT. That is, they are designed to promote teaching appropriate tasks and increasing the amount of time students are engaged in these tasks at a high level of success. In addition to methods discussed later in the book, some relatively simple and straightforward ways of increasing both quantity and quality of instructional time are presented in Figure 1.4. In Figure 1.5, you will see how one teacher uses these guidelines to increase the amount of ALT in her classroom.

**High Levels of Success**

As noted above, increasing engaged time has a positive impact on student learning. However, it is when students are both engaged and successful that they learn the most. Merely engaging in a task or performing a skill is not useful if the percentage of errors is too high; in essence, students are spending their time practicing errors. Although student errors or incorrect responses are most likely to occur during initial instruction, you can make learning more efficient for students by minimizing and correcting these errors as soon as they occur. High success rates are positively correlated with increased learning outcomes; conversely, low rates of suc-
FIGURE 1.4. Ways of optimizing instructional time.

1. **Increase allocated time and time spent teaching in critical content areas.**
2. **Ensure an appropriate match between what is being taught and the instructional needs of students.** Consider the importance of the skill and the level of difficulty. Verify that students have the prerequisite knowledge to learn the skill.
3. **Start lessons on time and stick to the schedule.**
4. **Teach in groups as much as possible.** Teaching students in large and small groups increases both ALT and the amount of instruction for each student, as compared to other instructional arrangements such as one-to-one instruction or seatwork. Seatwork is useful for practicing newly acquired skills to build retention and fluency, but it is not a substitute for well-designed group instruction.
5. **Be prepared.** Often instructional time is lost because teachers don’t have their teaching materials organized and ready for instruction. Thus they must spend time gathering their thoughts and materials that they could be using for teaching.
6. **Avoid digressions.** When teaching, stay on topic and avoid spending time on unrelated content. This is not to say that using appropriate humor or providing anecdotes or analogies to illustrate and illuminate content should be avoided, but rather that doing so should serve an instructional purpose.
7. **Decrease transition time.** Transition time refers to moving from one instructional activity to another. Often instructional time is lost through inefficient and disorganized transitions.
8. **Use routines.** Routines refer to the usual or unvarying way activities are carried out in the classroom. Routines save time because both students and teachers know how and what they are supposed to do without having to think or ask about it. In relation to instructional activities (e.g., group instruction, seatwork, cooperative groups), students know how and when they can get needed materials, ask for help, and so on. These routines are typically taught at the beginning of the year and reinforced as the year progresses. (Routines are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.)

In order for high rates of success to occur during instruction, several design and delivery factors must be considered. Briefly, some of the factors that increase level of success include teaching material that is not too difficult (although scaffolding procedures allow teachers to teach skills that otherwise might be too advanced or difficult for students to learn through more minimally guided teaching approaches), clear presentations, dynamic modeling of skills and strategies, supported practice, active participation, careful monitoring of student responses, and immediate corrective feedback.