

Comprehension Strategies Instruction

(Provided by Michael Pressley, Michigan State University)

The instruction summarized here is consistent with the true experiments that have been published validating teaching of a small repertoire of comprehension strategies to students, with large effects on comprehension reported in those studies (e.g., Anderson, 1992, *Teaching & Teacher Ed*; Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, & Schuder, 1996, *J Ed Psych*; Collins, 1991, *Reading Teacher*). It is decidedly evidence based!

The goal of comprehension strategies instruction is to increase comprehension by encouraging readers to be active in the ways good comprehenders are active.

Good comprehenders do the following:

- They size up a text in advance and make predictions about what will be in the text based on this sizing up. (Looking at titles, sections, pictures, captions.)
- As they read, they confirm or change predictions, based on what is in the text.
- If they are reading a story, they come to the reading expecting early information about setting and characters, making certain they note the setting and characters. Then, they expect problems to develop, and for there to be solution attempts. They watch for these. Eventually, there is a resolution, which is also something the good reader watches for.
- If it is an informational text, they watch for the types of information that can be in an informational text and make note of the most important points and details.
- They connect to the ideas in text based on their very personal prior knowledge, knowledge of other texts, and general world knowledge. These connections are quick and do not divert attention from the actual text, but rather help the reader understand the text better.
- They construct images representing the ideas expressed in the text.
- They ask questions (i.e., wonder) and notice or generate answers as they read.
- They go back and re-read for clarification if they are confused.
- They summarize the text, and, if they can't, take that as a signal to re-read.
- They generate interpretations that make sense based on the story.
- Good readers continue to reflect on text after reading it, perhaps trying to decide what to do with the information

Students are not actively comprehending until they consistently use these processes, with the evidence of this being that they report to you the strategies they are executing as they read aloud. (“I have a great image of the witch! And, she is really tall but very pretty like it says in the story.” “I predict that she is going to use her magic to try to harm the kids, but I also think it won’t work.”)

A short-hand for all this:

COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES (WAYS TO BE ACTIVE WHILE READING)

PREDICTING AND UPDATING

NOTING MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION (If story, characters, settings, problems, solution attempts, eventual resolution; if informational text, information author most wanted to convey or reader most wants to obtain)

IMAGINING

QUESTIONING

CONNECTING

CLARIFYING

SUMMARIZING MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION (If story, make sure it includes story grammar elements.)

I would put a poster in the reading corner---and elsewhere, listing the comprehension strategies students know at this point. When they are not obviously using the strategies, remind them to make the choice to be strategic, to use the strategies on the chart.

How do you teach students the strategies?

1. Start with one. (Usually prediction or imagery)
2. Explain it to the students.
3. Model using it during read alouds.
4. Encourage students to use the strategy as they read.
5. Practice the strategy in small reading groups.
6. Students will not use it on their own at first. Cue them, but let them know you want them to use the strategies on their own and report when they are using them when they read aloud. It might take awhile for students consistently to use a strategy on their own. After awhile, they will. Then, it is time to...
7. Introduce another strategy (explain it.)
8. Model its use while you read, but continue to model use of the first strategy, letting students know that good readers articulate a variety of strategies as they read.
9. Begin to expect students to use it as they read aloud, cuing them at first. How you cue is important, with the clear message being that they must choose when to use each strategy. (Is there a strategy you might choose to use here? Are you actively thinking as you read. If you are, be sure to let me know what strategy you are using.

Encourage students to use the actual strategies terms to reflect what they are doing, but also require that they tell you more than the label---They should tell you what they are predicting and why; they should tell you what their images are like; you want to hear their questions and

connections; they should let you know what is confusing that they are trying to clarify; they should summarize rather than just say they are summarizing.

FIRST GRADE: If, over the course of a school year, you can get children to learn three or four of these strategies and be using them, a great year. I would start with prediction, then imagery, then connections, and finally, summarizing. Something the teacher should do with every read-aloud---and there should be lots of read-alouds in grade 1---is to model use of the strategies for the students. Think-aloud as you read a story, making predictions, talking about images that come to mind, formulating questions (and noting when the questions are answered in the text), seeking clarification if something is confusing, making connections, and summarizing.

IF YOU WANT TO READ A BOOK ABOUT STRATEGIES...

One book that is helpful in explaining each of the strategies is the following:

Zimmermann, S., & Hutchins, C. (2003). *7 keys to comprehension: How to help your kids read it and get it!* New York: Three Rivers Press.

The following chapters contain information that may be helpful in getting you to understand each strategy and teaching each strategy to students:

PREDICTING AND UPDATING (None of the chapters in the book are particularly pertinent to this, with the key being to scan the title, headers, and pictures and make predictions by relating this information to prior knowledge. Then, as reading continues, note whether the predictions were correct.)

NOTING MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION (If story, characters, settings, problems, solution attempts, eventual resolution; if informational text, information author most wanted to convey or reader most wants to obtain) (Z & H's Chapter 6, Key 5---Determining importance could be helpful here.)

IMAGINING (Z & H's Chapter 2, Key 1---Sensory images---is helpful here...The making a movie in your mind metaphor.)

QUESTIONING (Z & H's Chapter 4, Key 3---Questioning---is helpful here...The W Questions, How questions, Questions for the author about why things are the way they are in the story/information---and then noting answers when encountered in text later.)

CONNECTING (Z & H's Chapter 3---Connecting, which is Key 2, using background knowledge---and Chapter 5---Weaving sense into Words, which is Key 4, drawing inferences---Connecting is relating to prior knowledge, which often involves making inferences)

CLARIFYING (Z & H's Chapter 7 on cultivating awareness, which is Key 7, using fix-up strategies).

SUMMARIZING MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION (If story, make sure it includes story grammar elements.) (Z & H's Chapter 7, Key 6---synthesizing---could be helpful here)

ONE WAY TO BE READING DISABLED THAT YOU HAVE TO DISCOURAGE

One way to be reading disabled is to make images, connections, and so on that are tangential.... So, a student reading Little Red Riding Hood who makes the connection that red is his favorite color and then starts talking about fire trucks... Well, that is an example. At the first sign of this, point out to the student that images and connections have to help the reader to understand the text better... That others have to see how the connections or images or questions are connected to text. In small group discussions, spend time commenting on how images reported, connections made, summaries suggested show the reader understood the text.... Nudge the readers to react to the central ideas in the text very, very hard, for there definitely are readers who take themselves out of the meaning making game by making tangential associations.

ALSO DISCUSSION STRATEGIES

One way to think about these strategies is that they are the stuff of intelligent small group discussions about text: When smart people discuss text in small groups, they PREDICT (and later UPDATE PREDICTIONS, commenting on whether they were right or not), report IMAGES that come to mind, ask QUESTIONS, CONNECT (to prior, world knowledge; to information encountered in other reading); they note when confused and CLARIFY (often by re-reading); and they SUMMARIZE (with a summary always an interpretation---including only the parts they feel are important, but other interpretive comments also included sometimes).

A great power of this framework is that it connects comprehension and discussion. Skilled, small group discussion is at the heart of language arts achievement at the middle school and beyond (Applebee et al., 2003, Am Ed Res Journal). These skills can go far in encouraging better dialogue, and, as students dialogue with them, this further encourages internalization of the powerful text/discourse comprehension skills.

INFORMATION TEXTS

Shouldn't the strategies for informational texts be different? Well, some texts are laid out in a clear cause-and-effect fashion, or a clear sequential fashion, or a clear text specifying the attributes of a concept...but most are not!! Undoubtedly you have been teaching students the classic information text structures, and when they apply them to texts with exactly that structure, they, in fact, zero in on that information more certainly, seem to comprehend and remember it better. The problem is that most information texts are not constructed consistent with the classic informational text structures!!

PREDICTIONS can be made to all informational texts. Often, IMAGES can be generated of the cause and effect, sequence, or whatever. QUESTIONS can always be asked. Often, CONNECTIONS can be made. When there is confusion, students should CLARIFY. And, definitely, we want students to be able to SUMMARIZE...and, as always, if they cannot do so, or cannot recall what they are supposed to have gotten out of the text. Then, re-reading is in order.

A note about questioning with respect to informational texts---A very powerful strategy is for students to ask themselves (and answer) WHY-questions as they read informational text, basically boiling down to the question, "Why does this new fact make sense (based on my prior knowledge, what I have read in the text already)?" For example, Why is the author talking about Huck Finn in this chapter on the reconstruction period? WHY-questioning and answering produces huge positive effects on learning from text. Although it can also be used with narratives, especially appropriate with informational texts. By the way, even if the student's explanation of

WHY is not quite right, memory for the information and understanding of it will be more complete, because the student has more completely filtered the ideas in the text through prior knowledge and made more meaningful connections.

DECODING STRATEGIES

When students encounter a word they do not recognize (i.e., cannot read automatically), urge them first, to **ATTEMPT TO SOUND THE WORD OUT**. Once they have done that, ask them to **CHECK WHETHER THE WORD MAKES SENSE** in the context---based on the text already read and the pictures. Good readers coordinate sound-letter-word level cues and contextual cues, temporally prioritizing letter-sound-word level cues, however, as they tackle challenging words.

NOTETAKING

Often, it makes sense to take notes, especially if the information is going to be used later. Encourage students to take notes on those occasions.

If you want to use a text mapping approach to note taking while reading informational texts---try semantic mapping, with the main idea as the central node on the map and all other information related to that node. Virtually all informational texts can be semantically mapped in this way.

DEALING WITH THE MOST COMMON STUDENT OBJECTION

A common objection by students is that they would rather read it straight through. It should be emphasized to the student that is passive reading...the way weak readers read. Good readers respond to ideas in text and reflect on them, Predicting (and associated previewing) before reading, doing all the strategies as reading proceeds, and especially thinking about the summary (even going back to see what else should be added) after completing reading.

WHAT COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES INSTRUCTION IS NOT!

It is not comprehension strategies instruction to have students fill out worksheets after reading a text reporting, for example, the predictions they made, images that occurred to them, questions that occurred to them, and/or a summary. Strategies are used as the reader reads, and the best evidence of their use is their responses **AS** they read, not in response to questions (or worksheets) afterwards. There is no evidence that a steady diet of completing such post-reading sheets, in fact, leads to active reading---the use of comprehension strategies as the child reads.

Yes, such work sheets and answering post-reading comprehension questions may prepare students for standardized test demands, but it is not comprehension processing per se, the habit of mind we want students to internalize and use forever.

FINAL NOTE

The key to internalization---owning active comprehension---is several years of practicing these strategies every day. Strong teacher lead during first year, with students encouraged more and more to use overtly and actively in partner reads and as they read in small groups on their own. A student group is not strategic until it is evidencing active reading on its own; an individual child is not strategically reading until their think alouds as they read evidence these processes.

Processes Involved in Comprehension

Reading the Words

Fluently

Orienting to the Meanings of the Words

Reading the Sentences/Paragraphs

Does it make sense?

Can I recall what I just read?

Understanding well...

Can I see the characters...setting....
actions? (IMAGERY)

Can I summarize? (SUMMARIZATION)
(Re-reading for clarification!)
(Are there still questions...that
probably were answered in the text?)

Shaping the knowledge base?

How is my knowledge different now?

Do I need to be acquiring more knowledge
in this arena?Coming up with a
plan...CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE
MATTERS IN COMPREHENSION!



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