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EFFECTIVE APPROACHES FOR IMPROVING THE READING COMPREHENSION OF PROBLEM READERS

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When children have trouble comprehending what they read, teachers are faced with an especially difficult responsibility. It is not always easy to improve the comprehension of problem readers. There is no magic method that will work for all teachers and for all children. The teacher's responsibility is made even more difficult by some of the suggested methods of teaching reading comprehension, which often are vague or else limited to simple questioning of children after reading. The comprehension ability of problem readers will not be helped a great deal by relying entirely on questioning.

The teacher's specific task is to help problem readers translate the thinking they do in speaking and listening situations to the written language before them. Techniques teachers use must tap the thinking of the problem reader, and help to organize it in such a way as to result in understanding. This goal cannot be accomplished without continuous guidance. Teachers must be keenly aware of this so that they do not leave the understanding side of reading to chance. What can teachers do to improve comprehension ability? What are some specific procedures, techniques, and strategies that will help problem readers develop a systematic approach for getting meaning from what they read?

Here are ten suggested approaches for increasing the reading comprehension of problem readers.

1. Develop Listening Comprehension

The most logical step in helping students to understand what they read begins with oral language experiences. Helping pupils to think about what they have heard will help prepare them to comprehend what they read. Listening is closely related to reading, for both are receptive communication processes. In listening activities, children should focus on the spoken message so that they can understand more mature

and interesting material than if they were silently reading the text. Listening comprehension activities can develop concentration and thinking, which are prerequisites for comprehending what is read. Tape stories for listening or use the tapes that accompany books. Students need not have the books in front of them to follow as they listen. Another listening comprehension activity is suggested by May and Eliot (1979). One student reads to a group of students who do not have books. Before the reader can pass on the book to the next reader, all of the students in the group have to agree on what the first reader said. This exercise forces students to not only listen for understanding but to read for understanding as well. If the message was not understood by the group, then the pupil reads it again, this time trying to communicate (and therefore read) more clearly.

2. Use Pictures or Photos

Taylor (1978) suggests the use of pictures or photos for improving comprehension ability. Pictures are valuable in developing the reading-related language skills of observing, thinking, listening and speaking. In analyzing pictures, students will be practicing the thinking skills required in reading for understanding. The following activities provide a framework for improving the specific comprehension skills of locating details, identifying main ideas and making inferences. Have students:

- a. Look at a picture and write or tape-record as many details as they can see.
- b. Compare two pictures that are alike in some way. Explain how they are alike and why.
- c. Classify pictures according to topics, characters, themes, moods, and settings.
- d. Suggest titles for pictures. The titles should express the idea the picture communicates.

3. Introduce Unfamiliar Vocabulary

Vocabulary deficiencies are often associated with difficulty in comprehending. Before children can comprehend what they are reading, they must know what the individual words mean, particularly words basic to the meaning of the reading passage. To eliminate vocabulary difficulties, help students understand unfamiliar words before they read them. Teachers should search the reading selection for words likely to give trouble. These words can be written on the chalkboard, pointed out in the reading selection, and then explained. After explaining what the words mean, the teacher can give additional help by reading sentences in which the student will encounter the words. In some cases, it may be necessary to go a step further and have students use the words in other ways, such

as making up sentences using key words, breaking words into meaningful parts, creating new words based on inflectional endings, affixes and roots, or simply keeping a word bank of key vocabulary.

4. Use a Structured Instructional Procedure for Guiding Student Reading

A procedure for directing the problem reader through the comprehension of a story is suggested by Schwartz and Sheff (1975). Children are guided through three specific steps as they read: posing a problem, reasoning while reading, and verifying. The posing of a problem is initiated by the teacher. The title or a representative picture may be the stimulus that encourages the students to think about what they are going to read. After students have speculated about the title or picture, they read a short portion of the passage. The teacher then asks literal questions about the portion read, and the students answer the questions. Following this discussion, another problem is posed which relates to the literal information discussed. The students then read another portion of the passage to identify information that will solve the new problem. This procedure continues throughout the reading of the story, and new problems can focus on higher level comprehension skills. This procedure actively involves students in shifting their attention from one piece of meaningful information to another as they read through the reading selection.

5. Develop Visual Imagery

Improving visual imagery has been shown to improve reading comprehension (Levin 1973, Lesgold, McCormick, and Golenkoff 1975). Begin by having students try to visualize a few specific things--a favorite object, a place they like, or an event. Then, in small groups, have students tell about their visual images and listen to the descriptions of others. After this introduction to visual imagery, stimulate students to form visual images by reading stories to them. For example, before reading a story, ask students to visualize in their minds as they listen to the words. As the reading continues, occasionally stop to pose questions, but not to seek answers. Next, have students describe the visual images they see after they have read the story. Encourage pupils to supply details not mentioned in the story. Help students by asking specific questions about details not contained in the selection. Another exercise is to have students draw or sketch the visual images formed during reading.

Students should be encouraged to form visual images based on their specific comprehension strengths and weaknesses. For example, students who have problems representing character traits should be encouraged

to form visual images of what a story character might look like. Students having problems with inferring cause-effect relationships would be urged to visualize such information. Through incorporation of each piece of story information into a summary picture, students should begin to understand how to visualize relationships between ideas within a story.

6. Use the Retelling Technique

Asking pupils to elaborate on what they read by retelling story content aids comprehension. This technique is based on the assumption that students will develop the mental set to read for more meaning if they see reading lessons as activities in which they will have the opportunity to share and discuss what they have read in a story. Students will, in effect, develop the attitude that they have some valuable ideas to share with the other students and the teacher. In this procedure the teacher simply says to students after they have read a selection, "Tell me everything you can remember about the story." When pupils stop or hesitate, ask for more information. The teacher might say things like "Is there anything else you can remember?", "Go on.", or "What happened next?" After students finish telling all they can remember, follow with more specific questions so they have a chance to expand or clarify what they said. Whenever appropriate, ask students to give reasons for their answers. The retelling technique, or asking students to elaborate on what they read, works best if teachers practice active listening. Teachers must wait patiently and quietly without interjecting a comment or a question.

7. Use Cloze-Type Exercises

The strict cloze procedure involves copying a reading passage and deleting every fifth word for students to fill in after reading the passage in its entirety. Lopardo (1975) suggests that modifications of this technique can be used to improve reading comprehension. The initial step calls for students to dictate a story to the teacher who transcribes it on an experience chart. Before meeting with students again, the teacher rewrites the story on another chart--this time deleting every fifth word. The students then read the new version putting in words that make sense to fill the blank spaces. The students check their work by comparing the two experience charts. This technique forces students to think about what was read rather than just reading word-by-word from memory. Other variations of cloze-type exercises might involve copying a reading passage from a book, using a multiple-choice format and deleting only nouns and verbs. The difficulty of cloze exercises can be gradually increased by furnishing more items to choose

from, eliminating all answers which force the reader to supply words, using higher level reading materials and omitting a larger percentage of words. It is essential in this technique for the teacher to discuss with pupils the answers that are or are not acceptable. The teacher should not require the exact word but should accept all reasonable answers. Selections should also be self-checking for immediate student feedback. This can be accomplished by letting students compare their answers with the original reading passage.

8. Use the ReQuest Procedure

The purpose of a reciprocal questioning procedure (Manzo 1979) is to improve pupil questioning behavior and reading comprehension. The procedure involves four steps. First, the teacher and students read the first sentence of a selection. The pupils then ask the teacher as many questions as they wish, and the teacher answers the questions. The teacher should answer each question as fully and honestly as possible and should not pretend not to know the answers to try to draw out responses from pupils. In the third step, the teacher asks questions of students. The students should not say "I don't know" since they could at least explain why they cannot answer the question. The reciprocal questioning is repeated for successive sentences until pupils can provide a reasonable response to the question "What do you think is going to happen in the rest of the selection? and why?" Finally, pupils read to determine whether their prediction is accurate.

9. Use the Structured Comprehension Procedure

The structured comprehension procedure (Cohn 1969) is useful for students who have difficulty understanding sentences or paragraphs from content area or factual reading materials. Have students read the first sentence and answer the question "Do I know what this sentence means?" This forces the reader to be an active participant rather than a passive reader. If students do not understand part or all of the sentence, they should ask the teacher as many questions as are necessary to fully comprehend the meaning. After all student questions have been answered the teacher asks one or more questions about the sentence. Students are to write the answers to questions asked by the teacher. This again forces students to actively participate. After all answers are written, the questions are then discussed and answers checked. When ten questions have been answered and discussed, the exercise is concluded and scored so pupils can compare their current effort to those done previously. When students can get three consecutive perfect papers, they can recognize their progress and go on to the next step, which is reading two sentences at a time

and answering questions based on them, leading finally to a whole paragraph. After students do two sentences at a time well, the teacher can begin to add higher level comprehension questions.

10. Use Repeated Readings

The method of repeated readings (Samuels 1979) consists of rereading a one hundred word meaningful passage several times. The passage must be at students' reading instructional level. Students are next given the passage and told to read it silently so they can read it orally with few errors and at a comfortable rate. After silent reading, the passage is read to the teacher, who counts oral reading errors per one hundred words. If the passage is too difficult, an easier one should be chosen. If not more than five errors per one hundred words are made, the teacher tells students the time it took, and suggests that they practice the material silently again so they can read it more fluently next time. This process is repeated until students have read the passage three or four times with an increase in rate and fluency each time. The repeated readings method enhances comprehension because with each reading the reader is required to give less attention to decoding and more attention is free to be used for comprehension. An additional technique for improving comprehension is to ask students a different comprehension question after each rereading of the passage.

In summary, teaching reading comprehension is an important part of any classroom reading program. Helping problem readers derive meaning and understanding from what they read is a real concern for teachers. Since they are the key to success in comprehension of reading, teachers must be aware of specific methods and approaches that have proven effective in developing children's comprehension. The ten approaches described in this article can be successfully utilized for improving the comprehension skills of most readers.

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