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TWELVE "MUSTS" FOR IMPROVED READING COMPREHENSION

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Recent years have brought an unprecedented interest in reading comprehension, particularly in the area of research. The Center for the Study of Reading was established in 1976 at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, with its basic goal to conduct research into the underlying processes of reading comprehension. One unusual characteristic of this endeavor was the assembly of a multidisciplinary staff of researchers from the areas of psychology and linguistics, as well as reading. Over the past years, the CSR has been prolific in its research and dissemination with hundreds of pieces of ongoing research and summaries of studies having been published. Much of the data have reiterated what good reading teachers and specialists have known for years, while other studies have indicated some changes that need to be made and some areas that need to be strengthened.

A brief summary of this research effort indicates the following conclusions that are important for teachers:

1. Reading can no longer be viewed as solely a skills acquisition in which readers sequentially progress from letter and word recognition to the comprehension of more difficult ideas. Rather, reading is an interaction between these processes and the background and expectations readers bring to their reading.
2. The importance of the reader's background to his understanding of what he reads cannot be overstated. This problem is often referred to as schema theory. Schemata are the networks of concepts or ideas to which the reader relates newly read material, often by filling in gaps that are present in his background and by formulating hypotheses to be accepted or rejected through reading. Consequently, "...comprehension is as dependent on what is in the reader's head as it is on what is on what is printed" (Durkin, 1981), and readers may make widely varied interpretations of the same text if their backgrounds and experiences are divergent. Indeed, their decoding of the text may be exactly the same,

while their comprehension is quite different. This theory reinforces the idea that teachers must give added time to background development and exploration before reading, rather than skimming over that section of their basal lesson plans. It is also important to encourage youngsters to make their own individual predictions before reading and share them with the group, so that the various possibilities of meaning are all explored. Group interaction becomes extremely important when we want students to learn different interpretations of the same materials as is especially common in today's multi-cultural, mobile student bodies. It is equally important that teachers know the possibilities of understanding that exist among their students and give them some strategies for learning to comprehend efficiently by specific methods.

3. Schema theory is also relevant to the areas of standardized and informal testing. If reader's interpretations are so dependent on their individual backgrounds, can there be one best answer to standardized test comprehension questions, particularly at the interpretative level? Can one form of an informal reading inventory be appropriate to all children in the school district? These questions must be answered by individual teachers and districts.
4. Research in the area of story grammar is also relevant, particularly to narrative prose. Story grammar refers to the way stories are put together. Story grammars identify the major components of stories. There are several story grammars in the literature, but the one proposed by Stein and Glenn (1979) is a good example. Stein and Glenn outline these components as the setting; the episode which includes the initiating event, internal response, attempt to reach the goal, consequence and reaction. Current theorists believe that many youngsters read prose successfully because they realize that stories have a schema for the components of stories and read to find them. If the story does not fit this pattern, they often realize that something is missing and has limited their comprehension. In this instance, poor comprehension may be more a result of the author's poor writing than any flaw in the reader's comprehension.
5. Research has also focused on why spoken discourse is often easier to comprehend than written discourse. Apparently, speakers use pauses, intonation, stress, facial expressions, gestures, and eye movements to describe

more familiar materials to the listener (Durkin, 1981). This listener, then, usually has a better idea of what the subject is and there's less likelihood of ambiguity becoming confusing, whereas the writer must use punctuation marks alone to convey many of these same things to the reader.

6. Readability formulas have also been questioned by new research. Generally based on the premise that short words in short sentences make materials easier to read, the formulas ignore the reader's background. In addition, when materials are rewritten, quality is often sacrificed while the author's original message may be altered and many gaps may be left in sentences that have been reduced in length. This reduction may, in fact, make it necessary for the reader to infer more than a longer sentence would. For example, "After I boiled my eggs, I enjoyed eating them for breakfast." is actually clearer than the following two short sentences: "I boiled eggs. I ate breakfast."
7. Anaphoric devices have been recognized as a source of difficulty in comprehension. Anaphora are means of avoiding repetitions by reducing what is said. If the reader recognizes that something has been left out, there's no problem, but if he or she does not recognize the deletion and/or has no instructions in learning to make these recognitions, comprehension may suffer. For example:

"My house was spotless. The baseboards had even been scrubbed."

Comprehension of the above necessitates recognizing that it is the baseboards of the house that have been scrubbed. Children need more and better instruction in recognizing this characteristic of text.

8. Finally, today's research is reaffirming that readers comprehend better when they have specific purposes that are set before reading. The critical point now is to remember that the questions must be good ones that force children to comprehend beyond the literal level. In fact, even primary teachers need to start children on the path of becoming critical readers and thinkers by posing questions that involve critical reading skills. Such instruction might balance the recent basic skills movements that have produced youngsters who can give short, quick answers but are unable to explain and defend the judgments they make and lack the ability for reasoned, disciplined thought.

If the research has yielded all this information, what else does it mean about the daily teaching of reading? We have indicated already the absolute necessities of the following:

1. Consider each child's background before reading selections. Perhaps it will be better to skip some stories in the basals particularly. The option is to spend much longer times on building background.
2. Build background through techniques such as the structured overview. Here the teacher and/or students select important concepts and vocabulary and arrange them in a graphic design for introduction and discussion before reading. This technique can be especially helpful in content areas.
3. In testing, have several forms of IRI's available and try to get item analysis done of standardized tests, so that you will be able to spot possible problems related to background that influence scores. Read through the content of standardized tests to check their match to your students' backgrounds.
4. Remember that skills are not reading; they are only a means to the end of reading. The emphasis should be on reading and learning any skills needed to improve reading, not doing worksheets and taking tests to the point of never allowing time for practice reading.
5. Having children make predictions before they read and/or setting purposes for them to read and confirm or reject is crucial. It makes reading an active process in which each child must talk - or write - and read. Be absolutely positive that students are shown how to comprehend for different purposes through teacher demonstration. Simply telling them to comprehend does not teach.
6. Asking children to retell stories in their own words can be very informative. It eliminates the necessity for questions and can be very enlightening as to the child's interpretation, often revealing varied interpretations that relate to the youngster's different background that may not come out as clearly through questioning. To do this, we simply ask them to tell us, in their own words, what the passage said.
7. In assessing the readability of materials, we need to remember that the formulas provide very rough and limited estimates of readability. Short length sen-

tences and one syllable words do not always equal reading ease, particularly when anaphoric devices and students' schemata are considered. We have nothing as yet as efficient as the formulas, but we will have problems if we rely on them alone.

8. Since students seem to understand spoken language much easier than written, unfamiliar discourse, a good case can be made for the use of the language experience approach, especially in the early stages of teaching students the comprehension process. Language experience stories are generally composed of high interest content and familiar language, and are therefore excellent vehicles for developing comprehension. Students can easily predict, hypothesize and read for verification in the materials.
9. High interest materials, even of the nonlanguage experience type, are always easier for students to comprehend. They generally have the schemata or background for them; therefore, when youngsters have difficulty, these types of materials should be used for lots of easy practice.
10. It is absolutely imperative that children have the opportunity to read, read, read. Doing skill sheets, taking tests, or filling in workbooks is not reading. Children must have the time to practice reading real materials that have some meaning for them--directions for games they want to play, recipes for food they want to eat, manuals that will allow them to get drivers' permits, books they like, materials they have written. Tradebooks and real-life materials should be as important in the classroom as basal readers. Given these opportunities to read and discuss what they have read, particularly early in reading instruction, children will see that getting meaning is essential to successful reading and they will have a more successful foundation on which to base their reading careers.
11. Since knowing the students' backgrounds is necessary for teaching them to comprehend successfully, using interest inventories can be important, especially at the beginning of the year or when a student arrives during the year.
12. Finally, our jobs as teachers will be significantly easier if we can convince parents to read to their children from birth. With this background, youngsters

learn that reading is supposed to make sense. They learn that the squiggles on paper convey meaning. They enjoy reading and they also learn the structure of stories--the story grammars discussed earlier--that make comprehension much easier. This constant reading also greatly expands their background and vocabularies and gives them far greater schemata to be met in print when they read themselves. Learning to read after being read to for several years is sometimes self-taught and almost natural. As reading professionals, we have a real responsibility to get to parents of infants, perhaps through prenatal classes, pediatricians, maternity clinics, obstetricians, the media and any other possible route to convince them of the importance, even necessity, of reading to their young children.

Training our students to comprehend is certainly important in our present society. The unprecedented interest in recent reading comprehension research has verified some old ideas and introduced some new ones. Similarly, some routine practices, such as setting purposes for reading and varying types of questions have been confirmed, while others, like over-reliance on readability formulas and one-shot testing, have been questioned. Though there are still many questions to be answered, we certainly know much that we can do in our classes everyday to enhance comprehension. Faithfully following these research-based practices will make our students more successful in the most important product of reading--comprehension.

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