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# REFERENTIAL QUESTIONING: A STRATEGY FOR ENHANCING THE READER-TEXT INTERACTION

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Current theories portray reading comprehension as a dynamic process which involves an interaction between the reader and the text (Anderson, Spiro, & Montague, 1977). Comprehension, then, can only take place when readers actively contribute their own knowledge and background of experience to the printed page. Yet, many readers do not make maximal use of this interactive process while reading. Instead, they tend to respond to textual material by compartmentalizing it, treating it as something entirely new, and separating it from their prior knowledge as much as possible (Spiro, 1977; 1980).

Since readers may not autonomously make these connections, it becomes the responsibility of teachers to promote the reader-text interaction through direct instruction. However, the issue of direct teacher instruction in reading comprehension remains unsettled. Although there may be no definitive answer, some teacher behaviors appear to improve understanding more than others. For example, studies show that teachers who attempt to improve readers' comprehension by asking questions after reading actually assess rather than instruct (Santa & Hayes, 1981). With some current practices, teachers seemingly spend an inordinately small percentage of time in direct comprehension instruction, believing themselves to be instructing, when in reality, they are evaluating (Durkin, 1979). It would appear that teacher questioning alone is one of the least effective methods for enhancing the reader-text interaction and, subsequently, increasing comprehension.

Strategies are needed which enable teachers to promote this reader-text interaction by establishing a connection between the concepts to be taught, the vocabulary necessary to teach them, and the experiences of the readers who are to learn them (Tierney & Spiro, 1979).

One such instructional strategy which helps to make this connection is called Referential Questioning, which requires that the teachers ask readers several questions about the concept to be learned that relate directly to their own prior experiences. This is done while continually explaining the connections between student responses and the target concept or main referent—thus the name, Referential Questioning.

The Referential Questioning strategy for concept development employs a combination of metaphor, analogy, and the Socratic method. Its major advantage is its reliance on metaphor, a powerful instructional tool eliciting the vivid imagery which encourages memorability (Ortony, 1975) and on analogy, an effective advanced strategy for producing transfer (Royer & Cable, 1975; 1976). Additionally, associations developed by means of this strategy serve as mnemonic devices for long-term retention. For instance, readers may have difficulty remembering what longitude is, but familiar student-generated associations such as "It is like a telephone pole" or "It's an upright pencil" may serve to facilitate recall.

As an approach to teaching concepts, Referential Questioning assumes that the questions a teacher asks can help readers activate their existing knowledge about a text to be read and facilitate, by means of association, the learning of new concepts and terms. What follows, then, is a rationale for the use of the Referential Questioning strategy. Question types are described and examples provided. Finally, an example of how the Referential Questioning strategy can be used within the context of a lesson is described.

### The Strategy

#### Morphemic/Semantic Question

First, teachers ask a referential question requiring readers to see likenesses and differences in the morphemic or semantic elements of words. Readers must then engage in a recombining process, comparing the unknown to the known by relating the new word to some other words that they already know and understand. For example, if teachers want to pre-teach the concept of "subterranean" as it relates to subterranean cultures existing in the insect world, they would display the term and ask, "What are some familiar word parts you notice?" Readers might respond with a word part such as "sub, which is found in submarine, suburban, or subheading." Such responses would allow teachers to generate other questions, e.g., "What differentiates submarines from other ships?" "Where are the suburbs in relation to the city?" and "Where do insects make their homes?" By asking questions, teachers help readers draw appropriate conclusions which expand their general and technical vocabulary, both spoken and printed. By writing responses on the chalkboard, teachers help readers to note the morphemic and semantic similarities among the words named and to associate the meanings of the parts of words which are similar. In basic form, then, this referential question asks something similar to the following: "Do you notice anything familiar about that word?" or "What are some other words you know with similar parts?"

#### Metaphor/Analogy Questions

Two other types of referential questions are now posed, one requiring a direct analogy followed by one requiring a personal analogy. Teachers next formulate a referential question requiring a direct analogy. For example, a question concerning subterranean cultures might be, "What are some familiar occurrences which can be compared to this concept?" The students may suggest any number of likenesses, such as: "It's like being a cave dweller in pre-

historic times"; "It's like finding your way around when the lights go out"; or "It's like a subway in New York City." Teachers write the more salient responses on the chalkboard. Here again, the initial stimulus question provides a starting point for teachers to generate additional questions from the readers' responses and to further draw parallels to the concept being learned. Thus, teachers serve as mediators by helping readers "make the strange familiar" (Gordon, 1973). The basic form this referential question of direct analogy takes, then, is similar to: "What familiar object (person, event, feeling) is this like?"

Next, a third referential question is asked to elicit a personal analogy or a metaphor, a description concerning the actual feeling and identification with a thing, a person, an event, a concept, a plant or an animal. Gordon (1973) referred to this analogic form as the "be the thing" strategy since it requires an empathic response on the part of the reader. A typical question of this type on the topic, subterranean culture, might be, "How do you think this sensation might feel? Describe your feelings. Be the thing." Students' responses might include, "I feel damp and cold"; "I hear footsteps overhead"; or "We're groundhogs in winter." Teachers continue to elicit personal involvement from the class while directing the responses back to the main referent, subterranean cultures. Thus, this final referential question takes a form similar to: "Imagine that you could be described in these terms." "How would you feel?" "Be the thing."

### Referential Questioning in an Instructional Lesson

#### Pre-Reading Stage

Step one: Define term. Teachers focus on one concept, usually textually explicit in nature. An example on the topic of rock layers will be used.

aquifers: rocks which store water in connected pores and through which water can pass freely.

It should be noted that supplying a definition to a new concept is often where pre-teaching instruction ends.

Step two: Morphemic/Semantic Question. Next, teachers ask a series of referential questions concerning the concept and write all the relevant responses on the board. The first type of question is asked: Do you notice anything familiar about aquifer? What are some other words you know with similar parts? Readers might respond with the following words from their experiential background:

aquanaut	aquaplane	aquamarine
aquarium	aquatic	

Here, teachers will want to add any additional information thought to be unknown to readers. In this instance, they may not know that "fer" derived from the Latin ferrum, is also a portion of the word ferrous, meaning "containing iron." A discussion ensues with readers examining their responses in relation to the key concept, "aquifer."

Step Three: Direct Metaphor/Analogy Question. Next, teachers ask readers an analogic type of referential question: To what familiar object, person, event, feeling can "aquifer" be compared or contrasted? Responses might include:

"It's like a paper towel because water can pass through it."

"It's not like iron because water cannot pass through it."

"It's like a sponge since it has pores and holds water."

"It's not like a baseball because a baseball is hard and nonporous."

Step four: Personal Metaphor/Analogy Question. Finally, teachers ask readers to relate personally to the concept. For example teachers might ask: "Imagine that you could be described in these terms. How would you feel? Be the thing." Readers may answer in the following manner:

"I feel transparent."

"I'm a piece of Swiss cheese."

"I don't feel opaque."

"I'm an oil filter."

"I feel loose and free."

"I don't feel tense and restrained."

After the referential questioning stage is completed, the board now displays several associations developed by the class about the concept. These associations contain all the relevant and meaningful responses the teacher feels will assist in clarifying the concept. Discussion, if necessary, can clear up any confusion on the part of readers. This information is recorded by the readers in their notebooks before proceeding to the next concept.

### Reading

Step Five: Recording and Reading. The class begins reading the textbook selection. While they are reading, they derive from their text any new information not previously mentioned and add it to the existing associations recorded in their notebooks. For instance, readers may add the following information from the textbook:

"The porous openings must be connected in order to flow. Most aquifers are made of sandstone, limestone, or sand."

### Post-reading

Step Six: Final Synthesis. At the conclusion of the reading, teachers return to each concept and discuss the textbook additions. For reinforcement, the class is asked to create analogies based on the information (text or personal) they have acquired. For example, some representative analogies might be:

aquanaut is to aquifer as submarine is to subterranean

aquifer is to impermeable as transparent is to opaque  
 sponge is to aquifer as baseball is to nonporous rock  
 free is to aquifer as restrained is to impermeable rock

In summary, it can be seen that Referential Questioning as an instructional strategy requires three events: (1) the use of a combination of morphemic/semantic and metaphor/analogy questions in the pre-reading stage; (2) the recording of new, explicit textual information in the reading stage; and, (3) the synthesis of both textual information and student-supplied information in the post-reading stage. The steps are sufficiently simple for anyone to use, yet the questions and the resulting discussions can be as complex as necessary to achieve understanding and retention of information. Further, a strategy like Referential Questioning would be appropriate for many concepts in any subject-matter area.

Referential Questioning is an attempt to explain new textual information to be encountered in terms which come from the students' own experiential background and, thus, enhance the reader-text interaction. Simply explaining a word in textbook or dictionary terms, or asking questions which assess rather than instruct are inadequate to insure comprehension. Teachers should use the prior experiences of readers as a foundation for learning new information. By doing so, learning becomes more relevant, more pleasurable, and more certain.

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