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# HELPING CHILDREN CONSTRUCT MEANING: COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES THAT WORK!

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There has been widespread concern that students in today's educational system are not comprehending what they read. Reading comprehension can be taught (Durkin, 1978-79; Pearson & Johnson, 1978); however, Durkin reports that almost no comprehension instruction was found in grades three through six. Less than 1% of classroom time was spent on direct instruction in reading comprehension. Durkin further reports that an adequate definition of reading comprehension instruction could not be found in research reports or other educational publications. Lack of comprehension instruction may be due to the fact that teachers have not acquired an adequate understanding of reading comprehension; consequently, do not have a knowledge of the appropriate instructional strategies that develop children's comprehension of text. What can be done to improve classroom instruction in reading comprehension? First, teachers need to acquire some basic concepts about the comprehension process. Second, teachers need to learn instructional strategies that develop children's comprehension. Third, teachers need to implement these strategies so that children's comprehension can be improved. The purpose of this article is to provide the classroom teacher with a good grasp of comprehension as well as suggest specific instructional strategies that enable children to comprehend text.

## Concepts about the Comprehension Process

Seven basic concepts are posited regarding teachers' understanding of the comprehension process.

1. Comprehension is an active process which requires the reader to think about the author's message; deciding whether to accept, reject, or modify the author's ideas.
2. Comprehension is tying the "old" with the "new" (Pearson & Johnson 1978). To comprehend the text, the reader relates the knowledge (old information) s/he presently possesses to the author's ideas (new information).
3. Comprehension is a conversation between the reader and the author (Pearson & Johnson, 1978). Through a formal medium of communication, the author discusses his/her thoughts and ideas about a subject. The written word tends to be more precise than the spoken word, but it is simply another way to communicate ideas.
4. Comprehension involves making inferences (Pearson & Johnson, 1978) or what Gray (1960) identified as reading between the lines.

Much of the author's message is not explicitly stated in text, but rather it is implicitly stated.

5. Comprehension is a constructive process which requires the reader to integrate information both within and across sentences to reconstruct a model of text (Goodman, 1976). The reader is required to sequence ideas, thoughts or events as well as to identify specific relationships in the text.

6. Comprehension is directly related to the reader's prior knowledge of the information presented in text. The more the reader knows about the topic to read, the greater is the reader's chances to better comprehend the text. Comprehension achievement is enhanced by the reader's prior knowledge (Pearson, Hansen & Gordon, 1979).

7. Comprehension is directly affected by the reader's interest and motivation. Children have been able to comprehend materials at their frustration levels due to their interest, enjoyment, and prior knowledge about the author's message.

The following strategies are based on the seven concepts listed. Each of the suggested strategies actively involves children in the reading task, integrates the children's knowledge with that of the author's, develops the concept of communication (reader and author), initiates children in thinking while reading, and motivates children to develop an interest in reading.

#### Directed Reading - Thinking Activity (DR-TA)

The DR-TA (Stauffer, 1970) capitalizes on the interests and the motivation of the reader by initially involving the reader with print. In this activity, the children are given a text and are asked to read the title and make predictions about what may happen in the story. To help children develop hypotheses, the teacher asks such questions as "From reading the title, what do you think will happen in the story?" or "Without reading the story, what do you think the story will be about?" Children should be given an adequate amount of time to develop their hypotheses as well as to justify them. Group interaction should be encouraged while the children are developing their hypotheses. Interaction will allow children to rethink and if necessary, revise their hypotheses.

The second step requires the children to read silently a portion of the story for the purpose of checking the accuracy or inaccuracy of their hypotheses. At this point, the children are told to read to check if their ideas were correct and note those places in the text that support their hypotheses.

The third step allows the children to "prove" their hypotheses through discussion and oral reading of the text. The teacher can ask the following questions to initiate interaction:

- (1) "Was your prediction correct?" and
  - (2) "What part of the story supports your prediction?"
- Read the sentences that prove your prediction."

At this point, the teacher asks the students to make further hypotheses about the story plot. The following questions may stimulate the children's thinking:

- (1) "What in the story makes you think...?"
- (2) "Why do you think these events will occur?"
- (3) "What are some possible outcomes to the story?"

The children are being asked to reason about what they know about the world and what they have just acquired from text to develop further insights into the story plot. Hypotheses are again made by each child. The children can read to the conclusion of the story or to another predetermined point in the text. While reading, the children are to keep their hypotheses in mind. Discussion about the children's hypotheses and the story's outcome occurs after the silent reading.

To develop a DR-TA the teacher divides the story into two or more segments. Dividing the story into segments should be logical, where the story action may rise or fall or where alternative events could occur. However, if there are too many divisions made in the text, the predicting, reading, and proving procedure may become monotonous and lose its effectiveness in engaging children to think while reading.

The DR-TA requires the child to think before and during the reading of text. A child makes inferences by developing hypotheses and proving or disproving them. The prediction process provides for the child's involvement and captures the child's interest by bringing about a continual check of predictions. The child is guided in constructing the author's message at each segment of the story through discussion of the accuracy of earlier predictions and through developing predictions according to new information given by the author.

#### Cloze Procedure

The cloze procedure is a strategy that enables the student to reconstruct a model of text. While reading the passage, the pupil is reconstructing meaning by predicting the words that have been deleted from the passage. A specific example will better illustrate the students' task during the cloze procedure.

The computer put Ollie exactly where he was - behind home plate. Barney was best suited to first 1, Mike to second. Herbie 2 shortstop, and Billy to 3 base —the same positions 4 were already playing. There 5 a change in the 6.

(Philbrook, 1978, page 414)

The author's exact words for the preceding passage are listed here in the order they appear in the passage: (1)base, (2)to, (3)third, (4)they, (5)was, and (6)outfield.

To construct a cloze passage for comprehension instruction, the teacher deletes those words that may be detected by means of context clues. Used for instructional purposes, the teacher does not have to adhere to the rigid guidelines established for purposes of readability; i.e., the teacher deletes those words which fulfill the instructional goals. Too many deletions within a passage may hinder the child's ability to predict from context. If the passage is 250 words in length, no more than 50 deletions should occur.

It is further recommended that the entire first and last sentence remain intact to facilitate comprehension.

Direct teacher instruction is vital for this procedure to be effective in developing comprehension, regardless of grade level (Bortnick & Lopardo, 1975; Rankin, 1977). A teacher needs to guide the child through the thinking, reasoning process when making responses to the deletions that appear within the passage. Help the student to use the context when making responses. For example, have the child read to the end of the sentence before s/he predicts a response.

If students have not been exposed to the cloze procedure, the following instructional sequence is suggested. The teacher should work with the group of students who will be completing the cloze exercise. The teacher reads the entire passage aloud while the students have the exact passage in front of them. The entire passage is read to serve the function of previewing, enabling the reader to construct an overall understanding or "gestalt" of the passage. Through group discussion, the students predict appropriate responses for each deletion in the passage. Typically, the student will predict more than one logical response per deletion. At this point, the teacher and the group of students should discuss each of the given responses. Questions that may enhance learning are:

- (1) "Which of the responses seem to be closest to the author's implied meaning of the passage?"
- (2) "Which responses are very close in meaning?"
- (3) "Which responses are quite different in meaning?"

The purpose of the discussion is to illustrate to the students that many responses are logical and may provide similar meaning of the passage. When the cloze passage is completed, the teacher should provide feedback; i.e., provide the exact responses the author used in the passage. Comparison of the author's and students' choices of responses should be discussed. The discussion should center around this question, "Where in the passage are the author's responses more appropriate than the students' responses?"

When students understand the cloze procedure, then the teacher can provide cloze passages for an individual or group of students to do without direct teacher instruction. Even when an individual or group of students complete this exercise on their own, feedback must be provided. The student or students must be able to compare their responses to the author's exact words used.

The cloze procedure requires the child to construct the author's message by predicting appropriate responses for deletions within the passage. The child develops an understanding of reading as communication by comparing his/her responses to the author's words.

### Analogy

Analogy is a comparison between two ideas, events, or concepts. The purpose of an analogy is to provide clarity about a new idea so a better understanding can develop within the reader. How can an analogy be effectively used so comprehension is facilitated?

In a basal reader published by Houghton-Mifflin, a story about Harriet Tubman appears. The focus of the story is Harriet Tubman's involvement with the underground railroad. The concept of underground railroad may not be clearly understood by children, since most children have not experienced captivity and immobility which was an integral part of black slavery. The teacher's implementation of analogy may serve as a vehicle for a better understanding of the underground railroad which may facilitate children's comprehension of the basal story. The following analogy about the underground railroad may provide children with a bridge to understanding.

The underground railroad could be compared to a modern day situation—the smuggling of Mexicans across the American border. Presently there is a large group of people who are actively engaged in providing Mexicans with access to the U.S. This large group of people provide the Mexicans with specific routes to travel, places to stay while enroute, and illegal papers to remain in the U.S. The same basic idea happened many years ago during slavery where the underground railroad was made up of many people who helped the slaves escape to the northern part of the U.S. The people of the underground railroad would provide the slaves with the necessary knowledge of routes to travel and places to stay while the slaves journeyed for freedom in the North.

The events (Mexican smuggling and underground railroad) have similarities as well as differences. The Mexicans can not legally obtain the means to enter the U.S. and use an underground network to obtain entry. The slaves could not leave their masters for fear of brutal punishment and had to obtain the assistance of the underground to enter the North. In both events, Mexicans as well as slaves risk their lives. The Mexicans may be shot by border police or may die from the strenuous journey. The slaves also had a strenuous journey and could be shot by slave owners for escaping. Differences also exist between the two events. The Mexicans are not slaves but wish to come to the U.S. for a better economic way of life. The slaves were captives who escaped for freedom from a terrible system. The analogy presented is a way of building background knowledge and developing conceptual understanding about the story's main thrust—the underground railroad.

An analogy is a starting point for providing comprehension of text. Caution is important when one uses analogies to reach better comprehension of ideas, events, or concepts in text. Even though they may share similarities, they will have many dissimilarities, as illustrated in the analogy described. But, the great value of analogies is the clarity it can provide to ideas expressed in the text (Warriner, 1957).

Analogy provides children with the means to integrate their "old" information with "new" information that will be presented in text. The integration of children's understanding of concepts with that of the author's will facilitate comprehension.

#### Schemata

A key to guiding children's comprehension of text is to relate the children's direct and indirect experiences or schemata (Anderson, Spiro & Anderson, 1977) to the author's message. Schemata refers

to the knowledge the reader has in his head about an idea, event, or concept prior to reading the text. The schemata that a reader has acquired interacts with the meaning from text; consequently, textual meaning is positively or negatively affected. The teacher, who initiates pre-reading discussion about children's experiences that are related to the major points of the text, can assess the correctness or incorrectness of the children's schemata. After an assessment has been made, the teacher can begin or continue to develop accurate concepts or schemata about the ideas, events, or concepts in text. Strange (1980) suggests that building on children's prior knowledge may guide children to make predictions from their schemata about the content of the text to be read. He further suggests that pre-reading instruction will help the teacher recognize whether the children's schemata are sufficiently developed so the children can better comprehend the text.

The following example may provide teachers with a strategy for relating children's schemata about an idea, even, or concept to print. If children recently went on a nature hike through prairie lands, and they are to read Laura Ingalls Wilder's book, Little House on the Prairie; prior to reading, the teacher can have the children discuss the things they saw, heard, and touched while walking through a prairie. The teacher can have children make comparisons as follows:

- (1) Compare and contrast the things found in a prairie with those things found in a forest, and those things found in a city.
- (2) Compare and contrast a woods to a prairie — land form, vegetation, etc.

Discussion of the children's direct experiences with a prairie may provide insight into comprehending Wilder's book, Little House on the Prairie. Focus on the function of prairies may provide the children with an understanding of the reasons the Ingalls family moved from the woods of Wisconsin to the prairie lands of the West.

Direct or indirect experience, i.e., schemata for the ideas, events, or concepts of the story can create bridges from the known to the unknown, if the teacher guides children to make relationships between their knowledge to the information in print. Pre-reading discussion provides the reader with a focus that may lead the reader to develop a purpose for reading the text.

After the children read the text, discussion commences in which the children compare and contrast their concepts of prairies before and after reading Little House on the Prairie. Discussion after reading the text provides the final link in the chain where the "old" information is linked to the "new" information.

Teachers who develop children's knowledge of a concept prior to reading are encouraging them to be actively involved while reading the text. Relevant experience prior to reading enables children to integrate their knowledge with that of the author's, a process which in turn helps them whether to accept, reject, or modify the ideas. Such thinking while reading may enable children to better

comprehend the text.

#### A Final Word

The suggested strategies are only a few examples of engaging the reader to be actively involved in the comprehension process. The four strategies provide the teacher with an opportunity to develop children's thinking beyond the literal level, to develop and integrate children's schemata of ideas, events, or concepts found in the text, and to initiate the children's interest and motivation for reading the text. Teachers who understand what reading comprehension encompasses can identify additional instructional strategies within their repertoire that may enable children to better comprehend text. For children to benefit from the teacher's knowledge of the process, teachers should implement the four suggested strategies and other appropriate comprehension strategies. The results should be an increase in children's comprehension of text.

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