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PSYCHOLINGUISTICS: TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR COMPREHENSION

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Children typically come to the reading task with a foundation for learning to read. They have attained a substantial amount of oral language and they have accumulated a storehouse of personal background experience. As with oral language, the child needs to understand that what he reads must make sense. Goodman (1973) reminded us, "A reader, then, is a user of language who constantly seeks sense from what he reads."

However, recent research suggested that poor readers do not apply what they know about oral language to the act of reading. They do not strive to make sense of what they read. Au's (1977) study of the types of oral reading errors which distinguished good from poor readers indicated that poor readers 1) make a significantly higher percentage of non-meaningful substitutions, 2) often showed lack of any effective strategy, 3) do not self-correct their own errors and 4) seldom used the context (Au, 1977). Au suggested that poor readers would benefit if given training in self-correction and use of context.

In an attempt to find solutions to this problem, the authors developed the following techniques while working with remedial readers at the Child Study Clinic, University of Missouri-Columbia. Readers are encouraged to use their knowledge of language and their experience to make sense of material they are reading. Use of the techniques provides training in self-correction and training in the use of context to aid comprehension. In this way, the child is taught strategies for building meaning or seeking sense from written language.

Strategies for Building Comprehension

In a directed reading lesson the teacher can follow these steps to help children develop effective strategies for comprehension:

1. When readers meet an unfamiliar word they should skip it and read on to the end of the sentence, paragraph or passage. This helps readers use the context and their skill with language to determine the unknown word.
2. If the child is reading orally, and the miscue does not change the meaning, do not stop the reading. Example: (Text) "The neighbors painted their *house* white." Child reads, "The neighbors painted their *home* white."

3. If the miscue *does* change the meaning, stop the child at the end of the paragraph. Example: (Text) "They descended the stairs." (Child) "They decided the stairs." Allow time for the child to realize the word or phrase doesn't fit the context and self-correct the miscue. If the reader doesn't self-correct, ask the student to reread the sentence, say the sentence the way it was read, and add, "Does that make sense?" or "Does that fit?"
4. Tell the child to think of a word that would "fit" in the sentence or to think of a word that would make sense in the sentence.
5. If necessary, help the reader note additional cues such as the initial or the final letter of the word.
6. If the child still does not know the word, consider whether or not it would be best to tell the reader what it is. Each situation should be considered individually and no hard and fast rule should be applied. Do not put the child on the spot, but give the reader individual help at a later time.

Teaching Techniques

1. Teach with a tablet and felt marker readily accessible. Call attention to miscues which changed the meaning by jotting them on paper. Example: (Text) "So he shouted again." (Child) "So he shut again." Call attention to the differences and to the place where the reader needs to look to find the differences.
2. If children habitually associate words such as "saw" and "was," supply text with blanks for the child to insert the appropriate word. The omitted words ("saw" and "was") should not be used interchangeably in the sentence; that is, the words must not be in the same semantic (meaning) or syntactic (grammatical) slots. Example: Susie _____ the man. The truck _____ red.
3. If children confuse words which appear similar such as "for" and "from," use sentences in which clues are given for the meaning and leave blanks as above. Use enough context so that the word can be called correctly. Example: Helen was coming _____ the store.
4. It is important that the teacher help children relate these strategies to all their reading. Be careful not to confine these techniques to the reading group only, but integrate and reinforce the ideas throughout the day. Provide the child with many and varied opportunities for reading.
5. Capitalize on the reader's interests and find books which are appealing. Children are motivated to read material which is stimulating and of personal interest.
6. Research shows that readers can read silently much more efficiently than they can read orally (Smith, 1971). Encourage readers to read silently, just the way their parents and teachers read, while emphasizing reading for the meaning of the passage.

The teacher must help the child acquire strategies for developing better

comprehension. The use of strategies such as those described can aid in developing confident, independent readers who apply their knowledge of language and their background of experience to seek meaning when reading.

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