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Matters

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Teaching Reading Comprehension Skills

Comprehension is enhanced when trained teachers use a combination of strategies to help readers relate and connect what they are reading to their own experiences and knowledge.

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Children who have been provoked to reach beyond themselves, to wonder, to imagine, to pose their own questions are the ones most likely to learn to learn.

Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom*
(1988)

Making meaning from text is no small feat for students. Comprehension is a complex process that demands much from the reader. The National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) defined comprehension as the intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed between the reader and text. This implies that the reader interacts with the text content, using his or her vocabulary, background knowledge, skills, motivation to read that text, knowledge of text structure, and strategies to construct meaning.

Many students come to our schools with underdeveloped reading, vocabulary, and comprehension skills, and a low motivation to read. Research (e.g., RAND Reading Study Group, 2002) has improved our knowledge about how readers can develop meaning from text and the type of instruction that is necessary for them to become successful in reading. Comprehension is enhanced when readers relate and connect what they are reading to their own experiences and knowledge, and when trained teachers use a combination of the following effective strategies:

Activating prior knowledge. Teachers need to first find out what students know and balance out their background knowledge before presenting a new topic. When students are provided opportunities to link their own experiences and knowledge to new information, they are better able to comprehend text. However, they need direct instruction about how to make connections between the text and themselves, the world, and

other texts. This will help them to make the connections and sustain their motivation to continue to read.

Cooperative learning. Students can benefit from reading and discussing what they read with peers. Cooperative learning strategies can help create a positive classroom environment, build student-to-student interactions, allow them to share strategies and ideas, and facilitate discussions that can support comprehension.

Using graphic organizers. Comprehension is an abstract process. It has to become visible in order for students to learn how to construct meaning from text. Graphic organizers can help students organize information and identify how ideas are related to each other. These organizers can take the form of charts, graphs, pictures, or other graphics that help students organize information. Explicit instruction is very important for students to understand not only how to use graphic organizers, but also why and when to use them to construct meaning.

Visualizing. This involves students making mental images of the text they read (e.g., processes, events). Creating images that relate to the setting, characters, or plot of a narrative text, or a concept or process in expository text, can help students better recall what they have read.

Asking and generating questions. Questioning is effective for improving comprehension because it gives students a purpose for reading, motivates them to continue to read, focuses attention on what must be learned, helps to develop active thinking while reading, and monitors comprehension. Generating questions promotes student interaction with the text. It can help students to review content, make inferences, and relate what they are learning to known information. Teaching students to

ask their own questions improves their processing of text and their comprehension.

Recognizing text structure. Students who can recognize text structure (narrative and expository) will have a greater understanding of text. Students often are not familiar with the types of structures that are found in their textbooks, which communicate factual information and involve a variety of patterns such as description, sequence, comparison-contrast, cause-effect, and problem-solution. Teaching students how to use textual clues, such as headers, subtitles, bold letters, and charts and graphs, helps them to construct meaning from text. Helping them identify transitional words also can provide them with valuable clues to comprehension.

Summarizing. Students often have difficulty deciding what is important in the text and putting it in their own words. Summarizing can be highly effective in helping students identify main ideas, generalize, remove redundancy, integrate ideas, and improve their memory of what they have read. Modeling summarization in class and providing students with opportunities to summarize are important teaching strategies.

Monitoring comprehension. Good readers are aware of what they read and of what they do and do not understand. They use “fix-up” strategies (Tovani, 2000) to resolve problems with comprehension. Effective monitoring strategies include reading for a purpose, asking questions, rereading, looking back at a chart or other information in the text, predicting, solving word problems, or synthesizing known information with the text to check for understanding.

Reading is essential to every aspect of learning, and the purpose of reading is to construct meaning from text (comprehension). Without comprehension, reading can be frustrating and at times even painful. A major goal of reading comprehension instruction is to help students develop the knowledge, skills, and experiences they need to become independent readers and lifelong learners. Effective teachers are able to identify the strategies that will most benefit their students in achieving those goals.

References

Greene, M. (1988). *The dialectic of freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press.

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH Pub. No. 00-4754.

RAND Reading Study Group. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Towards an R&D program in reading comprehension*. Retrieved February 12, 2009, from <http://www.rand.org/multi/achievementforall/reading/readreport.html>.

Tovani, C. (2000). *I read it, but I don't get it: Comprehension strategies for adolescent readers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Online Resources

Walkthroughs for Elementary and Secondary School Administrators www.justreadflorida.com/readingwalkthrough

Free Online Reading Strategy of the Month
<http://forpd.ucf.edu/strategies/archive.html>

Pacific Resources for Education and Literacy: Focus on Comprehension
www.prel.org/products.aspx

Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices [4-12] http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides/#adlit_pg

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