TEACHING OF COMPREHENSION SKILLS

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Abstract: *Traditionally, there has been a tendency among teachers to view the primary grades as the time to hone word-recognition skills, with comprehension developed in the later grades. Increasingly, this view is rejected, with many demonstrations that interventions aimed at improving comprehension -- that is, interventions beyond word-recognition instruction - do, in fact, make an impact during the primary years. The starting point for the development of many comprehension skills is teacher modeling of those skills. Hence, there is much commentary in the article about modeling, monitoring, and so on. There is definitely interest in expanding comprehension instruction in the early elementary grades, with the expectation that such instruction will affect 5- to 8-year-olds dramatically in the short term and perhaps lead to development of better comprehension skills over the long term.*

Keywords: *word-recognition, elementary grades, strategies, teacher support.*

There are a variety of well-validated ways to increase comprehension skills in students through instruction. More, new hypotheses about effective comprehension instruction are emerging, and these are also summarized. Although too little comprehension instruction is now occurring in schools, much is known that would enable such teaching to be done with confidence.

Reading is often thought of as a hierarchy of skills, from processing of individual letters and their associated sounds to word recognition to text-processing competencies. Skilled comprehension requires fluid articulation of all these processes, beginning with the sounding out and recognition of individual words to the understanding of sentences in paragraphs as part of much longer texts. There is instruction at all of these levels that can be carried out so as to increase student understanding of what is read.

Students cannot understand texts if they cannot read the words. Before they can read the words, they have to be aware of the letters and the sounds represented by letters so that sounding out and blending of sounds can occur to pronounce words. Once pronounced, the good reader notices whether the word as recognized makes sense in the sentence and the text context being read and, if it does not, takes another look at the word to check if it might have been misread. Of course, teachers have paid enormous attention to the development of children's word-recognition skills.

So, being able to sound out a word does not guarantee that the word will be understood as the child reads. When children are first learning to sound out words, it requires real mental effort. The more effort required, the less consciousness left over for other cognitive operations, including comprehension of the words being sounded out. Thus, it was critical for children to develop fluency in word recognition. Fluent word recognition consumes little cognitive capacity, freeing up the child's cognitive capacity for understanding what is read. Anyone who has ever taught elementary children can recall students who could sound out a story with great effort but at the end had no idea of what had been read.

Thus, a first recommendation to teachers who want to improve students' comprehension skills is to teach them to decode well. Explicit instruction in sounding

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out words, which has been so well validated as helping many children to recognize words more certainly, is a start in developing good comprehension.

When teachers conducted experiments in which vocabulary was either taught to students or not, comprehension improved as a function of vocabulary instruction. One counterargument to this advice to teach vocabulary is that children learn vocabulary incidentally, without explicit instruction.

Reading comprehension can be affected by world knowledge, with many demonstrations that readers who possess rich prior knowledge about the topic of a reading often understand the reading better than classmates with low prior knowledge. That said, readers do not always relate their world knowledge to the content of a text, even when they possess knowledge relevant to the information it presents.

Good readers are extremely active as they read, as is apparent whenever excellent adult readers are asked to think aloud as they go through text. Good readers are aware of why they are reading a text, gain an overview of the text before reading, make predictions about the upcoming text, read selectively based on their overview, associate ideas in text to what they already know, note whether their predictions and expectations about text content are being met, revise their prior knowledge when compelling new ideas conflicting with prior knowledge are encountered, figure out the meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary based on context clues, underline and reread and make notes and paraphrase to remember important points, interpret the text, evaluate its quality, review important points as they conclude reading, and think about how ideas encountered in the text might be used in the future. Young and less skilled readers, in contrast, exhibit a lack of such activity.

Reading researchers have developed approaches to stimulating active reading by teaching readers to use comprehension strategies. Of the many possible strategies, the following often produce improved memory and comprehension of text in children: generating questions about ideas in text while reading; constructing mental images representing ideas in text; summarizing; and analyzing stories read into story grammar components of setting, characters, problems encountered by characters, attempts at solution, successful solution, and ending.

Of course, excellent readers do not use such strategies one at a time, nor do they use them simply when under strong instructional control -- which was the situation in virtually all investigations of individual strategies. Hence, researchers moved on to teaching students to use the individual strategies together, articulating them in a self-regulated fashion (i.e., using them on their own, rather than only on cue from the teacher). In general, such packages proved teachable, beginning with reciprocal teaching, the first such intervention, and continuing through more flexible approaches that began with extensive teacher explanation and modeling of strategies, followed by teacher- use of the strategies, and culminating in student self-regulated use of the strategies during regular reading.

The case is very strong that teaching elementary, middle school, and high school students to use a repertoire of comprehension strategies increases their comprehension of text. Teachers should model and explain comprehension strategies, have their students practice using such strategies with teacher support, and let students know they are expected to continue using the strategies when reading on their own. Such teaching should occur across every school day, for as long as required to get all

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readers using the strategies independently -- which means including it in reading instruction for years.

Good readers know when they need to exert more effort to make sense of a text. For example, they know when to expend more decoding effort - they are aware when they have sounded out a word but that word does not really make sense in the context. When good readers have that feeling, they try rereading the word in question. It makes sense to teach young readers to monitor their reading of words in this way. Contemporary approaches to word-recognition instruction also include a monitoring approach, with readers taught to pay attention to whether the decoding makes sense and to try decoding again when the word as decoded is not in synchrony with other ideas in the text and pictures.

Good readers are also aware of the occasions when they are confused, when text does not make sense. A key component in transactional strategies instruction is monitoring. Even the first such package, reciprocal teaching, included the clarification strategy: When readers did not understand a text, they were taught to seek clarification, often through rereading. To improve children's reading and comprehension, it makes very good sense to teach them to monitor as they read, to ask themselves consistently, "Is what I am reading making sense?" Children also need to be taught that they can do something about it when text seems not to make sense: At a minimum, they can try sounding out a puzzling word again or rereading the part of a text that seems confusing.

Based on research, a strong case can be made for doing the following in order to improve reading comprehension in students: teach decoding skills.

teach vocabulary.

Encourage students to build world knowledge through reading and to relate what they know to what they read (e.g., by asking why questions about factual knowledge in text).

Teach students to use a repertoire of active comprehension strategies, including prediction, analyzing stories with respect to story grammar elements, question asking, image construction, and summarizing.

Encourage students to monitor their comprehension, noting explicitly whether decoded words make sense and whether the text itself makes sense. When problems are detected, students should know that they need to reprocess (e.g., by attempting to sound out problematic words again or rereading).

Such instruction must be long term, for there is much to teach and much for young readers to practice. Even so, there is little doubt that instruction that develops these interrelated skills should improve comprehension.

Little, if anything, offered in this section is debatable. That said, there are more debatable - but very promising - perspectives being offered, for there continues to be great researcher interest in development of even more effective comprehension instruction. These perspectives are presented in the following section.

I close by returning to the possibility raised in the introduction of this article: There needs to be experimental validation of comprehensive comprehension strategies instruction. There is a great need to know just how much of an impact on reading achievement can be made by instruction rich in all the individual components that increase comprehension. Of course, the hope is that there will be much benefit; the fear is that such instruction might be overwhelmingly complex. If all the components are

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simply thrown into the mix, instruction will be confusing and ineffective. With some experience in attempting to mix these components, how to create more effective blends might become more apparent so that meaningfully articulated and effective teaching occurs. There is much interesting work ahead before comprehension instruction is understood fully.

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