



Meaningful Comprehension Instruction

Action Learning Systems

Good readers are able to understand what they read. In order to do this they must not only be able to decode the words and sentences, but also be able to make meaning from the words and sentences. To illustrate this, consider this sentence: *The frissel stood silently by the nork*. A student may be able to decode all the words and “read” the sentence, but because it contains words that make no sense (nonsense), it has no meaning. In order to comprehend, students must be able to not just decode, but apply known comprehension strategies and skills to the words in order to draw meaning from what they read.

The question then is: *What is the best way to teach reading comprehension to students?*

Research

The last decade of research states unequivocally that reading comprehension strategies must be explicitly taught and systematically modeled in order to help students become proficient readers (Coyne, Kame’enui, and Carnine 2007). Application of these strategies to the texts they hear and read will increase students’ ability to develop literal and inferential understanding, increase vocabulary, and make connections between parts of a text, between separate texts, and between text and personal experience.

Teaching the Strategies and Skills

The impact of this research on instruction is profound. By systematically teaching reading comprehension strategies and skills

to students and incorporating a dialogue that uses these strategies, teachers can positively affect students’ achievement in reading.

Connecting Through Prior Knowledge

Often, the students are unaware of what prior knowledge or experience they might have that relates to new information. Good readers are able to apply their prior knowledge to the new material and interact with the text itself. As author/educator Robin Scarcella notes in *Academic English: A Conceptual Framework*:

Comprehension is an interactive relationship or process involving the learners’ background knowledge and the text (be it written or oral). Students cannot comprehend anything for which they do not have some existing knowledge structure or schema.

Therefore, it is critical that lesson skills are integrated and incorporate an explicit bridge to prior knowledge. Through the use of structured interaction and activities before they read, students can be taught to connect to new topics, ideas, and text through prior knowledge.

Good readers engage in an assortment of other strategies to get meaning from text:

- Good readers use a variety of clues to understand unknown vocabulary.
- Good readers are actively engaged in the content of the text.

- Good readers understand that the text has a purpose, such as to inform, persuade, describe, or entertain.
- Good readers talk about their reading, and often engage in discussion before, during, and after they have finished a piece of text.
- Good readers rely on themselves to draw meaning from what they read.

Modeling Key Strategies

One important aspect of this explicit instruction approach is that teachers act as models of good reading strategies. This approach features the teacher initially providing the model of four key strategies: questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting. Emphasizing these strategies, separately and together, sustains students in their understanding of the text as well as in their ability to monitor their own comprehension.

Posing questions during reading requires students to integrate information and think as they read. Students also profit from answering questions posed by other students. Clarifying is the process by which students make meaning of words, phrases, or ideas while reading. Phonic analysis, structural analysis, and contextual analysis are all necessary when clarifying. Summarizing is the process of distilling just the essential elements in a longer piece of text. The reader must determine the important ideas, generalize, and eliminate less important details. Predicting requires students to hypothesize about what they think will happen next, backed up with evidence from the text. Students make informed predictions, read to confirm their predictions, and then revise or make new predictions as they continue reading.

In *Gateways* teachers repeatedly model the use of the strategies. Once students master the strategies, they facilitate the process themselves, first in student groups and then independently.

Applying Skills

Teaching the strategies is just one half of the equation. To complete the full reading comprehension equation, students need to be taught the specific skills needed to get the intended information and meaning from the text. These skills include identifying the main events of the plot, contrasting the actions of characters, distinguishing between cause and effect, and determining the underlying theme in a text. While students are reading, the teacher should introduce the skills to focus on critical information and encourage students to monitor comprehension by self-questioning and returning to the text to fill in gaps in comprehension. When the students have finished reading, they should engage in analysis and acting on information. *Gateways* supports this framework by providing skills instruction that, when applied within the context of the strategies, allows for complete comprehension.

Teachers who do not just give students the tools, but also teach them how to use those tools are preparing students for success.

References

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