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Learning Difficulties Q & A #4

READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

Our last email alert overviewed the complexity of reading comprehension. In many cases, poor reading comprehension will improve following the provision of targeted instruction in phonics (to improve reading accuracy and fluency) alongside explicit instruction in vocabulary. However, research indicates that fluent decoding and age-appropriate vocabulary are not the only skills necessary for successful reading comprehension, particularly as children move into upper-primary and secondary school. This highlights the importance of equipping students with a range of strategies that will allow them to gauge meaning from increasingly sophisticated written texts.

While some students may naturally develop the use of comprehension strategies as they read, many will require explicit instruction in the most successful methods of gaining meaning from text. These strategies will not compensate for poor vocabulary or inadequate prior knowledge but they will assist students to focus on the most important elements of a text. Findings from the National Reading Panel (2005) suggest that the following strategies will assist students to understand the material they are reading:

1. Comprehension monitoring

Good comprehension involves developing an awareness of when a text is understood, and when it is not. Instruction in monitoring for comprehension teaches students to notice when they do not comprehend a text, to identify the part of text which is difficult to understand, and to use appropriate strategies to improve comprehension when there is a problem.

2. Collaborative learning

An effective way to teach reading comprehension strategies is through collaborative learning. This involves students working together in pairs or small groups to learn new information or work cooperatively. A key component of this strategy is for students of mixed-abilities to support each other by explaining content in their “own words”.

3. Graphic and semantic organisers

Graphic aids such as story maps and diagrams help readers to construct meaning and organise the ideas presented in a text. The visual-spatial presentation of the central concepts alongside more detailed supporting information enhances the reader’s understanding. Graphic organisers can help readers to focus on underlying concepts and how concepts are related.

4. Question answering

Instruction in question-answering aims to teach students to answer questions while reading a text so that comprehension of the text is improved. Questions focus the students’ attention on particular content and enables better understanding as well as reasoning (for example, of how or why). This strategy also encourages students to engage actively with the text as they read.

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5. Question generating

Many young readers do not question themselves while reading or make spontaneous inferences. Instruction in question generation supports students to engage with text by posing questions. The goal of such self-questioning is to improve memory for what is read and for the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the text.

6. Story structure

Students are taught to recognise structural aspects of a story including characters, setting, events, problem and resolution. Instruction in story structure gives readers procedural knowledge to aid comprehension of the content of the story and the organisation of the plot structure.

7. Summarisation

Teaching readers how to identify the main ideas presented in a text is an effective way to improve reading comprehension. Summarisation instruction also helps students to make connections between ideas, to eliminate irrelevant information, and to remember what they read. When students are asked to summarise a text, they pay closer attention to what they read.

For more information on these strategies, see [Factors that Contribute to Successful Reading Comprehension \(DSF Bulletin, Volume 48, Spring 2013\)](#).

Acquiring reading comprehension strategies requires only five to ten 20-30 minute sessions, with occasional review. Once a student has learned these strategies they remain stable over time. Explicit instruction involving demonstration, practice, and review has been found to be the best way to ensure students internalise comprehension strategies and use them independently. This is particularly the case for struggling readers. Collaborative strategic reading and reciprocal teaching are forms of strategy instruction that follow this format. Teaching a combination of strategies has the greatest impact and no single strategy is effective for all, although, instruction in content-specific vocabulary and conceptual knowledge is viewed as extremely valuable. It has been suggested that the most effective strategies all require active interaction with the text - and this appears to be the key ingredient driving their success.

References:

Adler, C.R. (2001) *Seven Strategies to Teach Students Text Comprehension*. Accessed August 2016 at <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/seven-strategies-teach-students-text-comprehension>

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) (2005), *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read (Reports of the Subgroups)*. Available on-line at <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf>

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