Key Comprehension Strategies to Teach

By: [Texas Education Agency](#)

How can classroom reading instruction help poor readers — indeed, all students — become more like good readers? Research suggests that the answer may lie in providing students with instruction that both teaches them the comprehension strategies that work so well for good readers and helps them to develop the necessary metacognitive awareness of how and when to use these strategies.

What are the key comprehension strategies to teach?

Studies on good readers have identified a number of comprehension strategies to be highly useful. These strategies range from the simple to the complex. From the array of strategies examined by researchers, the following strategies have been shown to be especially helpful and to lend themselves particularly well to instruction:[1]

Activating and Using Background Knowledge

This strategy requires readers to activate their background knowledge and to use that knowledge to help them understand what they are reading. Background knowledge is made up of a person's experiences with the world (including what he or she has read), along with his or her concepts for how written text works, including word identification, print concepts, word meaning, and how text is organized. Research has established that readers' existing knowledge is critical in determining their ability to comprehend what they read.[2]

One of the most important contributions made by cognitive scientists to the understanding of how comprehension works is schema theory.[3] This theory is based on how people organize and activate their knowledge.

According to schema theory, as people learn about the world, they develop a large network of knowledge structures, or schemas, with each schema connected to many others. These schemas grow and change as a person acquires new information through experience and reading. For example, a very young child's schema for dog might contain only her or his understanding of the family pet — something white, furry, and fun to play with. As the child gains more experiences with a variety of dogs in a variety of settings, the dog schema will expand and be refined. It may connect to other schema — types of dogs; colors of dogs; foods dogs eat; places where dogs stay when the family is on vacation; dangerous dogs; who veterinarians are; and locations of important dog shows.

When they applied schema theory to reading comprehension, cognitive scientists found that good readers constantly connect their background knowledge to the new knowledge they encounter in a text. In fact, they appear to activate a schema as soon they begin to read. The initial schema

then activates others, thus directly affecting how readers understand and react to a text.[4]

Schemas that are related to text organization are especially important to comprehension. Having knowledge of a text's organization improves students' understanding of that text.[5]

Generating and Asking Questions

This strategy involves readers asking themselves questions throughout the reading of a text. The ability of readers to ask themselves relevant questions as they read is especially valuable in helping them to integrate information, identify main ideas, and summarize information. Asking the right questions allows good readers to focus on the most important information in a text.[6]

Generating good questions may also lead readers to focus on problems with comprehension and to take actions to deal with these problems.[7]

Making Inferences

This strategy requires readers to evaluate or draw conclusions from information in a text. Authors do not always provide complete descriptions of, or explicit information about a topic, setting, character, or event. However, they often provide clues that readers can use to "read between the lines"-by making inferences that combine information in the text with their background knowledge.

It has been shown that when readers are taught how to make inferences, they improve their abilities to construct meaning. Indeed, research indicates that the ability to make inferences is crucial to successful reading.[8]

Predicting

This strategy involves the ability of readers to get meaning from a text by making informed predictions. Good readers use predicting as a way to connect their existing knowledge to new information from a text to get meaning from what they read.[9] Before reading, they may use what they know about an author to predict what a text will be about. The title of a text may trigger memories of texts with similar content, allowing them to predict the content of the new text.

During reading, good readers may make predictions about what is going to happen next, or what ideas or evidence the author will present to support an argument. They tend to evaluate these predictions continuously, and revise any prediction that is not confirmed by the reading.

Summarizing

This strategy involves the ability of readers to pull together, or synthesize information in a text so as to explain in their own words what the text is about. Summarizing is an important strategy because it can enable readers to recall text quickly. It also can make readers more aware of text organization, of what is important in a text and of how ideas are related.[10]

Effective summarizing of expository text may involve such things as condensing the steps in a scientific process, the stages of development of an art movement, or the episodes that led to some major historical event.

Effective summarizing of narrative text can involve such things as connecting and synthesizing events in a story line or identifying the factors that motivate a character's actions and behavior.

Visualizing

This involves the ability of readers to make mental images of a text as a way to understand processes or events they encounter during reading. This ability can be an indication that a reader understands a text. Some research suggests that readers who visualize as they read are better able to recall what they have read than are those who do not visualize.[11]

Visualizing is especially valuable when it is applied to narrative texts. In reading narratives, readers often can develop a clear understanding of what is happening by visualizing the setting, characters, or actions in the plot. However, visualizing can also be applied to the reading of expository texts, with readers visualizing steps in a process or stages in an event or creating an image to help them remember some abstract concept or important name.[12]

Comprehension Monitoring

This involves the ability of readers to know when they understand what they read, when they do not understand, and to use appropriate strategies to improve their understanding when it is blocked.[13] Comprehension monitoring is a form of metacognition. Good readers are aware of and monitor their thought processes as they read. In contrast, poor readers "just do it."[14]

The strategies employed by good readers to improve understanding are called "repair" or "fix-up" strategies. Specific repair strategies include rereading, reading ahead, clarifying words by looking them up in a dictionary or glossary, or asking someone for help.[15]

In general, good readers use a variety of strategies such as the ones just discussed to construct meaning as they read. However, not all good readers use the same strategies; good readers tend to develop and practice those strategies that are most useful to them. Further, good readers are flexible in their strategy use: they switch from strategy to strategy as they read; they use different strategies with different kinds of texts.

The point is, because good readers have conscious control of their strategy use, they are able to make decisions about which strategies to use and when to use them. Most good readers do this with little or no explicit strategy instruction. Most students, however, can benefit greatly from organized, explicit instruction that teaches them to use specific strategies for understanding text. The good news is that specific comprehension strategies can be taught and learned - and that their deliberate use by readers improves comprehension.[16]

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