The Simplicity and Complexity of Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

The complexities of being able to comprehend often include intricate and detailed processes. Reading comprehension is an essential skill for one to understand what is being read and comprehension skills must be developed and refined over time. This article will explore a variety of effective strategies for teaching reading comprehension to students of all ages, focusing particularly on strategies for emerging or struggling readers. It presents strategies, assessment tools, and teaching interventions that might help improve student reading comprehension skills. In addition, the article introduces different technologies that can be integrated to help increase reading comprehension.

1. Introduction

Reading Comprehension, in simple terms, means understanding what you read, however, the complexities of being able to comprehend often include intricate and detailed processes. While reading is a fundamental building block and essential in daily living, Kirby (n.d.) declares that reading comprehension is a vital foundation skill for further learning, later employment, and other life skills. Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill for one to understand what is being read, and comprehension skills must be developed and refined over time. With that being said, it is important not only to understand what comprehension is, but also to learn how to apply a variety of comprehension strategies based on the types of texts being read. When looking at reading trend data from *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2011, 2013,* and *2015,* the average reading scores for students in the fourth grade have remained fairly consistent since 2009.

Considering this information, it is important to seek ways to ensure students develop more acute reading comprehension skills. This article discusses different strategies, assessment tools, and teaching interventions that might help improve student reading comprehension skills. In addition, the article discusses different technologies that can be integrated to help increase reading comprehension.

Reading Comprehension

Comprehension is defined as "the construction of meaning of a written or spoken communication through a reciprocal, holistic interchange of ideas between the interpreter and the message in a particular communicative context" (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 39).The RAND Reading Study Group (2002) stated that comprehension is "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" (p. 11). Cecil, Gipe, and Merrill (2014), define comprehension as the construction of meaning. Although there are many different definitions of comprehension, there seems to be a common theme in each - comprehension consists of students being active readers, processing what they read, forming a mental image, summarizing, and drawing conclusions. These actions guide the reader to understanding and connecting with the text while assisting the reader in gathering details and making meaning of the text. Through this process, readers use critical thinking to find a balance between the writers's meaning and his or her own interpretation of the text.

Reading comprehension is as critical for beginning readers as it is for proficient, skilled readers; therefore, reading comprehension skills need to be taught and reinforced in all stages of literacy development. Typically, comprehension problems surface when students have not developed or learned the necessary skills and strategies to help them make sense of what they are reading. Cecil (2003) suggests teachers should provide a large block of time for actual text reading. Students are more apt to build fluency when spending time immersed in the text. Making this time for the students to focus on active reading skills can help establish a better understanding of and confidence in reading comprehension.

When teaching reading comprehension strategies and techniques, teachers can model effective strategies by thinking aloud and by illustrating techniques such as restating the text in your own words, looking back in the text, or looking forward in the text. Allowing student's time to read in small groups or with a partner gives them the opportunity to read the lines, hear the lines, and discuss the story. These learning situations provide students the opportunity to connect personally with the text and share their ideas and understandings with classmates. Learning to participate in these processes effectively requires direct instruction and modeling from the teacher as well as time for students to practice the strategies. According to Fielding and Pearson (1994), providing children with time to practice these strategies is an essential part of a successful reading comprehension program. Hollenenbeck and Saternus (2013) discuss how students often view reading comprehension strategies as "rigid tasks that are completed at the teacher's request" rather than "as tools to assist with meaning construction" (p. 560). For reading to have meaning and purpose, students need to understand why they need to utilize a strategy and how to utilize the strategy effectively beginning early in elementary school.

In *Guided Comprehension in Grades 3 – 8*, McLaughlin and Allen (2009) advocate for explicit instruction in comprehension strategies which involves five steps. These steps are: explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, and reflect (p. 435). These strategies can help students organize their thoughts by identifying a purpose for reading the text. In addition, the strategies teach students how to become more independent readers by helping them identify a comprehension problem, where it is occurring, and then provide them with effective strategies to solve the problem using the text.

Strategies for Reading Comprehension

The number of comprehension strategies and resources for teachers of elementary students are endless. There are graphic organizers, story maps, games, websites, and apps that allow students the opportunity to practice and build comprehension skills. Figure 1 lists websites that can be used to help students with comprehension. Honig, Diamond, Gutlohn, and Cole (2008) list eight comprehension strategies that they have been researched and proven to be effective in the classroom. These strategies include: monitoring comprehension, connecting to world knowledge, predicting, recognizing text structure, asking questions, answering questions, constructing mental imagines, and summarizing. For example, click and clunk (Cecil, Gipe, Merrill, 2014) is a comprehension monitoring strategy proven to be effective with elementary students. As students read a passage, they ask themselves questions. If they answer the questions effortlessly, they receive a click, like a light bulb clicking on.

The click indicates that the information "clicks" with the reader. Students can tap a pencil or snap a finger to represent a click if the use of sound helps to build confidence. However, if students struggle through the passage and cannot answer the questions effortlessly, it is a clunk. Students can create other sounds to represent the clunk sound, like dropping a dried bean in a container. For students who have more clunks at the end of the text, they reread the passage repeating the same questioning exercise. This is a form of self-monitoring, which is partially why the strategy has proven beneficial. According to Honig, Diamond, Gutlohn, and Cole (2008) it is effective because "students notice what they do understand, identify what they do not understand, and use appropriate 'fix-ups' to resolve problems or confusions" (p. 618).Students have the opportunity to self-correct, while allowing time for the teacher to plan interventions and lessons that can specifically address the problems the readers are experiencing. Klinger and Vaughn (1998) discuss how this strategy can also be used to "teach students to monitor their reading comprehension and to identify when they have break- downs in understanding" (33). This strategy is used widely with students with reading difficulties because it teaches them to pay attention to areas in which they are struggling.

Another strategy proven to be effective when teaching reading comprehension is a story map. There are many different types of story maps, but most are fairly simple in design and ask students to retell the beginning, middle, and end of the story. Story maps are great resources in the classroom during whole group instruction as they allow each reader to visualize the story and understand it in a more detailed perspective. Younger students and immerging readers may use pictures to create a story map while older students may express their stories in a web design, timeline, or story. Honig, Diamond, Gutlohn, and Cole's research (2008) has proven that using a more complex story map - outline, setting, characters, problem, and sequence of events, outcome, and theme - maintains the reader's focus and engagement in the text. Students know which details they are looking for and tend to remember and understand the story better when they record it on a map.

An effective reading comprehension strategy utilized at all grade levels is called RAP: Read-Ask-Paraphrase. This strategy involves students reading the paragraph, asking themselves, "What was the main idea and two details?" and putting the information into their own words (Hagaman, Luschen, and Reid, 2010, p. 23) This strategy asks readers to paraphrase the information in the text and use details from the story to substantiate their interpretation. Klinger and Vaughn (1996) introduce previewing as an effective strategy to empower students' reasoning. Previewing involves activating students' prior knowledge about a reading topic, enabling students to make predictions, and generating students' interest in the topic. Previewing helps readers trigger their thinking process by tapping into what they know on the topic. Another effective strategy that teachers use is text coding or text annotation. When reading new material or a difficult or lengthy passage, students may become uninterested or disengage from the text. Text coding is an effective strategy to help students remain focused on the text and what they are thinking while reading.

It is a simple strategy that may consist of the use of symbols to represent questions, what they already know, or something new; underlining important words or facts; logging questions or thoughts about the text in the margins; or making predictions. Text Annotation is an effective and a simple way for older students to self-monitor comprehension, while being aware of their own thought process while reading. In his article, *I'll Have Mine Annotated, Please: Helping Students Make Connections with Text,* Matthew Brown states: "Reading is one thing, but getting something of value from what we read is another" (73). Brown presents the value of making personal connections and interacting with a text to facilitate comprehension and the reading experience. Summarizing is a common strategy used in reading comprehension. Summarizing consists of synthesizing the information, putting the information in your own words, and determining the essential parts of the texts. Summarizing may be challenging for some students who have limited vocabularies or have difficulty relating to a text. Teachers can use direct instruction and modeling to teach summarizing to students.

An effective strategy which helps guide students in asking questions as well as starting conversation about the reading is the Direct- Reading-Thinking Activity strategy. This strategy may be used to help students with the "process of predicting, verifying, judging, and extending thinking about the text material" (Vacca, Vacca, Gove, Burkey, Lenhart, and McKeon, 2011, p. 363). This strategy helps students discuss the story to gain a complete and detailed understanding of the topic. It is beneficial for the teacher and the students because it allows students the chance to verbalize what they are thinking about the text while verifying their thoughts with passages or facts from the text. The verbal communication provides the teacher with a better understanding of how the students interpret the text.

When discussing the story, the teacher can provide opportunities for students to extend their understandings by asking if the students can make any personal or external connections. The authors present three ways students can connect with a text. First, readers share how the text connects to them personally, which is called text-to-self. Second, readers make a text-to-text- connection, which means the reader makes a connection between the two texts that he or she has read. Third, is text-to-text world connection? The text-to-world connection is utilized more often with older students, because it involves a higher-level thinking. In this connection, students relate the story to current or historical world events. Using children's picture books to model and practice a variety of comprehension strategies is an effective tool for teachers. Figure 2 provides a list of picture books that can be used to facilitate a particular comprehension strategy.

Technology in Reading Comprehension

The use of technology can be a beneficial tool for teaching reading comprehension strategies to students. Many classrooms today have easy access to technology, and students are more engaged when teachers incorporate interactive strategies such as story map on a smart board. Teachers can use websites to locate comprehension games and read-alouds for their students, as well as comprehension lesson plans and lists of comprehension strategies that can be used. One such helpful website is the *Hoot's Library and Read-Along Room* at www.abctooncenter.com/library.htm, which has a variety of read-aloud stories. Another useful source is *Reading Rockets: Comprehension* at www.readingrockets.org/atoz/comprehension, which has an abundance of resources for comprehension including articles about comprehension, useful tips for parents to help their children at home, videos on comprehension, and strategies listed for teachers to implement. This website encourages teachers to use any type of technology or interactive lesson to encourage comprehension skill building. Lastly, there is a website that offers lesson plans for all age levels and key information about teaching certain strategies. This website is titled *Read Write Think* and can be found at www.readwritethink.org. Many schools now have laptops and tablets for all students to use in their classrooms. There are countless apps for tablets that can assist students with reading comprehension such as Mini Mod Reading for Details. This app is designed for use on the ipad and can help may be accessed through the app store or located on Reading Rocket's website. In addition, figure 3 provides a list of other websites for facilitating reading comprehension.

Assessment

Assessment is important in measuring the progress and success of each individual student. Assessment should be ongoing and used to drive instruction. Just as there are many strategies for teaching reading comprehension, there are also numerous ways to assess it. Reading comprehension improvement is often gradual, and therefore, may be difficult to assess in a formal, summative assessment. The cloze test or technique is a simple technique that assesses reading comprehension. This test or technique uses a 250-300-word passage that has every fifth word deleted, leaving the first sentence complete. The students use the words around the deleted word to figure out what should be in the blank. Teachers sometimes use the cloze test to determine a student's level of comprehension (Cecil, Gipe, & Merrill 2014). An Informal Reading Inventory (IRI), is also an excellent assessment for word identification, comprehension, and fluency.

To assess comprehension, students are asked to read stories and then retell each story in their own words. There is a set of questions that students have to answer with 50% accuracy to move to the next reading level. This assessment allows the teacher to determine the students' improvement on implementing comprehension skills and assists them in determining which strategies and interventions are needed to help students succeed. It is beneficial to continue this assessment over time to chart a student's progress. The IRI also estimates the student's independent, instructional, frustration level, and listening comprehension level. This provides information regarding the level of book for independent reading and the level of book needed during instruction. There are many other simple, informal assessments that can be used with the students, such as observations and anecdotal notes. These assessments, though very simple, provide the teacher with important information about the student and their daily progress or failure to understand information. Some strategies work double time as an intervention strategy and an assessment. The K-W-L is one such strategy that works well as an assessment, especially for English Language Learners (ELL). The "L" part of KWL is an obvious assessment, because it will show what they have learned. The "K" and "W" also provide good information for the teacher about what students know about a topic and what additional work they need to do to build background knowledge (Tompkins, 2011).

Teachers can also use the think-aloud strategy as an assessment "to determine if students (1) understand a text's vocabulary, (2) predict upcoming actions, (3) visualize settings, characters, and events, (4) make inferences, and (5) self-monitor when comprehension breaks down" (DeVries, 2015, p.191).

Conclusion

In conclusion, comprehension is a necessity that every student and person needs; it is important for teachers to provide as much reading time in the classroom as. Keeping students engaged and interested in the text and allowing them to visualize and connect with the reading is essential to increase reading comprehension. Teachers must keep an open mind and incorporate a variety of comprehension strategies to meet the learning needs of all students. They are responsible for creating an environment that fosters an appreciation for reading, success in reading comprehension, and ultimately, an opportunity for students to grow to become mature and effective readers.

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Figure 1: Reading Comprehension Websites

Graphic Organizers

http://www.enchantedlearning.com
http://www.eduplace.com
http://edhelper.com/teachers/graphic_organizers.htm
http://www.teach-nology.com/worksheets/graphic/
http://www.educationoasis.com/printables/graphic-organizers/

Story Maps

http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/graphic-organizers-reading-comprehension
http://www.thinkport.org/graphic-organizers.html

Games

http://www.learningtoday.com/curriculum/reading-comprehension/
http://www.funenglishgames.com/readinggames.html
http://www.pbs.org/parents/fun-and-games/online-games/
http://www.acadia.k12.la.us/EES/3427-Interactive-Reading-Links.html
http://freeresources.smarttutor.com/category/reading-lessons/

Read-alouds

http://www.storylineonline.net/
http://www.starfall.com
http://www.andersenfairytales.com/en/main

Reading Strategies

http://www.readingquest.org
http://www.readingrockets.org/article/seven-strategies-teach-students-text-comprehension
http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies
http://dyslexiahelp.umich.edu/professionals/dyslexia-school/reading-comprehension

Lesson plans

http://www.readwritethink.org/
http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/using-comprehension-strategies
http://www.teach-nology.com/teachers/lesson_plans/language_arts/reading
http://www.readworks.org

Figure 2: Picture Books to Facilitate Reading Comprehension

Activating Prior Knowledge

The Magic School Bus Presents the Human Body
Stellaluna by Janell Cannon
The Magic School Bus Explores the Senses

Predictions

A Piece of Chalk by Jennifer A. Ericss
The Very Busy Spider by Eric Carle
Doctor De Soto by William Steig

Mental Imagery/visualizing

Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs by Judi Barrett
Charlotte's Web by E.B. White
Miss Nelson is Back by Harry G. Allard, Jr. and James Marshall

Main Idea

Chrysanthemum by Kevin Henkes
A Color of His Own by Leo Lionni
Stand Tall Molly Lou Melon by Patty Lovell

Inferences and Drawing Conclusions

I Need My Monster by Amanda Noll and Howard McWilliam
The Great Kapok Tree by Lynne Cherry
Two Bad Ants by Chris Van Allsberg

Characterization

Wilfred Gordon MacDonald Partridge by Mem Fox
Rainbow Fish by Marcus Pfister
The Legend of Spookley the Square Pumpkin by Joe Troiano

Connections (text to self, text to text, text to world)

The Day the Crayons Quit by Drew Daywalt
David Goes to School by David Shannon
Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No-Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Voirst

Asking Questions

Sylvester and the Magic Pebble by William Steig
Verdi by Janell Cannon
Frog and Toad All Year by Arnold Lobel

Summarizing

The Tiny Seed by Eric Carle
Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs by Judi Barrett
Chicken Sunday by Patricia Polacco

Synthesis

The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by Jon Scieszka
Stone soup by Jon Muth
Miss Rumphius by Barbara Cooney

Description

The Way I Feel by Janan Cain
Crickwing by Janell Cannon
Owl Moon by Jane Yolen

Sequencing

The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle
The Hat by Jan Brett
There was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly by Simms Taback

Cause and Effect

If You Give a Mouse a Cookie by Laura Numeroff
The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein
The Lorax by Dr. Seuss

Problem/Solution

A Bad Case of the Stripes by David Shannon
Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak
The Little Engine that Could by Watty Piper

Compare and Contrast

Lon Po Po by Ed Young
The Rough Face Girl by Rafe Martin and David Shannon
Prince Cinders by Babette Cole

Figure 3: K-12 Practice Reading Comprehension Assessment Websites

https://eprcontent.k12.com/placement/placement/placement_langarts_2.html
http://www.k5learning.com/reading-comprehension-worksheets
http://www.k12reader.com/subject/reading-skills/reading-comprehension/
http://mrnussbaum.com/readingpassageindex/