

COMPREHENSION SKILLS CAN BE TAUGHT

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The literature in the field of reading and teachers' guides for reading instruction offer little information and no specific techniques for teaching comprehension skills. Teachers need guidelines for judging whether students are learning, whether they are being provided adequate practice in using comprehension skills, and whether they are assimilating the skills. They need a structured plan of instruction with specifications for pupils' responses.

Teachers typically have been taught to develop comprehension skills by questioning students to find out if they understand and remember what they have read. During such questioning, it was assumed that other students who listen and observe also learn from their classmates' answers.

Supposedly, questioning students before they begin reading helps them focus on important information in an assignment, but studies cited by Wray (1978) challenge this procedure. Pre-questioning is shown to have little positive effect and some negative effects on improving reading comprehension. (Wray asks whether it is the procedure that is at fault or the quality of the questions.)

Titles, subtitles, and headings in written texts assist comprehension. They act as "advance organizers" to facilitate assembly of previous knowledge and new information. Kominsky (1977) reports that "they serve as pointers, as assumed, 'given' information that makes contact with previous knowledge in memory. If no previous knowledge is available, titles serve as an anchor point in memory around which the incoming textual material will be organized." Wray also cites research where advance or cognitive

organizers help readers score significantly higher in comprehension than readers who are provided none or who are asked questions before reading.

The ability of the reader to comprehend or recall stories is affected by the structure of the story and the correlation of its schema with the reader's story schema. "Well-structured, schema-conforming stories are easy to remember, but disorganized stories that deviate from our culturally shared story schema are likely to be distorted in recall" (Poulson and others, n.d.).

Teaching Comprehension

If readers can understand how they use comprehension skills as they read, their comprehension will be stimulated. This is the technique teachers use in ECRI (Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction) classrooms. Teachers are given directives for teaching and testing literal, inferential, critical, and creative comprehension.

The teacher begins by modeling the use of the skills, directing the pupils to repeat the model with a different reading selection, modeling again if the students do not respond, and questioning incorrect responses. Replicating a model during language instruction is not passive imitation—each student's use of language is original and fulfills individual needs. Pupils demonstrate twice that they can use the skill in the manner the teacher modeled it and that they can use the skill when they read different materials. They learn to verbalize a description of the skill they are modeling. They tell why they do what they do. The teacher encourages them to repeat from memory what they have learned: "Look at me. Tell me the main idea" (Reid, 1978b). And the students learn a variety of questioning methods for the same skill:

"Now you can answer questions about the characters."



In ECRI classrooms, teachers use specific techniques to help students understand what they read.

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"Who are the characters?"
"How do you know they are characters?"
"Who does this paragraph tell you about?"
"Who are the subjects of this paragraph?"

Imagine a teacher in front of a small skills group of students of any age. The teacher begins instruction with the following dialogue or directives:

Objective Directives:

1. "You will judge if the information you read could be fact."

2. "Fact is information that is true. It is accurate or correct. It is information that usually can be proved to be true." (If the term "information" is unknown, the teacher also says, "Information tells something. For example, today is March 3. This information tells today's date." The teacher gives additional examples and repeats Directive 2.)

3. "What is fact?" (Students respond, "Fact is information that is true. It is accurate or correct. It is information that usually can be proved to be true.")

4a. "To help you judge if the information you read could be fact, you can use your experience. You may have seen or done it."

Modeling Directives:

4b. "I will read this information and judge if it could be fact by using my experience—what I have seen or done." (The teacher reads aloud information.) (Reid, 1978a.)

The directives continue with the teacher modeling, using his or her experiences to judge whether the information is factual. Following this, the students are led through oral exercises to judge whether what they read is fact, based on personal experience. The students respond orally to the teacher. They are not writing answers on skills sheets or in a workbook.

The directives proceed to the next levels of judging information. The students read other material to see if the same information is given; they decide whether the author is giving opinion instead of fact, and whether the author is an expert in the information he or she wrote. The students verify if the information was checked for accuracy by others and when the information was published.

Teachers are also given directives at the critical comprehension level to teach students to identify fiction:

"Fiction is writing the author invented or made up."

"He used his imagination."

"A whole story or book can be fiction. Part of a story or book can be fiction."

"Fiction may be about real people or events, but the author used his imagination in writing about them."

"Fiction can be about people, things, or events that are true to life. They are realistic, but they are not actually real."

"The author used his imagination and made them up."

"A make-believe story that could not possibly happen is also fiction."

Students are taught the critical comprehension skills of identifying propaganda techniques:

"The ways the author deliberately tries to persuade the reader to think and do what the author wants." Teaching these skills involves over 150 directives.

Comprehension instruction takes place every day with students working in small groups following the introduction of new words (using directives also). Approximately five to seven minutes is required to introduce a comprehension skill to the group. (Individual practice and mastery of the skill occur later.) Another five minutes is used daily with each skills group to teach a study skill, and additional time is used to teach creative writing skills. This daily instructional time with groups is augmented with almost constant individual instruction and peer interaction. The teacher elicits unison group responses to questions, but students read quietly at their own rates from the charts or transparencies used during instruction, until the teacher tells them to stop reading. Each skills lesson begins with the teacher stating an objective and modeling it, followed by "prompting" and "practice" directives.

Teachers are encouraged to teach 80 or 90 comprehension skills each year. The selections the teacher uses are appropriate for the reading levels of the pupils and their interests. Thus the directives are suitable for students of any age. The teacher's

choice of materials varies from one reading level to another.

Pupils are checked on their acquisition of comprehension skills as they read aloud to the teacher in an individual conference, as they answer questions on a mastery test, and as they discuss in small groups the information they gleaned from reading. They apply their skills during content reading as well as in their use of basic reading materials. If a pupil fails to respond correctly, the teacher re-teaches instantly. Motivation for reading is provided following each mastery test, which is administered individually by the teacher.

Most of the same comprehension skills are taught at each grade level. It is as important for the reader to obtain the main idea in a third- or seventh-grade book as in a first-grade book. Skills change in complexity, however, as materials become more difficult to read because of the more advanced vocabulary, longer sentences, and higher-order linguistic structures. Recognizing the sequence of events, for instance, in third-grade materials could involve using clue words to identify what happened first and second, and so on, whereas in first-grade materials the sequence could be tied to the order in which the author tells the story.

Comprehension should be taught from preschool years on. If the pupils cannot read, comprehension can be taught as listening skills, which are basically comprehension skills. While listening, pupils rely completely on memory since they cannot refer to a text.

The difference between a child's and an adult's ability to reason is quantitative, not qualitative. Studies have shown that kindergartners draw inferences and use other types of critical thinking skills. Children lack the experiences that adults have accumulated, so many and varied experiences from which concepts are formed should be provided as part of the school's curriculum. If teachers are able to teach reading and writing skills effectively, pupils learn to recognize experiences they have had and relate their language skills to them.

It is possible for students to talk or write about things they know nothing about; they often read words for which they have had no previous experience. Usually, however, the stu-

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dent's background of experience is greater than his or her ability to describe it or desire to read or study about it. Experiences may provide meanings that very likely have not been sought or reflected upon. Words—read, spoken, and heard—are the means by which individuals become conscious of their experiences, establish objectives, and project goals.

Effective teachers of reading do not wait to provide experiences before teaching reading skills, nor do they teach skills oblivious to the importance of designing meaningful experiences from which understanding of words stems.

As pupils begin to recognize how authors convey messages to the reader, they become more effective writers by learning to create for themselves. Thus, in teaching comprehension skills, the teacher is also teaching creative writing skills. Students' language facility is dependent on the stimulation of their thought processes. Reading and discussing what is read provide that stimulation.

These techniques have produced as great as or greater gains in comprehension than in vocabulary skills—although growth in vocabulary skills has also been statistically significant (Reid, 1971-73).

Comprehension Skills

ECRI's instructional materials divide comprehension into four levels of skills: literal, interpretative, critical, and creative (Smith, 1969). These four levels correlate with the classes of cognitive (intellectual) behaviors identified by Bloom (1966) and others, since comprehension skills are also thinking skills. "Knowledge" relates to the literal level of comprehension; "comprehension" and "application" to the interpretative level; "analysis and evaluation" to the critical level; and "synthesis" to the creative level.

Let us consider the development of one student's skills. We'll call her Jane. At the literal or factual level, Jane receives the author's expressed meaning. Reference is made to the

author's words. Like a newspaper reporter, Jane gets the facts: who, what, when, where, why. At the interpretative level, Jane adds meaning to the author's text. At the critical level, she becomes a critic or judge of what has been written. At the creative level, Jane leaves the text to extend it or put herself into what she has read. (The interpretative and creative levels of comprehension may seem very closely related. However, at the interpretative level, Jane adds the meaning the author intended her to add; at the creative level, Jane adds her personal reflections.)

The interrelationships of Jane's language skills create a network of fine threads—a tapestry of understanding. The vibrancy of the tapestry increases as each colorful thread, a newly mastered skill, is woven into the fabric. For instance, when Jane identifies the character's problems (literal comprehension skill), she is helped to understand the development of the plot (literal comprehension skill) and can become a critic of what was written (critical comprehension skill). When Jane finds the details (literal comprehension skill) that support the inferences she drew (interpretative comprehension skill), she verifies her conclusions (critical comprehension skill). When Jane is taught to select the topic (study skill) and main idea (study skill, literal or interpretative comprehension skill), she is able to evaluate what is relevant and irrelevant in what she reads (critical comprehension skill and study skill). When Jane is taught to detect propaganda and bias (critical comprehension skill), she recognizes that the writer wants her to make inferences without supporting details (interpretative comprehension skill). When Jane learns what stated information (literal comprehension skill) to look for, she is taught that some information might be implied and not directly stated (interpretative comprehension skills). Or, to become even more specific about the interrelated nature of language skills, when Jane is taught that "the charac-

ter is a person, animal, or thing that does things by itself" and Jane is directed to find out what the person, animal, or thing does to become a character, she learns to recognize noun and verb phrases, subject and predicate, sentence structure, pronoun referents, and personification.

Jane does not apply only one comprehension skill at a time; many skills are called into use simultaneously. But not all are needed at one time, either. Her teacher's responsibility, however, is to teach comprehension skills one at a time and then check to see whether Jane has attained those skills and understands the author's message.

Comprehension is critical for students to become lifetime readers; it is reinforced by the information and enjoyment obtained by reading. This motivates the reader to obtain more information and enjoyment through continued reading. ■

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