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HotSheet 4: Effective Practices for Reading Comprehension



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The ability to read and comprehend text is crucial to achieving success, not only in school but in the working world. Good readers are purposeful when reading and choose appropriate comprehension strategies automatically; however, less skilled readers, including many students with disabilities, often do not. These students need explicit instruction in order to accurately and efficiently gain meaning from text. This HotSheet will define reading comprehension and describe some of the more and less effective practices for instruction.

What is Reading Comprehension?

Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading. Understanding and obtaining meaning from written text material is what is commonly referred to as comprehension. Reading comprehension is interdependent on students' existing background knowledge, knowledge about the content of the text, awareness of cognitive and metacognitive strategies (strategies that help students to be more aware of their own thinking and learning), and competencies in basic reading skills including accurate and fluent decoding and vocabulary knowledge. Reading comprehension is often demonstrated through students' abilities to retell the information in their own words or to answer correctly questions about what was read.

Why is Reading Comprehension Important?

Teaching children to read, including reading comprehension, is one of the major purposes of schools. Students' success in school is largely determined by their ability to read fluently and gain meaning from reading materials in all subject areas. Younger children (primary aged) can learn strategies to assist with comprehending the meaning of pictures and the basic story elements of narrative text read aloud to them. Older students can learn more complex strategies to help with their understanding of the expository text found in their science and history textbooks. Students can also learn to self-regulate their own reading comprehension. Self-regulation is the ability to monitor one's own learning. This becomes increasingly important as students progress through the grades and are expected to "read to learn." However, the ability to read and understand does not end with the classroom; reading comprehension is of lifelong importance. Students apply reading comprehension skills to everyday life. For example, reading comprehension is necessary for a person to successfully conduct research on-line, correspond through email, follow a recipe or a computer manual, and even obey road signs.

Reading Comprehension Facts

1. A student can read fluently and not understand what was read.
2. Reading comprehension is an active process.
3. Strategies for improving reading comprehension can be taught.
4. Basic reading skills, including decoding and fluency, can influence text comprehension.
5. Vocabulary knowledge influences text comprehension.
6. Background knowledge influences text comprehension.
7. Expository text, such as content area instruction materials, may require more complex reading comprehension strategies than those required for narrative texts, such as prose stories. See table on next page.

NARRATIVE TEXT STRUCTURE	EXPOSITORY TEXT STRUCTURE
<p>Narrative text (e.g., stories) is generally organized in a similar manner, referred to as story grammar. Example story grammar elements include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character • Setting • Plot: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Initiating Events — Internal Reactions — Goals — Attempts — Outcomes 	<p>Expository text (e.g., a textbook) is much less consistent than narrative text because multiple structures can be used within the same textbook, the same chapter, and even the same section. Generally, expository text follows one of six structures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description Of characteristics, traits, properties, functions • Temporal Sequence of Events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Concepts organized by time • Explanation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Of concepts or terminology • Definition / Example • Compare / Contrast • Problem / Solution / Effect

Source: Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, and Baker (2001)



Reading Comprehension Practices that are Less Effective

LESS EFFECTIVE PRACTICE	EXPLANATION
<p>Teaching reading comprehension strategies only after basic reading skills have been mastered or teaching reading comprehension strategies without also teaching needed basic reading skills</p>	<p>These practices stem from the conception that students are not ready for reading comprehension strategies until they have mastered basic reading skills, or that basic skills instruction should only happen in the early elementary grades. However, reading comprehension and basic reading skills are interdependent, and therefore, instruction is needed in both reading comprehension strategies and basic reading skills in order for students to read and comprehend independently.</p>
<p>Asking students to read the material and answer questions independently</p>	<p>This practice is found frequently in content area classes in which students are assigned to read the chapter and answer questions and it is assumed they will comprehend the material. However, chapters usually contain high levels of unfamiliar formats and vocabulary which interferes with comprehension.</p>
<p>Explicitly teaching strategies for narrative text with the assumption that this will generalize to expository text</p>	<p>This practice often occurs as students begin to transition from narrative to expository text. While explicit instruction of strategies in narrative text is indeed a best practice, these strategies may not be sufficient for expository text which is often more complex and diverse in structure. Students require explicit instruction of strategies for this type of text as well.</p>
<p>Giving students material to read without pre-teaching unfamiliar vocabulary and novel concepts</p>	<p>Sometimes this practice occurs with the idea that pre-teaching vocabulary and concepts lowers the expectations of students to learn from reading. However, pre-teaching vocabulary and concepts is often critical for students that struggle with reading comprehension, including students with disabilities and English language learners.</p>
<p>Assuming that a student will understand the text if a “read aloud” accommodation is provided</p>	<p>This practice increases when students have not mastered basic reading skills by an expected age. However, while reading aloud to a student may help a student access the text, the student still may not understand the information. Comprehension strategies will likely be needed, particularly as text becomes more complex. Further, a read aloud accommodation should never replace instruction in the critical areas of reading.</p>
<p>Assigning homework that requires students to read and comprehend material at their frustration level</p>	<p>In many classrooms, reading assignments from a grade level anthology or textbook are given as homework. However, grade level texts are at an instructional level for most students. Further, many textbooks have a readability level that exceeds the grade level for which it is being used, making the reading demands at a frustration level for most students. This practice is especially problematic for students who read below grade level, and as a result, these students may not even attempt the assignment.</p>

Reading Comprehension Practices that are More Effective

MORE EFFECTIVE PRACTICE	EXPLANATION
<p>Teach students to monitor comprehension.</p>	<p>Explicitly teach students to monitor their comprehension before, during, and after they read.</p> <p>Before reading, teach students to monitor their comprehension by doing things such as: thinking about what they already know about the topic (prior knowledge), previewing the text (such as headings and subheading that may give clues to text organization), and thinking about strategies that might help them (metacognition).</p> <p>During reading, teach students to monitor their understanding of text by identifying what they understand and what they do not, using text structure to assist comprehension, and making predictions about what may come next. Have them use repair (“fix up”) strategies to help them decode unknown words, understand unfamiliar vocabulary, or use alternate comprehension strategies.</p> <p>After reading, teach students to monitor their comprehension and recall by reflecting on what was read to determine if it confirmed or contradicted what they already knew about the topic, to summarize what they read in their own words, or to answer questions about the information read.</p>
<p>Teach metacognitive strategies.</p>	<p>Metacognition refers to students’ ability to think about their own learning. Teach students how to use comprehension strategies by explicitly teaching the purpose of the strategy, when to use the strategies, and how to be flexible with them.</p>
<p>Use graphic and semantic organizers.</p>	<p>Teach students how to use graphic organizers. Graphic organizers are sometimes referred to as maps, webs, graphs, charts, frames or clusters. The purpose of these organizers is to help the reader attend to concepts that are inter-related in a text by representing these concepts visually. Choose graphic organizers carefully to be compatible with the text structure of the reading material. The following are some common types of graphic organizers:</p> <p>Story maps are visual tools that can be used to help students delineate the most important ideas, reflect on the linkage of concepts or facts within a passage and generate questions about narrative stories. The story map consists of questions and statements that students complete to identify elements of the story, implicit information, and story details.</p> <p>Venn diagrams can be used with informational (expository) text to help students visually compare and contrast important concepts.</p> <p>Semantic feature analysis can be used to help students identify the superordinate and subordinate features of abstract concepts that help students to distinguish concepts within the same category (e.g., writing styles) with slightly different features (e.g., narrative, explanatory, persuasive).</p>

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Reading Comprehension Practices that are More Effective

MORE EFFECTIVE PRACTICE	EXPLANATION
Ask questions during instruction.	Ask students questions! Questioning helps them attend to what is important about the reading (e.g., remembering details, identifying the main idea, drawing conclusions from information presented). Questions are typically explicit (answer is found directly in the text) or implicit (answer is implied in the text and sometimes require the use of existing background knowledge) in nature.
Teach students to generate questions.	Teach students to ask themselves questions (self-question) as they are reading. This not only helps them to be more active in their reading, but also helps them to monitor when their comprehension has broken down. Explicitly teach students to ask themselves predetermined questions (e.g., “Who/what is the passage about? What happens to the who/what? Can I retell the passage in my own words?”) or to develop their own questions (e.g., by using “w” questions or headings of the chapter).
Teach students to recognize story structure.	Teach students how to recognize text structure through the use of story maps and graphic organizers .
Have students summarize text.	Explicitly teach students how to summarize information that they read by restating the information read in their own words.

Source: National Reading Panel (2000)

Although these practices seem quite simple, it is important to remember that it can be extremely difficult for students with LD to learn them. It is, therefore, paramount for teachers to use effective comprehension instructional practices.

Common Components of Effective Comprehension Instruction Practices

Reading comprehension is an active process; therefore, comprehension instruction is thought to be effective because it requires students to interact more with text materials during the reading process. Instruction of comprehension strategies is one way to help students with learning disabilities become more efficient at understanding both narrative and expository text. Regardless of the specific strategies used to improve student comprehension of text, researchers (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001; Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Graetz, 2003; Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard, 2000) have indicated that direct explicit instruction should be used that include:

- » explaining why the strategy is important and when and why it should be used,
- » modeling strategies, typically through a “think aloud” process,
- » guided practice, providing explicit feedback, until the student has demonstrated mastery using the strategy (this practice is critical for sustained independent strategy use), and
- » independent practice.

References

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- Schumaker, J. B., Denton, P. H., & Deshler, D. D. (1984). *The paraphrasing strategy: Instructor's manual*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Institute for Research and Learning.
- Vaughn, S., Gersten, R., & Chard, J. D. (2000). The underlying message in LD intervention research: Findings from research synthesis. *Exceptional Children, 67*, 99-114.

Additional Resources

Center for Research and Learning: Strategic Instruction Model (Kansas University)

- <http://www.ku-crl.org/>

Florida Center for Reading Research (Florida State University)

- <http://www.fcrr.org/>

The IRIS Center (Vanderbilt University)

- <http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/>

National Reading Panel

- <http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org/>

Reading Rockets

- <http://www.readingrockets.org/>



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