

How to Improve Reading Comprehension

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Your reading comprehension program should implement a multiple-strategy approach using authentic texts.

Introduction

Reading comprehension forms the stepping stone for the rest of a child's education. You can help children improve their reading comprehension dramatically if you know how. There are myriad ideas about how to do this. Some work, some do not, and some are best used in conjunction with others. Your first step is to understand which methods have been solidly affirmed through research.

The best approaches equip readers with strategies for remaining alert for and organizing the information in the text. This is true for both narrative and expository reading. Following Shanahan (Shanahan 2005) we make the distinction between *strategy* and *skill*. Skills are learned, trained, and eventually applied effortlessly. Strategies, however, are purposeful and applied with deliberate effort: "instead of trying to do something quickly without paying attention, strategies slow the reader down and focus his or her attention according to the demands of purposes and needs" (Shanahan 2005 p.29). Reading comprehension is about *strategy*: not faster, but better.

What we know is that certain strategies do, in fact, work well: readers can employ certain techniques to increase their reading comprehension. In some studies, strategy training appeared to make populations of struggling readers indistinguishable from populations of good readers. Other methods either showed little efficacy or their supporting research was not conclusive. So, in 1997, the United States Congress authorized the formation of the National Reading Panel.

The National Reading Panel, organized by the director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (at the National Institutes of Health), analyzed decades worth of research literature in order to form concrete conclusions about how to best teach children to read (National Reading Panel report, 2000). The panel classified the various methods employed by researchers into 16 strategic categories. They concluded that a handful of these strategies had firm scientific support.

The most successful strategies have common characteristics. Namely, they make the readers continually set expectations for what they are about to read, they give the readers a way to keep checking themselves to see if they understand what they are reading, and they have the readers reorganize the information in a way that makes sense to them.

Perhaps the single most important finding in comprehension research is that **approaches that teach readers to utilize multiple strategies are superior to**

approaches that teach single strategies. Most of the studies tested the application of a single strategy. Scientifically, this is certainly useful information. But when it comes to increasing comprehension, there is no doubt that you should adopt an approach that implements multiple strategies.

You should also use authentic texts. That is, you should use texts of the right level that the reader would normally read, rather than worksheets made up solely for the purpose of teaching reading comprehension. Whether it is the latest award winning prose, or a children's Bible, children should learn and apply strategies in a natural context.

Methods that prompt the reader's mind before reading, have the reader continually monitor whether or not he or she is "getting it," and reorganize the information, lead to comprehension. Perhaps the best way to prompt the mind is to generate questions before and during reading.

1. Generate Questions

Readers can be taught to generate questions that reliably prepare their minds for reading. One way is to have them take something they know about the passage (or story), even just the title if they are at the beginning, and ask the questions, "who, what, how, and why." Their minds will then expect to find these answers, and will either recognize and remember when they see them, or will continue wondering as they continue reading. Either way, they are paying closer attention to what they are reading.

Alternatively, you can have them predict what will happen or be said. They can use the same questions, "who, what, how, and why," to structure the predictions. They will then pay closer attention to see if the predictions were right or wrong.

The research shows that this is a good way to increase reading comprehension. It helps the readers remember what they read and link the ideas together across the text. It also helps them *monitor* their comprehension as they read.

2. Monitor Comprehension

The readers' act of paying attention to whether or not they are comprehending as they read, that is, "monitoring" their comprehension, also has a fancier name: metacognition. They deliberately remain aware of their mental state while reading, and when they realize they are not understanding, review the text and acquire the missing information. Until they become skillful, have them stop as often as every few sentences to decide if they understand what they are reading and to take corrective action if they do not. As they become more proficient, they are able to read for longer stretches between pauses.

Research shows that readers can learn this skill and that it appears to improve comprehension. It is certainly one of the strategies you should consider in a multiple-strategy approach. To give the readers focus when monitoring for understanding, combine the strategy with question generation. And to help them catch any lapses, as they read have them frequently summarize.

3. Summarize

To summarize, the readers distill the central idea of the text and remove trivial and redundant information. Researchers have found that readers in the early grades primarily just delete unwanted text. More advanced readers, however, condense ideas into their own words, and even group ideas from several paragraphs into a single summary statement.

Summarization can be taught and improves with practice. Beginning readers summarize every few sentences or every paragraph. More advanced readers can summarize several paragraphs or even longer passages. Frequently summarizing forces the readers to reorganize the information in a way that is sensible to them. It also helps them monitor so they don't go too far afield before realizing that important information is missing.

As a single strategy, summarization has given mixed results on standardized comprehension tests. But as part of a multiple-component strategy, summarization improves reading comprehension because it aids recall of the text.

4. Use a Graphic Organizer

Another strategy that improves recall is to use a kind of picture that helps some learners better understand relationships. This picture is called a *graphic organizer*, of which there are several types. For narrative text, for example, the reader can write the important events on a timeline or plot arc. Another type of graphic organizer graphs the story elements (problem, solution, main character, and so on) in a way that is appealing to visual learners. Graphic organizers lead to a better understanding of the relationships among the events in the story, especially causal events, and allow deeper understanding and better recall of the story. Researchers call this, "teaching the story structure."

Teaching the story structure improved comprehension for all readers in the early grades, but by middle school the most gains were seen in weak readers. **It may be that weak readers tend to be visually oriented, and the graphic organizers utilized the strength of their learning style.**

5. Use Multiple Strategies

While each of the foregoing strategies for reading comprehension has been shown to work well, using multiple strategies to comprehend text is more effective than using any single strategy. A very effective form of multiple strategy teaching comes from studies on something called "reciprocal teaching" (Palinscar 1984, Lysynchuk 1990), which introduces not only a particular set of strategies to teach together but also a manner of teaching strategies in general. Here we focus on the strategies; we postpone the discussion of how to teach using the reciprocal teaching method until the conclusion section of this paper.

The particular set of strategies applied in many, but not all, of the reciprocal teaching studies is to 1) predict, 2) clarify, 3) question and 4) summarize.

First, the reader **predicts** what the text is going to say. The first prediction comes from the title or other clues in the “packaging,” but after that they come from the text. This focuses the reader’s mind so that he or she is reading for a purpose.

When reading for a purpose it is easier for the reader to monitor comprehension. When comprehension is lacking, the reader goes back through the text to **clarify** what meaning is missing.

An excellent way to determine if meaning is missing is to **question** the text. Select something important, and ask “who, what, why, and how” questions about it. If you can’t answer them, clarification is needed.

Finally, frequently **summarizing** ensures that the text is integrated in the reader’s mind.

The strongest comprehension gains were seen in studies that used multiple strategies.

Conclusion

The evidence that reading comprehension can be taught and learned is convincing. You’ll achieve the best results using a set of strategies that encourage the readers to anticipate what is to come, pay close attention to whether they are understanding and frequently pause to summarize, going back to fill in gaps in the information. What is the best way to teach this? You should consider using the reciprocal teaching method mentioned above.

Reciprocal teaching

The reciprocal teaching method worked very well in the studies. It can be summarized as

1. teacher demonstrates or models the process (“I do”)
2. teacher and learner do it together (“we do”)
3. learner does it independently (“you do”)

First, the teacher clearly guides the students on not only how to apply the strategy, but also when and why. The teacher applies the strategy and explains each step of the application while performing it (“thinking out loud”). Then the teacher lets the students apply the strategy, but provides as much guidance as necessary to keep them from going down the wrong path. Gradually, the teacher offers less guidance, but always enough so that the students succeed. Eventually, the students apply the strategy independently.

The reciprocal teaching method may be applied with individual students or with groups. If you are teaching a group, however, you may wish to incorporate cooperative learning into your lesson.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning studies report notable success having students work together to learn the reading strategies. In these studies, the object was to learn the reading

strategies per se. Learning the strategies in a cooperative environment translated into applying them well; that is, reading comprehension improved significantly. If done properly, students engaged in cooperative learning learn well and sustain higher morale.

How do you do it properly? Use these four steps:

1. Teach the students directly.
2. Have the students, in teams, practice, teaching each other.
3. Assess them individually, that is, each student takes an individual "test."
4. Add the individual test scores to arrive at a team score. Recognize or reward the winning team.

These techniques work. It is important to bear in mind that reading for comprehension requires deliberate effort, and although it will get better with practice, it will never be as easy as reading mindlessly. But through a systematic application of these methods, you should see dramatic improvement in reading comprehension in a matter of months.

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