

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION TO STUDENTS WITH READING PROBLEMS

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is the key with which to unlock the world of knowledge especially in the present day information age. The paper examines reading comprehension strategies that students with reading problems need so as to succeed in school. The paper highlights instructional strategies for teaching comprehension at every level of education, and concludes with an advocacy not just to teach reading strategies, but to teach strategically in order to build content and support language development, thereby helping students with reading problems to become confident and successful readers.

Introduction

Schools across Nigeria have increasing number of students entering general education classrooms every year. These students are expected to learn to read, write, and speak in English regardless of their backgrounds. Federal Government mandates, such as, Education for All Act, National Policy on Education (2004) expect that each and every child, regardless of his/her background, not only have equal access to all areas of the curriculum but also meet state and local curriculum standards. The challenge that teachers face every day is how to teach diverse students how to read and write in order to develop the critical tools needed for learning across the curriculum and for participating fully in society. Teaching reading comprehension, as noted in Anderson and Roit (1998), has the potential to create a dual learning opportunity for students. Key to successful reading comprehension is students' engagement.

When students are genuinely engaged in the comprehension process, not only are they learning about strategies and using them intentionally to make sense of text, they are also continually using language, learning vocabulary, sharing experiences, discussing text, collaboratively solving problems, elaborating on ideas, and engaging in meaningful conversations.

Teaching reading comprehension creates the perfect environment for students to not only learn how to derive meaning from text but also to learn how to talk about text and about what they are learning. Mohr (2004) emphasizes the need for increased talk time for students; reading comprehension instruction provides an ideal environment to foster discussion and accelerate reading development.

The importance of connecting literacy and reading comprehension instruction cannot be underestimated. Drucker (2003) and Allen (2002) note that while students often develop conversational skills in about two years, it takes much longer to develop the academic language that is so important for learning. Comprehension instruction can support the learning of literacy in a nonthreatening and supportive atmosphere. The goal of this paper is to provide classroom teachers with instructional strategies to teach reading comprehension to students with reading problems. The strategies discussed in this paper can be used for both reading and listening comprehension. Strategies are conscious plans that people use in order to achieve a goal. This paper focuses on two types of strategies: comprehension strategies and instructional strategies.

Students need to learn and eventually use reading comprehension strategies on their own in order to monitor and make sense of text as they read.

Reading comprehension strategies are the procedures that all readers bring to bear when they encounter difficulties while reading. When a text does not make sense, readers stop and recognize there is a problem; they use strategies to clarify confusions, inconsistencies, and complexities. For example, readers may reread difficult text at a slower pace, clarify unfamiliar words, and then reread, making connections to the known in order to better understand the less familiar. Comprehension strategies are also used to delve deeper into text, to make connections and inferences, and to draw conclusions.

Teachers use instructional strategies to teach students how to comprehend texts. These are part of the instructional plans for teaching and should be used flexibly depending on the needs of students. Unlike questioning, a common strategy for teaching comprehension, the instructional strategies laid out in this paper emphasize teaching and student engagement. Direct explanation, modeling, scaffolding instruction, pre-teaching, implementing routines, organizing learning, and teaching critical linguistic structures are the keys not only for teaching students how to comprehend texts but also for creating a learning environment in which students are comfortable in discussing problems, sharing ideas freely, and using language confidently.

Obviously, there is an interaction between both types of strategies. The instructional strategies are the procedures used to teach reading

comprehension strategies. Both categories of strategies will be discussed and then integrated into an instructional routine to support students as they engage in thinking about text. Regardless of the comprehension strategy being taught or the instructional strategies being used, teachers must be sensitive to the language proficiency levels of their students. Andzayi (2012) categorizes students into three English language proficiency levels: beginning, intermediate, and advanced proficiency. At the beginning level, students are characterized by limited understanding and production of literacy. By the intermediate level, students are moving beyond mere retelling of information to explaining the why and how. At the advanced proficiency level, students are fluent with academic language and are using complex forms of literacy. Assessing the language abilities of students and using instructional strategies that address the specific language proficiency levels is necessary.

Reading Comprehension Strategies: How to Make Sense of Text

Comprehension requires the reader to interact with the text, to use background knowledge to make sense of what is being read, to monitor and check understanding while reading, and to resolve problems and inconsistencies. Strategies are the tools that readers consciously use and adapt, not only to make sense of text, but also to maximize what they are reading-to get beyond the surface level of the text. Strategies help the reader to navigate through difficult texts, clarify unknown vocabulary, and organize information. Key comprehension strategies include predicting, summarizing, asking questions, clarifying, visualizing or using mental imagery (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001) and making connections. All of these strategies need to be used flexibly and in combination depending on the demands of the text (type of text, difficulty of the text, familiarity of the content) and the background and skills of the reader. Strategy instruction takes time.

Introducing strategies one at a time and providing students opportunities to use the strategies with different texts helps students internalize the strategies. The ultimate goal is to use strategies “flexibly and in combination” (Armbruster et al., 2001, p. 54). Students should be encouraged to discuss the different strategies before reading, focusing on when to use strategies, why use them, and how they can help make sense of texts. Adding visual cues and the names of the strategies in students’ primary languages provides additional support. Even after students have been introduced to these strategies, they may be reluctant to initiate using them. This is understandable because using them involves considerable language production. Introducing and posting starter statements and questions under each strategy is a simple

way to help students get started. Sample statements and questions include “What is difficult about this paragraph?” “I need to clarify...” “What picture is the author trying to create?” and “How does this connect to what I already know?” Statements and questions like these introduce academic language and encourage and support student participation and discussion.

As students become more and more comfortable with strategies, understand how to use them, and begin using the various questions and starters, additional starters can be added that not only encourage student participation but also encourage and support language development. In creating these statements, keep in mind students’ levels of literacy proficiency. For students at the beginning of literacy proficiency level, teachers should keep statements simple and encourage students to respond even if it is with single words or actions or by pointing to pictures. Students at the intermediate literacy proficiency level should be able to use sentence stems. Teachers can start with a few statements and build on them throughout the year. As students begin to use strategies more independently, they can create additional statements and questions and add them to the list. While comprehension strategies provide students with conscious plans to deal with texts, instructional strategies give teachers the tools they need to teach comprehension and plan for different instructions.

Instructional Strategies for Teaching Comprehension

Strategy 1: Direct Explanation

Effective comprehension instruction requires direct explanation. Direct explanation involves telling or describing how a strategy or skill can be used during reading Armbruster et al. (2001). Students are not left to figure out on their own why comprehension strategies are being taught or when and how to use them; the *why* is clearly explained and the *how* is made explicit. Direct explanation of reading strategies should be done within the context of reading, using language that is consistent with students’ language proficiency. For students, particularly those at the beginning level of language proficiency, direct explanation should be enhanced using charts, graphic organizers, and pictures. The use of direct explanation to teach strategies involves telling students explicitly what strategies are going to be learned and why and how the strategies can help them make sense of text. For students with reading problems, introduce one strategy at a time, use it while reading, and give students time to internalize the why and how of the strategy. Before reading a selection, tell students the focus strategy for the lesson. For example, “summarizing is a strategy to use when reading. Summarizing helps readers to

check and make sure they understood what they read and also to remember what they read.

Summarizing requires the giving of the most important information in a text. The reading strategy of summarizing may be particularly problematic for students with reading problems. Often there is a tendency on the part of students with reading problems to repeat almost verbatim what they read. This is natural because students have the text in front of them and can rely on the language in the book. It is comfortable and secure. Although this is a start, it is of limited value because students may not understand what they are saying. Students need to move from this type of retelling to thinking about and identifying the most important information and synthesizing it into a concise statement. They need to get at the kernel or big idea of what was read. For beginning-proficiency students, this may require visual supports, signal words, and restating by the teacher. Stahl (2004) states that teaching signal words—such as *what, why, where, when, and how*, as well as generic questions (e.g. What is the main idea of...?) provides a starting point for young readers to develop a summary.

These cues and structures should be explicitly taught to students. Teachers can begin by asking students to tell about what was just read: Who was the character? What happened? Where did it happen? Teachers can accept single word answers or have students point to appropriate pictures of things from the story. Teacher writes the answers on the board or on a chart and then uses the single words to retell the story using complete sentences: "Oh, Anna told us that the girl picked daisies. Paolo told us that the girl picked lilies. And Richard pointed to the roses. Roses, lilies and daisies are all flowers." A good summary is "The girl picked flowers."

Retelling lays the foundation for summarizing. Students need to be encouraged to move beyond this beginning stage. Working collaboratively, the teacher and students can develop a summary using an explicit instructional procedure developed by Brown, Campione, and Day (1981):

- Delete the trivial.
- Delete redundancies.
- Use super ordinate structures.
- Develop a topic sentence if necessary.

For more proficient students, teachers may begin by writing down what the students think should be in a summary, and then giving them responsibility for identifying trivial and unimportant information and marking it out. Once students have identified the most important ideas, they can work collaboratively to write a summary statement. For example, after a group had

read the book *Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich Last Sunday* (Viorst, 1987), they decided to summarize the story. They began by noting all the things Alexander spent his money on- more of a retelling than a summary. The teacher can write the students' statements on the board and discuss each point commenting on its importance or unimportance and crossing out the unimportant points. Then, the teacher has the students work in small groups to use the remaining information to write a summary.

Strategy 2: Modeling and Thinking Aloud

Another instructional strategy is modeling or demonstrating the thinking readers use when applying strategies. Think-aloud is particularly valuable for teaching comprehension for students in general and for students with reading problems in particular. Think-aloud involves putting into words the thinking and problem - solving used to make sense of texts. Think-aloud simply makes public what readers do unconsciously when they apply strategies. Think-aloud initially is made by the teacher and is used during reading to demonstrate how to use strategies. As students understand strategies and develop their oral language skills, teachers should encourage them to share their own thinking. Think-aloud helps students to understand the purpose of reading, focus on building meaning, value sharing ideas, engage in discussion, and use academic language.

Developing think-aloud involves some planning. Therefore, the teacher should identify logical points in the text to apply the different reading strategies. Think-aloud should include the name of the strategy, why it is being used, and how it is being used. It should sound natural and use language that addresses the linguistic needs of students. Think-aloud should provide scaffolding for students with reading problems to help them understand and use more complex linguistic structures. Teachers must be sensitive to students with reading problems and their linguistic levels of proficiency. Using an excerpt from the story *Rugby and Rosie* (Rossiter, 1997), the teacher can model through a think-aloud the strategy of visualizing. The story begins with a description of a boy and his dog thus: Rugby is my dog. He is a chocolate Labrador, and we have had him for as long as I can remember. He walks with me to the school-bus in the morning, and he meets me there when I get home. He follows me around when I do my chores and he sleeps beside my bed at night. He is my best friend, (n.p.) This beginning provides a perfect opportunity to visualize or use imagery. Students can picture the characters together and sense the feelings they share for each other.

Teachers should vary the think-aloud for visualizing, depending on the types of responses they expect from students at various proficiency levels. For

students with reading problems at the beginning level, teacher's modeling or thinking aloud about visualizing might sound something like, "I read the words. I can close my eyes and see the boy and his dog. They are together at the bus and at home." For students with reading problems at the intermediate level, teachers should provide a more elaborate model. For example, "When I close my eyes, I can visualize this boy and his dog. They are special friends. They have a loving relationship with each other. They are like best friends." This second model raises the bar because it involves making some inferences.

This type of public sharing not only provides insight into how and why to use strategies but also provides models of academic language. As students themselves begin thinking aloud, they begin to use the names of strategies, explain why they are using them, and share their thinking. For example, in *Angel Child, Dragon Child* (Surat, 1983), the author tells the story of a Vietnamese student who came to the United States without her mother and how she and her fellow students resolved problems and developed mutual understanding and respect. Making connections is a natural strategy to use with this story because it encourages discussion and enhances students' understanding of both the strategy and the story. By thinking aloud, teachers are able to model what comprehension is about: making sense, solving problems, using multiple strategies, and reflecting on texts. Thinking- aloud gives students the opportunity to hear teachers restate a selection's content in a manageable language. Once thinking aloud is turned over to students, teachers have an open window to students' thinking and are able to monitor their students' growth and identify where they need additional support.

Strategy 3: Scaffold Learning

Scaffolding moves learners beyond their comfort zone to take greater ownership of the thinking and problem solving involved in reading. When students are first learning to engage in text, to use strategies, to monitor their comprehension, and discuss the selection, they need considerable instructional support. Teaching one strategy at a time, the teacher gradually turns responsibility for modeling and thinking aloud over to students. This shift from the teacher doing all the work and thinking to the students doing the thinking is key. Gambrell and Mazzoni (1999) describe a three-stage model in which the teacher initially assumes the responsibility for using strategies. During the second stage, the teacher and students share responsibility as the teacher prompts students to take more and more responsibility for initiating the use of strategies. In the third stage, students become responsible for applying their knowledge of strategies while reading. This scaffolding helps

ensure the transfer of learning and student ownership of comprehension strategies.

Instructional language used to scaffold the use of strategies must be related to the language proficiency level of students. Teachers must constantly be evaluating students and increasing expectations of students' performance. Students have a tendency to stay in their comfort zone; teachers have a responsibility to move them to more sophisticated levels of thinking, to the use of academic language and greater independence.

Strategy 4: Teaching Useful Linguistic Structures

Adams and Dutro (2005) emphasize the importance of teaching critical linguistic patterns and structures that students need to understand and use in order to discuss texts was emphasized by Adams and Dutro (2005). Examples of linguistic structures are as follows: First, after, then, finally (temporal order words). The cause is..., and the effect is...; The main idea of the paragraph is..., and one detail in the paragraph is...; I want to...like a...; The...behind the...is...

These linguistic structures create a meaningful context for introducing and practising both academic and text-specific vocabulary that is critical for comprehension. The use of linguistic structures supports not only text comprehension but also the development of vocabulary and academic language. Teachers need to scaffold the instruction of these syntactic structures just as they do for comprehension strategies. Examples of linguistic structures that can be explicitly taught to students are shown below. The teaching of these structures supports the development of vocabulary, the use of strategies, and the discussion of texts. Student responses may range from pointing to pictures (beginning-level response) with the teacher incorporating the information into the linguistic structure to advance the use of the structures orally and in writing.

Strategy 5: Developing Elaborate Responses

Teaching linguistic structures helps students focus on identifying and using important information. Students with reading problems are surrounded by a plethora of information waiting to be learned. Teaching linguistic structures helps them sort out and use information, but students need to move beyond these structures to more elaborated responses. As students become comfortable using different structures, they need to extend the use of the structure by adding details, combining short sentences, and using complex sentences. Students need to be moved out of their comfort zone into using more elaborate responses. As noted earlier, scaffolding can encourage students

to extend simple sentences into more elaborate ones. Often students are quite ready to do this on their own; sometimes all they need is simple cueing from the teacher: *Can you tell me... ? (why, when, where, etc.)*.

Scaffolding Strategy Instruction: Elaborating on Responses

Beginning Level

Teacher models: “What did I read about first?; Next?; Last?” (Students may answer with one word); Scaffold by reading the first part again and saying, “I read about...first.”; Place a picture next to the *word first*.

Intermediate Level

Teacher models: “What did I read about first?; Next?; Last?”(Students are able to answer using simple sentences). Scaffold by putting up the words *first, second, and last*. Write a single word response and have students use it in a simple sentence. Encourage students to combine ideas using *and*.

Advanced Level

Teacher models: “What are the important ideas in this selection?” (Students answer with complex sentences that incorporate the main ideas). Scaffold as necessary by having students give a simple sentence. Help students extend by asking them to tell *where, how, why, when, or who activities*.

Strategy 6: Organizing Materials to Support Concept and Vocabulary Development

Students with reading problems need multiple opportunities to develop concepts and internalize vocabulary. By thoughtfully organizing reading materials into themes in which stories are logically sequenced to build on each other, teachers can help students learn critical vocabulary through multiple exposures in multiple contexts (Carlo et al., 2004). In this way, students are able to expand their understanding of basic concepts related to a theme (Mohr, 2004; Schmitt & Carter, 2000). But beyond the obvious advantages themes have for developing vocabulary and concepts, themes provide contextualized opportunities for students to develop ideas, incorporate new vocabulary into discussions about the selections and the theme, learn through different text types, and make connections across selections.

Theme reading should not just be limited to student materials. Teachers should regularly read aloud to students’ theme-related stories to provide opportunities for building concepts (Freeman & Freeman, 2000). In a unit on camouflage, a teacher decides to introduce the unit by reading aloud *Who’s Hiding Here?* Yoshi (1987). The book has carefully crafted colorful

pictures; short rhythmic narratives; and repetitive elements. It introduces basic concepts that students will encounter later as they read selections about camouflage. The book also provides instructional opportunities to meet the needs of students with reading problems at all three levels of linguistic proficiency. For students at the basic level, the teacher uses the book to pre-teach basic themes vocabulary related to colours, names of animals, and the concept of hiding or camouflage. For students at the intermediate level, the book encourages thinking about camouflage and the different forms it takes. Students at the advanced level write about what they already know about camouflage and write questions they want answered through the reading. Students of different English-proficiency levels do not always need different materials; they need teachers who use the materials differentially.

Strategy 7: Pre-teaching

Pre-teaching or front loading (Dutro & Moran, 2003) is key to successfully engaging students with reading problems during reading instruction. Pre-teaching gives students a head start by preparing them for what they will encounter. Pre-teaching can focus on developing critical background information. It can give students opportunities to discuss content or be an opportunity to teach vocabulary, focusing on difficult text elements. It can also be a way to introduce strategies. Carefully structured pre-teaching gives students something else that is critical: a sense of success, a feeling of “I can do it.” If pre-teaching is to be beneficial, the teacher has to identify content, vocabulary, linguistic elements, comprehension strategies, and text organizers that may be problematic for students with reading problems at different proficiency levels.

Returning to the unit on camouflage, the teacher identifies critical linguistic structures that students need to understand in order to both comprehend the upcoming reading selections and to discuss the reading selections such as, ...is the same as...;...can hide by...;...changes...to hide from other animals. Vocabulary instruction is logically connected to these structures as well and gives students needed support for incorporating newly learned vocabulary into their discussions. For example, if *octopus* and *color* are vocabulary words, students might fill in the blanks as follows: “The octopus can hide by changing color.” Using this pattern for other animals and forms of camouflage provides valuable practice.

To support discussion, the teacher can focus on the following linguistic elements: Today, I learned...; I was surprised to find out...; Something interesting on page...was...

Similarly, to support teaching the strategies of making connections and summarizing, the teacher pre-teaches the following linguistic elements: This reminds me of...; On this page I read...

The pre-teaching of vocabulary and linguistic structures helps to ensure students' successful engagement in the actual lesson.

Strategy 8: Using Instructional Routines

The instructional routine of thinking before, thinking during, and thinking after reading has several distinct advantages when working with Students with reading problems. The routine provides consistency and helps students focus their attention on using strategies and learning new content. In addition, it helps students to identify what is important and to set expectations; it becomes an organizer students can use when they are reading any text.

For teachers, a comprehension routine facilitates instruction. Once the routine is introduced, teachers can focus on teaching comprehension. An additional benefit of using a routine is that it maximizes instructional time, which is the precious commodity teachers always wish they had more of. Key to the before-, during-, and after-reading routine is to have students do the thinking. This routine can be used whether the teacher is reading the selection, with the focus on listening comprehension, or the students are reading the selection. Scaffolding, modeling, and thinking aloud are integral to the routine, and student engagement increases with pre-teaching.

Before Reading

Students need to be engaged in thinking before reading, to think about and discuss what they already know and build background about the theme and selection. Activate background knowledge, existing knowledge about the theme to develop a conceptual hook upon which to make connections. Build background by reading aloud carefully selected materials that provide exposure to the theme. This can be done during pre-teaching. Use graphic organizers to connect newly learned vocabulary with concepts and words introduced in read-aloud selections. Develop critical linguistic structures. For example, if the selections are organized temporally, teach words such as *first*, *then*, and *finally*.

During Reading

Students need to be engaged in thinking while reading to use strategies, solve problems, and discuss the meaning of text. Model thinking aloud while reading in order to solve problems and make sense of text. Scaffold instruction to move students toward using strategies on their own. Encourage

students to ask questions when they do not understand something. If students are ready, have them think aloud about how to solve the problem. Discuss problems and their solutions. Develop focus questions to help students center on the big ideas in the selection and the selection's connection to the unit theme.

After Reading

Students need to reflect on text after reading to think about what they have read, connect what they have learned to what they already know, and expand their knowledge. Build language and comprehension by discussing what was read. Scaffold learning by providing pictures at the basic level for students to use. Encourage single word responses or pointing to pictures or specific parts of the story in the text; use discussion starters, such as “I liked...,” to make responding manageable for beginning level students. Encourage students to talk about characters, favorite parts, problematic words, and ideas at the intermediate level. Have advanced students discuss intentions, make inferences, and evaluate ideas. Discuss strategies and how they help the students solve problems. Talk about the type of literature and connect it to other selections of the same genre. Reread the selection with a specific focus in mind. Students can do this in small, collaborative groups, and each group may have a different focus question that they discuss after rereading a selection.

Conclusion

In this era of “Education for All,” instructional time must be maximized. Reading comprehension instruction provides an opportunity not just to teach reading comprehension strategies but to teach strategically in order to build content and support language development, thereby helping students with reading problems become confident and successful learners.

Recommendations

Teachers should consider students’ linguistic levels when choosing materials for them. Students should be encouraged to learn to read with the provision of scaffolds by teachers. In teaching students how to read especially those with reading problems, the teacher should use teaching aids such as charts, pictures, graphic organizers and also demonstrate with practical examples in the classroom. Teachers should create a conducive atmosphere that will promote students’ reading skills, and should be flexible in their use of strategies to achieve the goal of a particular lesson. Finally, students should be

explicitly taught linguistic patterns and structures to help them understand texts.

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