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Do We Understand it?

by
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Webster defines comprehension as understanding or the grasping of the meaning of something. This definition becomes extremely important as it relates to reading since it clarifies that reading is about making meaning from text and is not simply a subset of sequenced skills that are performed by students. It is the notion of reading comprehension that gives purpose to reading instruction in general and for developing strategic readers within our classrooms.

In order to facilitate the development of these readers, it is essential to adopt a framework that focuses on prereading, active reading, and post reading. (These stages are also referred as before, during, and after reading.) Dowhower (1999) does an excellent job of discussing the activities included in each of these stages. The **prereading phase** includes: a) eliciting prior knowledge, b) building background knowledge and connecting it to prior knowledge, and c) focusing on the specific strategy taught. Specifically the students need to know what the strategy is, why they need to know it, and when they need to use it. Like the prereading phase, the **active reading phase** includes three activities: a) setting a purpose for reading the text or a specific section of the text, b) silent reading and self monitoring, and c) working the story. This phase encompasses a rich discussion allowing students to become a part of and process what they have read. It is important to note that this discussion does not involve "an interrogation" but rather an opportunity to really discuss the text and the strategies that should be used. During discussion it is quite easy to fall into an initiate (ask a question), respond (child answers), and evaluate (respond to the answer with a right or wrong response) pattern which does not lead to quality discussions.



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The **postreading phase** is made up of independent activities done by individual students or groups of students and includes: a) recall of content, b) reader response, c) extensions of text, d) strategy use and transfer, and e) informal or self assessment. Examples of activities in this phase are a partner read of the story, sequencing the events in the story, retelling the story into a tape recorder which the teacher can listen to later, and recommending other books that are similar to this story.

Pearson suggests using strategies/techniques that can be used with a wide variety of texts and work through the whole process. The following strategies are included in his recommendation.

Directed Reading-Thinking Activity

(Stauffer, 1969)

This strategy can be used with both narrative and expository text and uses a cycle that asks the reader to predict what is going to happen from either the title or the picture. As the reader works through the text, s/he confirms or disconfirms that prediction based on what is read and the cycle continues as new predictions are made and either confirmed or negated. Directed-Listening Thinking Activity can be used with students that cannot read text on their own and uses the same cycle with the book being read to the students.

Experience-Text Relationship

(Au, 1993)

This strategy allows students to link their own background knowledge to a narrative text through rich discussions before, during, and after the text. This allows the students to develop a relationship and insight with those characters in the text, deepening their understanding of the text.

Visual Structures

(Alvermann, 1991)

As the title indicates this is a general term given to spatial learning techniques like graphic organizers, maps, chains, charts, continuums, webs, trees, grids, matrices, and diagrams. These structures allow students to better understand text ideas and how they are related. They are also very helpful in summarizing information and may be used with narrative and expository text.

Story Grammar or Story Structure

(McGee & Richgels, 1985)

This is probably the most researched comprehension technique. The strategy includes many variations of narrative story parts like character or events. The most simplistic form is the beginning, middle, end often used in primary grades. This strategy is often linked to a visual structure and used as an assessment as well as teaching tool.

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K-W-L

(Ogle, 1986)

This technique is generally used with content area subjects. What you know (K) allows students to tap into prior knowledge while the what you want to know (W) allows them to set a purpose for reading. The learned portion (L) allows students to identify new concepts and enhance their learning. The graphic aid that is used allows students to deepen their knowledge since the summarizing adds a writing component.

While these are just a few of the comprehension strategies that are used within classrooms, these strategies encompass the full reading cycle and are, therefore, highly efficient. Additionally, all have a strong research base and are accepted by the education community at large. While this fact may seem unimportant, it is useful to know that what you are using has, in fact, been proven to be effective.

RESOURCES

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