

*Literacy at the Crossroads, pp. 131-146.*

## **9. Teaching Reading Comprehension Strategies**

**Tara Concannon<sup>1</sup>**

*Comprehension is a central component of the 'reading puzzle' as the goal of reading is to construct meaning. The paucity of reading comprehension instruction in classrooms has motivated researchers not only to observe this phenomenon but also to explore how a 'comprehension curriculum' might be developed. This paper examines some of the main reading comprehension strategies, focusing on the impact each strategy has on reading comprehension and on the practical applications of strategy instruction in the classroom. The author will also discuss effective teaching methodologies related to comprehension strategy instruction.*

A reading strategy is an action (or series of actions) that is employed in order to construct meaning (Garner, 1987). Reading comprehension strategies provide a language around comprehension processes, giving readers a vehicle with which to express their thinking and monitor their thoughts. Readers who know what strategies are, and how and when to use them, are strategic readers (Paris, Lipson, & Wixon, 1983). The competent reader is a strategic reader.

### **THE TEACHING OF COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES**

#### **Importance of oral language**

According to Routman (2000, p.26) 'all learning involves conversation. The ongoing dialogue, internal and external, that occurs when we read, write, listen, compose, observe, refine, interpret and analyse is how we

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<sup>1</sup> Address for correspondence: 1 Beaufield Drive, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Email: [tconcannon@eircom.net](mailto:tconcannon@eircom.net)

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learn'. Alverman, Dillon, and O'Brien (1987) suggest that conversation is a vehicle that enriches and refines one's knowledge, increases one's understanding and memory and helps a learner monitor their own thinking. Indeed, the *Primary School Curriculum* for English (DES/NCCA, 1999) highlights the pivotal role played by oral language in learning to read: 'oral language activity will be at the core of the programme for developing children's comprehension skills' (p.63). In learning how to use comprehension skills, students need plenty of opportunities to discuss and reflect on their learning. Students will require one-to-one interactions with the teacher as well as the opportunity to work with their peers in pairs or groups. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of socio-cognitive learning suggests that learning is most effective when it occurs in the context of social interactions.

#### **Teacher modelling**

Most models of strategy instruction incorporate the teaching of declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge and conditional knowledge (Duffy, 1993; Paris, Lipson, & Wixon, 1995). Declarative knowledge involves explaining what the strategy is and how it is useful to the learner. Procedural knowledge is a description of the steps involved in executing a particular strategy. Conditional knowledge is showing students when and where the strategy might be useful. All three areas of knowledge are taught through teacher modelling. Teacher modelling involves 'thinking aloud' by the teacher (DES/NCCA, 1999, p.63). This is where the teacher reveals the 'invisible' processes involved in comprehending a text. This is a crucial component of strategy instruction as simply describing the process will not enable students to internalise the type of 'inner speech' (Clay, 1991) required to be a strategic reader (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

#### **Instructional model**

Duke and Pearson (1992) suggest a model for comprehension instruction that includes five main components:

- ❑ Explicit description of the strategy
- ❑ Teacher models the strategy in action

- ❑ Collaborative use of the strategy in action
- ❑ Guided practice / reflection
- ❑ Independent use of the strategy

The teacher first explains the strategy and how it is useful in the reading process. Students then have an opportunity to see the strategy in action as the teacher ‘thinks aloud’ while reading, detailing her/his use of the strategy. Teacher modelling can then be followed by guided practice (Duke & Pearson, 1992) which offers the reader the opportunity to try the strategy while the learning is being ‘scaffolded’ (Vygotsky, 1978) by the teacher. Students are encouraged to ‘think aloud’ and discuss their use of the strategy. After having the opportunity to practise the strategy, the teacher models strategy use to the level of conditional knowledge. The teacher may ‘think aloud’ as to when and where to use this strategy or encourage discussion from the students. An essential component of strategy instruction is allowing students the opportunity to reflect on their learning by discussing their strategy use with their peers.

In order to foster independent learning in students, the teacher should engage in ‘coaching’ (McEwan, 2004, p.27). Coaching is the practice of ‘stretching students a bit farther during each succeeding guided practice while still maintaining the instructional level within their zones of proximal development’ (McEwan, 2004, p.27). Coaching can take the form of student think aloud, mini-lessons, providing feedback, and prompting, cueing, and encouraging the student to use the strategy. As students achieve independence, the strategy can be then added to the student’s repertoire.

Having established the procedures involved in teaching comprehension strategies, we will now examine the different strategies in detail.

### **The strategies used by the competent reader**

The National Reading Panel (2002) in the United States identified comprehension strategies that have a solid scientific base including comprehension monitoring, question answering and generation (Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002) and summarization (Brown, Day & Jones,

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1983). McEwan (2004) added activating of prior knowledge and making connections between prior knowledge and new knowledge (Pearson et al., 1992; Hansen, 1981) drawing inferences from text (Dewitz, Carr & Patberg, 1987) and inducing mental imagery (Gambrell & Bales, 1986) to the list of strategies used by highly effective readers. Research has shown that teaching these strategies can improve comprehension of texts in children from kindergarten through to college (see for example Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Brown et al, 1996).

#### **Monitoring/clarifying**

*'What is reading but silent conversation?'* – Walter Savage Landur

The competent reader is aware of when they need to exert more effort to understand the text and also when their comprehension breaks down and needs to be repaired. Comprehension monitoring is defined as a metacognitive process which is affected by person, strategy and task variables. It is an essential requirement for reading as it directs the reader's cognitive processes as s/he attempts to make sense of a text. If the reader realises, in the course of monitoring, that comprehension has broken down, s/he may attempt to clarify meaning, and, in the course of doing this, repair comprehension. Monitoring and clarifying function as a team. Monitoring is evaluative; clarifying is regulatory (Baker, 2002).

Markman (1979) investigated comprehension monitoring among children from third to sixth grade. The common finding in the studies was that younger children were not aware of their failure to comprehend. When asked to read a passage that contained inconsistencies, they rarely detected missing or contradictory information. However, when they were encouraged to 'find the problem' in the passage, their ability to detect errors improved. These studies suggest that children are capable of monitoring their comprehension, but may not do so automatically.

Babbs (1984) found that the use of 'monitoring cards' with fourth grade students increased their recall of content and their overall comprehension of text improved significantly. Klinger and Vaughn (1999) developed a language around comprehension monitoring referred to as 'clicking and clunking'. Encountering familiar words, ideas or

concepts is regarded as ‘clicking’, whereas meeting confusing or unknown words or ideas is ‘clunking’. Klinger and Vaughn (1999) found that teaching students to be aware of difficulties encountered in a text allows them to apply ‘fix-up strategies’. There is also evidence to suggest that pupils who receive training in such strategies transfer them to other situations (Klinger & Vaughn, 1999).

‘Coding the text’ (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000) enables children to practice a repertoire of strategies using the codes as a reference point. Students use codes such as ‘I’ (important), ‘?’ (I have a question) and ‘huh?’ (I am confused) to monitor their understanding as they navigate a text. The codes that children used can then form the basis of a post-reading discussion on strategy use.

### **Visualising**

*‘Reading is seeing’* – Wilhelm (2004)

The ability to visualise is a critical aspect of good comprehension (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Decades of research have proven that getting children to create visual images before, during and after reading is a viable way of enhancing comprehension and research has demonstrated that this skill can be taught (Gambrell & Bales, 1986). Visual structures, whether purely in the mind or transferred onto paper, are powerful tools for comprehension instruction because they offer concrete, memorable representations of abstract thinking processes (Alverman & Boothby, 1986). The process of creating images can help pupils when they are monitoring their comprehension. That is, it increases their awareness of whether the text is being understood (Gambrell & Koskinen, 2001). The construction of mental imagery also encourages the use of prior knowledge, enhances a reader’s ability to construct inferences based on a text, make predictions and remember what has been read (Gambrell & Bales, 1986). According to McEwan, (2004), visualising is the ‘untapped treasure’ among comprehension strategies.

The rationale behind the inducing of mental imagery is firmly rooted in Pavio’s (1971) dual coding theory. This theory suggests that the mind contains two mental subsystems: verbal and nonverbal (visual image).

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Each system is both independent and interconnected. Learning is enhanced when both systems are activated. For example, when a child is learning language s/he needs the 'mental peg' or the visual image in the nonverbal system to understand the verbal component. The word 'cat' means nothing to a child who has never seen a cat. However, when the child is given a visual image connected to the word, it can then be processed.

Many students will not automatically use mental imagery, to do this they will require direct instruction from the teacher (Gambrell & Koskinen, 2001). Research has shown that the creation of mental images can be taught and is of particular benefit to weaker readers (Gambrell & Bales, 1986).

Jacob (1976) found that the ability to use mental imagery is a central factor differentiating good and poor readers. Finch's (1982, cited in Gambrell & Bales, 1986) study, which found that fifth grade below average readers used imagery less often than skilled readers, supported these findings. Gambrell and Bales (1986) trained fourth and fifth grade weak readers how to induce mental imagery. In the post-training assessment, subjects were presented with passages containing inconsistencies. The trained group identified both implicit and explicit inconsistencies significantly more often than the control group.

In the classroom, the strategy of visualising can be approached through thinking aloud, discussing mental images, and engaging children in dramatic and artistic responses to text. A dramatic freeze frame or 'tableau' (Wilhelm, 2003) engages children in visualising a scene from a text and depicting it as a frozen moment in time. Creating this type of dramatic representation requires students to think deeply about the scene, processing all the information given in the text and coupling it with their prior knowledge. Various artistic representations of the story such as annotated sketches, picture maps, illustrated flowcharts/story maps and floor plans/room maps (Wilhelm, 2003) can serve to enhance a child's comprehension and engagement in a text.

## Questioning

*'Questions lead readers deeper into a piece, setting up dialogue with the author, sparking in readers' minds what they care about. If you ask questions as you read, you are awake. You are interacting with words'* (Zimmerman & Hutchins, 2003, pp.73).

Asking and answering questions have traditionally been major aspects of school life. Since Durkin's (1978) landmark study, there has been a rising feeling of dissatisfaction with this comprehension strategy. Durkin (1978) felt that the question asking/answering that she observed, referred to as 'interrogation', was more of an assessment of comprehension rather than the teaching of comprehension processes. Raphael and Wonnacott (1985) found that simply practising answering questions did not lead to improved student performance. This strategy was deemed largely ineffective as the technique was extremely teacher-centered and offered little explicit explanation with regard to how a student could find the answer to a question (McEwan, 2004).

Research indicates that the nature of questions children become accustomed to can shape their understanding and recall (Anderson & Biddle, 1975, cited in Bowe, 2003). When children are generally asked literal questions, they will focus on these during subsequent reading. Guszak (1967) suggests that if pupils are constantly asked to search for trivial information they will not have the cognitive capacity left to attend to more crucial elements such as plots, events and sequences. Hence, it is vital that teachers ask higher order questions and show students how to find the answers. This can be done by discussing the different types of questions that exist (see for example, Raphael & Au, 2005) and using this information to locate the answer.

Taylor, Peterson, Pearson and Rodriguez (2002) found that students must engage in high levels of questioning and do so in highly interactive settings to achieve high levels of comprehension. In order for students to be able to answer higher order questions, they need to understand the relationship between the question and the answer, or where to find the answer (Raphael & Au, 2005). Pearson and Johnson (1978, cited in Raphael & Au, 2005) developed a system of categorising questions that would enable the reader

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to access the appropriate information source in order to answer the question. They laid out three categories of questions: text explicit, text implicit and script implicit. These three categories formed the basis for Raphael and Au's (2005) research into question-answer relationships (QAR). Raphael and Au (2005) renamed Pearson and Johnson's (1978) taxonomy, using the terms 'Right there' (text explicit), 'Think and Search' (text implicit) and 'On my own' (script implicit). She also added a further category 'Author and me'. QAR (Raphael & Au 2005) is a metacognitive strategy that provides a language around questioning that can be used in the classroom. It provides students with a common way of thinking about and talking about sources of information for answering questions. Raphael and Au's (2005) research has found that QAR is an effective method of teaching children how to answer higher order questions.

The cognitive benefits of teaching a variety of questioning approaches to students include improved memory for text, the ability to answer questions with more accuracy, and the ability and to discriminate between types of questions and how to access the answers (Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002).

When teachers ask questions, the emphasis is on the product of comprehension. When students are shown how to generate questions as they read they become active comprehenders and the focus is on the processes involved in comprehension (Wittrock, 1981). Recent research has shown that students need direct, explicit instruction regarding various types of questions, combined with regular opportunities to see the teacher model the processes involved in self-questioning, and further opportunities to self question as they read texts independently (see for example Hansen, 1981).

Self questioning requires greater cognitive effort which results in enhanced recall and retention of information due to a deeper interaction with the text. It also heightens a reader's metacognitive awareness (Pressley & Forrest Pressley, 1985) and aids comprehension monitoring. Training in question generation has been found to be effective in familiarizing students with the cognitive and linguistic demands of question answering as it allows the reader to probe the relationship between questions and answers (Raphael & Au, 2005).

Yopp Nolte and Singer (1985) found that teaching fourth and fifth graders to ask themselves questions at key points in the story significantly improved their performance on tests about story content. Weiner (1978, cited in Yopp Nolte & Singer, 1985) conducted a study where students were taught to use self-questioning as a study technique. The studies found that the trained students outperformed the control group. Yopp (1988, cited in Bowe, 2003) found that when students learn to generate questions their overall comprehension of text improves.

Question generation is an important comprehension strategy as it places the locus of control firmly in the reader. It engages students in deep processing of text material, thus improving comprehension ability.

### **The activation of prior knowledge**

*'The single most important factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows'* (Ausubel, 1968, p.iv).

Schank (1999, cited in McEwan, 2004) suggests that activating prior knowledge is 'at the heart of how we understand and how we learn' (p.21). Competent readers use their prior knowledge to determine the importance of information in the text, to make predictions and to draw inferences from text (Hansen, 1981). Research has shown that children who do not activate their prior knowledge automatically need instruction in how to do so (Paris & Lindauer, 1976).

Martin and Pressley (1991) found that showing children how to relate their prior knowledge to text increased student memory and improved explanations of the information. Before reading, pupils can be shown how to use their prior knowledge to generate predictions about the possible content of the text. Predictions act as a bridge between prior knowledge and the new information in the text. The activation of prior knowledge allows the new knowledge to be integrated into the schema.

Donna Ogle's (1986) K-W-L model encourages the activation of prior knowledge while also setting a purpose for reading. An adaptation of this model, which may be particularly useful for weaker or more reluctant readers, is the anticipation/reaction guide created by Readence,

Bean and Baldwin (2000). In this model the teacher creates three to five general statements on the text, which may appear intuitively sound but may be disconfirmed by reading the text or seem incorrect but may be proven true by reading the text. Students are encouraged to discuss which statements they agree/disagree with and why. During and after reading, the statements are revisited and discussed in the light of the text read. In this way, the students' prior knowledge becomes embedded in their understanding of the text

### **Summarising**

Summarising can be defined as the ability to state the main ideas in a text in a clear and coherent manner. Summarising is a difficult strategy to master. According to Brown et al. (1983, p.1) 'the ability to recursively work on information to render it as succinct as possible, requires judgment and effort, knowledge and strategies'. Cognitive studies indicate that competent readers are proficient at identifying and recalling the main ideas of a text (see for example Brown & Smiley, 1977). Weaker readers, however, tend to experience difficulty in locating the central ideas when reading (Baker & Brown, 1984).

Research has indicated that summarisation skills can be taught effectively (Klinger & Vaughn, 1999) and that the ability to summarise can improve comprehension and recall (Taylor & Beach, 1984). Bridge and Sawyer (1984, cited in Cunningham & Moore, 1986) trained second grade students to locate important information in a text and engage in retellings. Chouhare and Borchardt (1984) studied the effects that summarisation training had on low-achieving high school students. The study found positive gains in comprehension scores. Linden and Wittrock (1981) conducted a study into summarisation instruction. The generation of summary statements caused students to process the text more deeply, thus leading to better retention of knowledge.

Strategy-based activities such as story maps (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002), summary cubes (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002) and timelines can be useful when teaching students how to summarise. McEwan's (2004) 'Five C's of Summarising' may also be appropriate in the senior classes.

## Inferring

*'You will have to fill in the holes yourself'* (Louis Sachar, 2000, p. 231)

Van den Broek (1994) defines inference as 'information that is activated during reading yet not explicitly stated in the text' (p.556). It is the ability to 'read between the lines' using personal prior knowledge to understand the text. According to Oakhill, Cain & Yuill (1998, p.347) 'a fully explicit text would not only be very long and boring, but it would destroy the reader's pleasure in imposing meaning on the text – making it their own'. Indeed, it is the reader's own personal interpretation of a text that makes reading enjoyable. If one reads without pleasure, then one will not choose to read, and thus reading achievement will suffer.

Inferring is one of the most essential cognitive strategies that skilled readers use. However, many weak readers fail to develop this strategy, often claiming that they 'read it, but don't get it' (Tovani, 2000). Because not all information is explicit in the text, it is imperative that teachers encourage students to reflect on information and infer meaning using background knowledge. Research has shown that although children have the mental capacity to infer, some do not do so automatically, without teacher direction (Fredrickson, 1975). However, studies have shown that this strategy can be taught successfully (Dewitz, Carr & Patberg 1987; Hansen & Pearson, 1980, cited in Dewitz et al., 1987). Gordon (1980, cited in Dewitz et al., 1987) successfully used a metacognitive approach to induce inferential comprehension, making the readers consciously aware of clues hidden in the text and the use of appropriate prior knowledge.

Strategy-based activities that promote inferring include creating a 'character resume' (Daniels & Steineke, 2004), 'Two-column notes' (Miller, 2002) and 'meanwhile episodes' (DES/NCCA, 1999). Pearson et al. (1992) emphasise the importance of including a strong emphasis on inferential activities from the outset of instruction as it is the 'heart of the comprehension process' (p.166).

## **CONCLUSION**

‘The essence of good teaching is to show students how to do what is required to be successful’ (Herber & Herber, 1993, p.2). Comprehension strategy instruction is based on the assumption that students do not generally learn to become efficient readers through osmosis. Instead, they need to be explicitly taught strategies that will enable them to understand text. Students must be shown how to use these strategies in flexible, adaptable ways. A competent reader will orchestrate a variety of reading strategies to comprehend a text.

Comprehension strategy instruction should begin with listening comprehension activities in the infant classroom and thereafter in reading instruction at every level in order to achieve a high level of competence in cognitive strategies and reading achievement (Guthrie et al., 1998). According to Pearson et al. (1992), strategies should form the basis of a comprehension curriculum. The curriculum should be spiral and recursive in nature, containing no grade specific strategies/skills. Instead all ages should use all strategies at differing levels of sophistication, adapting and adjusting experiences to accommodate the child’s emerging expertise.

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