

Comprehension Strategies that Enhance Literacy

by

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Crafting a thinking mind is an arduous task which requires teachers to model, guide, and monitor their students' ability to read and respond to text, conversation, situations and graphic works. The art of comprehending any concept requires having the ability to integrate what we already know about a topic with new information. It is a skill that requires the participant to practice metacognition, which is the ability to think about one's own knowledge, and how that knowledge might be refined by learning new information.

Skilled readers and writers need several ingredients in their instructional process in order to become proficient. Foremost they need to have a teacher who understands that teaching is an art and a science, which requires an understanding of how a student learns, behaves, and responds to the classroom experience and the teacher's classroom management. Truly knowledgeable teachers have established the strengths and weaknesses of each of their students. In addition, they have the ability to reflect and establish a curriculum that meets the standards established by their school and a future workplace economy.

In order to understand and utilize the strategies outlined in this article it is important to share that comprehension is one of the elements of the reading process. Teachers need to understand, and be able to teach as necessary to their lesson, the five essential areas of reading instruction which are:

- Phonemic Awareness: the ability to hear and work with sounds and phonemes (word parts)
- Phonics: the ability to hear sounds and relate that sound to a letter (reading/writing decodable text)
- Vocabulary: the ability to understand what a word means in text or conversation
- Fluency: the ability to read with a pace and expression that is smooth and accurate to the passage
- Comprehension: the ability to make connections between the texts, themselves and their experiences

Next students need to have easy access to quality literature at their differentiated independent level as well as guided practice through both frustration and instructional text. Classroom libraries with easy to read text offer practice, enjoyment and further instruction about a topic as well as enhance fluency.

Comprehension is the transaction between the teacher, the student and the text that transforms all those actively engaged in the following activities.

Retrieve Prior Knowledge

In order to have our instruction fully attach itself and modify prior learning we must take the time to ask our students what they know about a topic or an idea. It is especially helpful to chart these ideas and clear any misconceptions our students may share. Charting students' thoughts give such the importance this process deserves.

Make and Confirm Predictions

Another important task a reader should do when reading new information is to survey the cover and make a prediction, supported by details from the cover and their own understanding. This prediction is then confirmed or negated after reading the text, or a part of it. Asking students to close their eyes and to create a mental image of what is being read to them also enhances a reader's ability to see a story in living color and in detail.

Read Aloud to Your Students

In order to develop these thinking skills, students will need to be exposed to and taught an extensive amount of oral language. All students need to be actively engaged in listening to the teacher read, and to follow the guided discussion through text. Such discourse would

include read alouds, and enjoyable time with text, as well as direct instruction. Students need to observe as teachers model reading aloud, complete with fluency that engages the listener (expression) and demonstrates how they think as readers. In essence the teacher talks to himself/herself and to the class as he/she reads and thinks aloud as he/she travels through the text.

Promote a Robust Vocabulary/ Discuss Unknown Words

Understanding that vocabulary in a piece of fiction or non fiction requires instruction, conversation and repeated use of unknown words or words with multiple meanings. These lessons are critical to being able to read with a deeper understanding of the author's purpose and to increase a student's ability to read at a more advanced level. Readers need to develop a rich vocabulary in order to deeply understand text and to communicate their ideas with precision and interest.

Visualize

Using one's imagination to visualize the setting and events in a story does help students to see the details and feel the mood the author is trying to convey. Without visualization, reading can seem quite meaningless and boring. Most students enjoy creating visuals after they read. When given parts of a story to draw, students can then place the sequence of the plot.

Promote Rereading

To gain meaning from words, students need to read aloud to themselves and others. During this process a student would listen carefully to themselves and a partner and self correct when a word needs revision. Rereading text also builds fluency and gives the reader another opportunity to have meaningful engagement with the words in print. Opportunities for rereading exist throughout the day from choral reading to listening to a story on tape or CD.

Use Graphic Organizers

Picture clues and other access features (graphs, maps tables) enable the reader to confirm the meaning gleaned from the text. Graphic Organizers also help student organize their thoughts and the events in a story. The schema represented may appear interesting at first glance, but usually has significant meaning to the student.

Listen to Retellings

One way a teacher knows if a student is grasping the text is to have the student retell the text in his / her own words. This requires remembering much of the story in some sequence and recalling several details including some character names or facts. A rubric to assess how much the student learned or remembered is often helpful.

Make Inferences / Draw Conclusions / Compare and Contrast

Ultimately, a reader needs to read between the lines in order to make inferences about how the text may affect what they already know and affect their future thinking. Readers find this task quite difficult and it usually requires conversation between the teacher and a student or small group of students. Larger groups of students can make inferences, but a small guided reading group enables a teacher to check for individual understanding.

Generate and Answer Questions

Students should develop a list of questions for the author which require answers for who, what, when, where, why, what may happen next, how, etc. These questions should add intrigue as well. Perhaps they might want to role play being the author after a research visit about the author has been completed.

Relate the Text

Lastly, students need to develop a deliberate system for discovering the literal and inferential message in a text. To do this they need to continually relate the text to themselves, the world as they know it, and to other text. In addition they need to summarize, synthesize, analyze and critique the text in order to use what they learned with future fiction and non fiction pieces.

Summarize

The ability to summarize is often quite difficult for students. Learning to select the essential elements presented in the text requires practice and a guiding hand. Having a consistent summarizing sheet available for their use helps them to internalize what they will need to remember. We want students to place this information in their long term memory so that they can draw upon it for future comparisons with new readings.

Evaluate

Forming a judgment requires analyzing the data presented in the activities the teacher has chosen for the students to complete. It is important for students to take a position and defend their thoughts relative to text. When we teach how to make a judgment, we are teaching how to think from two points of view, which further requires recalling important details, character analysis, and authentic details.

Assess Reading Comprehension

Students will have a reduced sense of test anxiety when they are measure in many ways. A teacher can use a formal assessment, such as a unit test or state assessment or an informal measure such as an observation checklist. Rubrics to assess a poster or a presentation should be used as an outline for what is expected when assigning a project and then again as a grading instrument when the task is complete.

Respond in Writing

True literacy comes with being able to respond in writing to what has been read. When possible, every comprehension lesson should incorporate an opportunity to answer an open ended question with supportive details from the text, for as John Sheffield, 17th century poet once wrote "Of all those arts in which the wise excel, Nature's chief masterpiece is writing well."

Bibliography

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