

Teaching Reading Comprehension to Struggling and At-Risk Readers: Strategies That Work

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Abstract

Teaching reading comprehension to struggling and at-risk readers today is different from the past. Teachers need to focus on extensive comprehension instruction with all students, not just successful readers. This article discusses the causes of reading comprehension difficulties in struggling and at-risk readers. It also reviews multiple strategies that have proved to be successful in a second grade classroom in a Title 1, At-Risk school, as well as strategies used and found to be successful by other surveyed teachers. As new best practices in reading comprehension instruction are developed and researched, teaching strategies need to evolve as well.

Introduction

Reading comprehension has multiple definitions and explanations. This article defines comprehension as the process of readers interacting and constructing meaning from text, implementing the use of prior knowledge, and the information found in the text (Pardo, 2004). The terms “struggling” and “at-risk” will be used interchangeably as the strategies work for both.

In some situations, reading comprehension is often tested, but is seldom taught (Ekwall, 1992). Years ago, reading instruction focused on teaching decoding skills, while comprehension consisted of simple questions and retelling (Carnine, 2006). It is crucial that young students are taught the importance of getting meaning from reading (Ekwall, 1992). It is essential that

they understand that the reading process is more than just decoding words.

Prior to the 1970s, the process of reading comprehension was viewed as the reader’s ability to restate the text (Brooks, 2004). Historical strategies include worksheets, which did not engage students, resulting in not much being gained by these activities (Brownell, 2000). Today it is known that skillful readers use prior knowledge, make connections, visualize, infer, ask questions, determine importance, and synthesize the materials that they read (Grimes, 2004).

As the amount of background knowledge concerning a text increases, the ability to comprehend the text correlates (Pardo, 2004). When skillful readers use their schema, their known information is integrated with their new information through a series of connections (Pardo, 2004). Skillful readers verify that what they are reading makes sense and if not use strategies to comprehend the text when it stops making sense (Pardo, 2004). Struggling readers need to be taught to fix their reading when it does not make sense. Teachers need to provide explicit instruction in using reading strategies. It is imperative that teachers “show not tell” how skillful readers read.

Causes of Reading Comprehension Difficulties

There are multiple risk factors involved when teaching struggling and At-Risk readers. These factors include: attendance problems, behavior problems, low academic

achievement, low socioeconomic status, mobility issues, retention, and Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Brooks, 1997; Slavin, 1989).

Although some may have “normal middle class” home lives, others may come from environments that are not as conducive to learning (Slavin, 1989). Four out of the five students (all boys) in the targeted group of students come from at-risk home environments.

Struggling readers may come from underprivileged literacy environments, leading to fewer oral language and emergent literacy skills, and limited prior knowledge (Brownell, 2000; and Brooks, 1997). Some parents of the targeted group in the study rarely take time to read to their children, or may not have the ability to do so according to students. This challenges the ability of teachers to successfully educate students (Brooks, 2004). Struggling and at-risk readers may have less schema to help them comprehend while reading. Teachers need to increase schema in the classroom as much as possible. Learning dispositions can be the greatest obstacle to learning, possibly sabotaging the learning possibilities of reading experiences (Kidd Villaume, 2002).

Struggling readers differ from skilled readers in their use of world knowledge while comprehending texts, as well as monitoring comprehension and fix-up strategies (Parker, 2002). For some, they lack the knowledge needed in order to rectify their breakdown in comprehension (Massey, 2003). They may fail to understand keywords, and the way that sentences relate to one another (Parker, 2002).

Comprehension problems may also be due to difficulties in reading fluently (Parker, 2002). Fluency is vital for students to develop effective reading comprehension skills (Brownell, 2000). Readers lacking fluency spend excessive time decoding, leading to less short-term memory available for comprehension (Brownell, 2000).

Students need to be able to decode well, in order to comprehend the text (Pardo, 2004). Regular independent reading time must be provided for the students to practice the strategies (Pardo, 2004). Dr. Michael Pressley

stated the following, “Reading becomes better with practice, and comprehending becomes better with more reading practice” (Pardo, 2004).

Other issues that struggling readers need to overcome include: low-quality literature, boring reading materials, and inferior classroom instruction (Brownell, 2000). Struggling readers require support for many years, however different types of support are needed at different times in a child’s reading development (Brownell, 2000).

It is imperative that teachers teach decoding skills, build fluency, build prior knowledge, teach new vocabulary, motivate, and engage students with the text in order to improve reading comprehension (Pardo, 2004).

Targeted School in the Study

The elementary school in focus is part of a large suburban Michigan district. The school is responsible for educating about 460 students. The school district is made up of 10 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, 2 high schools, and a vocational technology school.

Targeted Students

Boy 1 Factors: behavior problems, low academic achievement, low socioeconomic status, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (not using medication); attended Extended Day After-School Literacy Program (see explanation in strategy section).

Boy 2 Factors: attendance problems, behavior problems, low academic achievement, low socioeconomic status, and mobility issues; attended Extended Day After-School Literacy Program.

Girl 1 Factors: IEP for reading and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (currently using medication); attended Extended Day After-School Literacy Program.

Boy 3 Factors: attendance problems, hearing loss, low academic achievement, and low socioeconomic status.

Boy 4 Factors: behavior problems, low academic achievement, low socioeconomic status, mobility issues, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (currently using medication); attended Extended Day After-School Literacy Program.

Strategies

Although one particular strategy may be well-suited for one reader, it may not work for another (Brooks, 2004). Therefore, teachers need to assess the strengths of their students, and build on their weaknesses (Wade, 1990). Strategies should be introduced one to two at a time, gradually increasing in number for students that are new to strategy instruction (Brownell, 2000). Teachers teaching the strategies should integrate their strategy instruction into their ongoing teaching (Brownell, 2000).

According to Raphael et. al., there are three principles of reading comprehension instruction. First, it is imperative that comprehension instruction is explicit. Second, the strategies must be modeled by skillful readers including teachers and peers. Last, the strategies must be scaffolded by teachers until the students are able to use the strategies successfully while independently reading (Raphael, 2004).

Efficiency is critical when teaching at-risk students (Carnine et. al., 2006). This can best be achieved by placing student in an instructional group with others that are at their instructional reading level (Carnine et. al., 2006). If possible, at-risk students should receive extra instructional reading time daily, with the amount of time depending on the grade level and how far the child is below grade level (Carnine et. al., 2006).

Although it is definitely important for teachers to explicitly model the strategies, they need to also correct any confusion that emerges while students try out their newly gained strategies (Kidd Villaume, 2002). It is imperative that teachers remind their students about strategy use, if their students neglect to use the strategies on their own, emphasizing that strong readers use strategies (Brownell, 2000). It is of great importance to explain to students that each

single strategy makes up only a small part of what skilled readers do while reading (Kidd Villaume, 2002).

Engagement and Motivation to Read

Motivation to read can impact a reader's persistence in reading. Students with higher amounts of motivation are more likely to apply the use of comprehension strategies while reading (Pardo, 2004). Although there are many motivational factors that are not within the teachers' control, teachers are able to motivate students to read by providing interesting texts, allowing choices to be made as levels of engagement increase, so does comprehension (Grimes, 2003).

Activation of Prior Knowledge

Activation of prior knowledge makes up a great amount of the process of reading comprehension. Teachers should attempt to activate as much prior knowledge as possible prior to reading the text, allowing students to apply the prior knowledge use while reading (Pardo, 2004). They also need to teach how to decipher useful background knowledge from other background knowledge (Raphael, 2004). Strategies to effectively activate prior knowledge include: brain storming, predicting, pre-reading questioning, and topic talking (Brooks, 1997). Picture walks before read-alouds, guided and independent reading are also effective (Cunningham, 2006). Reading aloud, thinking aloud, along with teacher modeling activating schema, and making connections enables readers to apply this information while they read (Pardo, 2004).

Teacher Read-Alouds

Teacher read-alouds are a great opportunity for students to learn vocabulary, as well as reading skills and strategies (Cunningham, 2006). When working with students reading at emergent levels, teachers need to have a strong comprehension focus while reading aloud (Carnine et. al., 2006). Before reading aloud to students, teachers

should choose a few vocabulary words that the students may not understand. Teachers should then focus attention on the vocabulary words during the interactive read-aloud, teaching children to use picture and context clues to figure them out. Following the interactive read-aloud, review the vocabulary words (Cunningham, 2006).

Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension have a strong relationship (Ekwall, 1992). New vocabulary words should be taught prior to reading, as the reader will spend too much time figuring out the new words, and will be unable to comprehend the entire reading passage (Pardo, 2004). Teachers can use the Internet to aid them in the process by finding visual images of the new vocabulary terms (Cunningham, 2006).

Comprehension Checklist

Teachers may use laminated bookmarks showing the strategies, using pictures if necessary (Massey, 2003). They may add new strategies to the bookmark as they are taught (Massey, 2003). This helps students to monitor their own progress. The bookmarks should include pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading strategies (Massey, 2003).

Sustained Silent Reading of Student Selected Texts

Students should be able to self-select texts that they are interested in, as well as that are at their own reading level to independently practice their reading comprehension strategies. Targeted students demonstrated more on-task behaviors while reading when they chose the books to be read. This is one of the most effective strategies for increasing vocabulary, fluency, and overall reading skills (Routman, 1998). It is imperative that the students are monitored carefully, as well as held accountable for the material that has been read (Routman, 1998). Occasionally it is necessary to assign only a page or so at a time, until meta-cognition,

and self-correcting use is evident (Routman, 1998).

Scaffolded Retelling

Research shows that using story mapping with struggling readers is recommended, assuming that the teacher is not using the story mapping as “busy-work” (Balajthy, 2003). Teachers can scaffold retelling instruction by creating fill in the blank retelling forms including forms on: story summary with one character included; important idea or plot; setting; character analysis; and character comparisons (Balajthy, 2003; Ekwall, 1992). Students can be provided with note sheets containing places for: title, setting, characters, problem, important events, outcome/reaction, and theme. Students may fill in these forms while they read to keep track of their reading, not as a form of busy work (Carnine et. al, 2006).

School-wide Reading Program

Schools can work together as a team, building a program that supports all students. They must first develop a learning community for all students and staff. It is imperative that large blocks of uninterrupted reading time are scheduled. Teach students to find books that are interesting to them, as well as that are age-appropriate. Every staff member should communicate their passion of reading with all students. Staff members should become teacher researchers, by researching best practices regarding reading instruction (Grimes, 2004)

Extended Day Literacy Program

The Extended Day Literacy Program is offered at the targeted school, funded by Title 1 money. The program is offered one hour per day, four days per week (after school), for a five month period for struggling students in grades one and two. The program consists of thirty minutes intensive guided reading instruction in small groups, and thirty minutes literacy related activities with a para-pro.

Home Reading Programs

Promoting reading at home is essential when teaching at-risk readers (Balajthy, 2003). Students from at-risk home environments may not have reading material that is their level at home. As part of this study, the targeted group of students was provided with leveled books from: www.readinga-z.com. The students were provided with new books every couple of weeks, increasing in difficulty as the students' reading abilities increased. This allowed students to have materials that were at their independent reading level, to practice their newly gained skills and strategies at home. Three students reported that they read their books to family members.

Pizza Hut's "Book It" program (<http://www.bookitprogram.com>) was also used for the months of October-March during the study, with three of the five students in the study participating at least 3 out of the 6 times. This program provides free personal pizzas, as rewards for reaching monthly reading goals. The rest of the students in the study did not participate at all in this program.

Teacher Surveys

This study included surveying teachers at the targeted school in the study, fellow graduate class students as well as teachers on the "Mosaic: A Reading Comprehension Strategies Listserv" (<http://www.readinglady.com/mosaic/index.htm>). Eleven teachers responded to some or all questions. The following are the survey questions, followed by sample responses of strategies that worked for the surveyed teachers.

How can I best teach reading comprehension skills/strategies to struggling and at-risk readers?

- Guided Reading
- Teach the strategies through a unit of study (ex: nonfiction) by spending a few days on one strategy, followed by scaffolding through the others.
- Help the kids observe themselves as readers so that they begin to notice which of the

strategies is most helpful to them. These strategies become part of their "fix-it" menu.

- Include a bit of reflection and introspection after the independent work time is over so that the kids can share their findings about themselves as readers.
- Be sure to include how the strategy enhanced the comprehension. You must provide a lot of modeling of meta-cognition or else, chances are, your students will not have a clue.
- School wide comprehension focus: Reading teachers model in every classroom a new strategy a month and also do one team teaching lesson each month in every classroom related to that strategy, allowing students to get a double dose.

What interventions can I utilize to help me?

- Reading Recovery
- Students meet in small groups three times each day during the 60 minutes allotted for literacy stations. One group meets with the teacher assistant, one group with the teacher, and one group rotates through independent literacy stations. Stations have various activities that allow the students to practice previously taught skills or to work on vocabulary for the week.
- Buddy up with a better reader and use aide to help
- Reading buddies with animals

How can I use my para-pro efficiently to aide me in this effort?

- Make sure they understand that they are responsible for teaching to the teacher's philosophies and beliefs.
- Review vocabulary and reread texts.
- Have the para-pro focus on one strategy one on one

How can I teach higher-level (Bloom's taxonomy) skills with simple books?

- By looking for complexity in the illustrations, we can engage children in higher level thinking.
- Higher level skills are again taught with large group through warm-ups, shared book, and read alouds by providing opportunities to think of different endings, what if's, if you were in the book how would you have reacted, comparing texts with sequence, characters, and settings.

How can I work together with parents to help the struggling readers when parent contact is difficult?

- Detailed newsletters
- Follow up phone calls. Teachers need to be very explicit on a child-by-child basis with descriptions of struggles and successes. Explain how to support children just as specifically.
- Require students to read 30 minutes each night.
- Communication is key: send home strategy lists, have them come to reading night, give them a list of computer programs/websites that are helpful or that have good reading activities.
- Literacy night to inform parents about teaching reading, and what they are expected to learn
- Teach families the reading strategies, interventions on how to work with their children at home.

How can I make them feel like they are successful readers?

- Children set personal reading goals and strive to meet varied goals. Offer guidance, the children are in control. The struggling reader who meets his or her goal has earned as much success as the child who reads as a matter of second nature.
- Marie Clay's model for praise points with children, making sure to be explicitly praising so that they know just exactly what they do well.

- Focus narrowly on teaching points and work this focus across more than one conference.
- Accelerated Reader Program
- READ-IN-an all day reading event during school
- Celebrate their successes, have them read to someone "special" or important (the principal, etc) even three minutes can boost a student's self esteem and confidence.
- Give them many opportunities to answer questions that do not have one correct answer. This way he/she can feel that the contribution is valuable. By providing more than just listening to a book, it makes the children see books in a different light.
- Send home leveled books at their reading level to help them to practice fluency and comprehension at home.

Study Results

By using multiple reading comprehension strategies, four out of the five students were on grade level by the end of the study. The following are strategies from above that were used with all of the targeted students: Activation of Prior Knowledge, Vocabulary Instruction, Sustained Silent Reading of Student Selected Texts, Teacher Read-Alouds, Extended Day Literacy Program, Reading A-Z Home Reading Program, and the Pizza Hut Book-It Program. All of the students that participated in the Extended Day Literacy Program were on grade level by the end of the study. Table 1 below shows student development in their reading comprehension skills.

Table 1: Reading Development of Targeted Students

F&P Level					
M	3/13:4	4/10:3	3/13:2		4/12:3
L	3/1:3	3/13:3		4/11:3	
K	2/3:3	2/1:4	1/9:3		1/4:3
J	2/1:2			2/10:2	12/7:2
I	1/9:3	1/31:4			
H	12/14:3	1/11:4	12/5:2	1/24:3	
G	11/29:4	1/11:4	11/29:3	1/3:3	11/22:2
F	11/16: NA	12/14:NA	10/19:NA	11/16:NA	11/9:NA
E	10/25: NA	11/29: NA	10/11: NA	10/17: NA	10/25: NA
D	10/11: NA	11/9:NA			
C	9/7:NA	10/25:NA	8/31:NA		10/12:NA
B					
A					9/6:NA
	Boy 1	Boy 2	Girl 1	Boy 3	Boy 4
Score: Date: Retelling score (NA if less than "G" level)					
J = On grade level (fall)					
K = On grade level (winter)					
M = On grade level (spring)					

Implications

Reading comprehension instruction has evolved over the years, and will continue to do so in the future. It is necessary for teachers to have their teaching strategies evolve, as new best practices in reading comprehension instruction are developed and researched.

There is not one single strategy that can teach the multiple phases of vocabulary development and reading comprehension (Brooks, 1997). Interventions need to begin as early as possible, using multiple strategies and activities in order to increase reading comprehension skills use in struggling and at-risk readers. Reading comprehension skills and strategies are best taught while in the context of actual reading, as fragmented instruction is rather difficult for at-risk learners (Rotuman, 1998). Best practices in reading education confirm that reading comprehension education needs to be differentiated for all learners.

Teaching struggling and At-Risk students is an area of concern for many educators. This area needs to be researched further so that all students will grow and develop. Teachers need to work together by sharing what works for them.

This may be as simple as talking with the teacher next door, or joining a reading education listserv such as "Mosaic: A Reading Comprehension Strategies Listserv" (www.readinglady.com/mosaic/) which provided many survey respondents). As educators work to close the achievement gap, educators must remember that focused and customized comprehension instruction is vital.

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