The Reading Connection

Jordan's note: As has become our custom, a summary of the R.E.G. Winter Dinner's guest-speaker address is the substance of the following newsletter. On March 13, 2003, our own Ruth Yopp-Edwards shared her research and insights on comprehension at the Winter Dinner, and does the same, here, in a condensed version for "The Reading Connection." Since all of our efforts on behalf of our students are ultimately directed at comprehension, we warmly welcome Ruth's expertise.

Comprehension Instruction

by Ruth Yopp-Edwards, Ph.D., Guest Contributor
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When Dolores Durkin's classic study of reading comprehension instruction was published in the late 1970's, it rocked the literacy community. Durkin's (1978-79) research had revealed that fewer than 28 of 4469 minutes (less than 1%) observed during reading periods in 24 fourth-grade classrooms in 13 districts were devoted to teaching students how to comprehend. Instead, the greatest portion of class time was devoted to assessment of comprehension where teacher questions dominated: Teachers assigned students to read and then asked them questions about what they read. This finding resulted in great attention to research in comprehension instruction over the next couple of decades—a time that has been referred to as the Golden Age of Comprehension because so much was learned about comprehension processes and the teaching of comprehension. In this article, I will briefly discuss four current understandings about the effective teaching of comprehension.

Vocabulary is Important

Vocabulary knowledge strongly influences comprehension. In fact, it has been demonstrated that as word recognition becomes automatic and requires less mental energy, more general language skills such as vocabulary become the limiting factor in reading ability (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Inadequate vocabulary knowledge has been identified as a major factor in the school failure of some children (Becker, 1977, in Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000). It is crucial, then, that vocabulary be taught. Teach it explicitly. Teach it implicitly. Provide repeated exposures in many contexts to words that are being learned. Teach children how to use morphemic and contextual clues to figure out the meanings of words. Attend to students' word knowledge.

Build and Activate Background Knowledge

Much research in the 1980's demonstrated that what students already know strongly influences their understanding of a text. The more students know about a topic, the better they are able to understand a text on the topic. We need to help students acquire background knowledge as well as teach them to activate it during reading.

How do we build our students' background knowledge? By engaging them in real world experiences (field trips, hands-on experiences), by providing them with text experiences (the more you read, the more you know), and by structuring opportunities for them to interact with—and so learn from—others. And, how do we teach them to activate the background knowledge they have acquired and to make connections between their world knowledge and a text? One strategy that has been demonstrated to be effective is "elaborative interrogation." In this strategy, students are taught to ask and answer the question Why does this make sense? as they read. This question forces them to think about the text, think about what they already know, and articulate the connection.
Teach Comprehension Strategies

We need to teach our students the strategies that good readers use. Good readers are purposeful and active. They use their knowledge of world, their knowledge of vocabulary and language, and their knowledge of reading strategies while they read. Reading strategies that have been demonstrated to enhance comprehension include the following: monitoring comprehension, using graphic and semantic organizers, answering questions, asking questions, summarizing, using prior knowledge, and constructing mental images. These strategies can be taught using a phase-out/phase-in, or gradual release of responsibility, model. The teacher begins by explaining and modeling the use of a strategy. She or he then gradually releases responsibility for using the strategy to the students by guiding and providing feedback to the whole class as students together attempt to implement it. This is followed by having the students practice the strategy in small groups and then in pairs and, finally, independently. Strategies should be taught early and should be taught for fluency.

Provide Ample Time for Reading

One surprising finding from the 1970’s and 1980’s was how little time students actually spent reading--as few as seven minutes per day in the primary grades and 15 minutes in the upper elementary grades. Students spent more time on skills than on putting skills together to read connected text (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). In 1990, Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama found that in a sample of fifth and sixth grade classrooms, students averaged only 15.8 minutes of reading during a 50-minute reading period, with class averages ranging from 9.6 minutes to 18.7 minutes. More recently, my sister and I found that some elementary students spent no time at all reading connected text in a one-hour period of time (Yopp & Yopp, in press). We also found that less-able readers spent less time reading than more proficient readers, even during time designated for sustained silent reading.

Yet, most reading professionals--even those who have wide differences of opinion on other matters--agree that time for reading is important. Reading builds fluency of word recognition and comprehension strategies, it builds vocabulary, it builds background knowledge. Fielding and Pearson (1994) argue that providing ample time for reading and ensuring that students are actually reading are among the most important tasks of the reading teacher. Ensuring that students actually read requires that teachers understand how to motivate them to read.

How do we motivate students to read? Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) tell us to provide instruction that emphasizes meaning and builds competence, to provide real-world experiences related to the text, to offer book choices, and to provide opportunities for collaboration. Palmer, Codling, and Gambrell (1994) note that students find prior experiences with books, social interactions about books, book access, and book choice to be motivating. The message: Build reading competence! (Students will not want to read if they do not feel competent.) Build your classroom library! Emphasize meaning! Share books, and structure opportunities for students to talk about them!

As we build our classroom libraries, we need to keep in mind the importance of providing students with a wide variety of genres. Recent research has revealed that we may be failing some of our youngest readers in this category. Specifically, there is evidence that we are not providing students in the early grades with sufficient opportunities to read informational texts, texts that may be a catalyst for reading for some students (Caswell & Duke, 1998). Others note that when we do not expose young children to informational text, we doom them to struggle with content area text in later years (Duke, 2000; Moss, Leone & Dipillo, 1997; Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

A Final Word

The written word inspires and informs us, stirs us to action, moves us to laughter and to tears. To teach reading means to teach our students how to connect with text in powerful ways and to understand that reading is a meaning-based activity. The four broad categories of findings related to comprehension
instruction discussed here should guide teachers as they continue to support their students, whatever their ages, in achieving reading success.

References


Palmer, B.M., Codling, R.M., & Gambrell, L.B. (1994). In their own words: What elementary students have to say about motivation to read. The Reading Teacher, 48, 176-178.


Additional Recommended Readings


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Faculty Footnotes

By Kathi Bartle Angus

REG’s annual dinner provides wonderful opportunities for alumni to reconnect with faculty and to meet current students. It also provides faculty with an opportunity to keep up with our illustrious alumni. Our last dinner was no exception.

The evening began with a welcome from REG president, Jan Bagwell, followed by a second welcome from Dean of HDCS, Dr. Roberta Rikli. Dr. Rikli commended our organization for serving as a model for other potential organizations throughout the campus and system. She also praised Reading and Education faculty for the leadership roles that they provide statewide.

Several presentations were made following dinner. President Juan Vazquez, Santiago Canyon College, was recognized as this year’s recipient of the Reading Department Outstanding Alum Award. Dr. Ruth May Siegrist, faculty emeriti, shared her memories of when she and Juan were Reading graduate students in the 1960’s under the supervision of Dr. Hazel Croy.

Toni Chambers, REG Vice-President, Membership, shared her research into REG’s history and concluded with special presentations. Peggy Hammer, Pat Irot, and Dixie Shaw were honored as founding members of REG and praised for their incredible vision in establishing an organization that has provided a professional connection for reading educators in Orange County for over 30 years. They were presented with lifetime memberships in REG.

Although Dr. Ash Bishop is currently on sabbatical this semester, he was able to join us for the event. He recalled Dr. Ruth Yopp as a young teacher and graduate student who enjoyed his course, Teaching Reading in the Elementary School, so much that she took it two semesters in a row. Of course he later discovered that the student in his course the previous semester was Dr. Hallie Yopp, Ruth’s twin sister. As REG members know the collaborations of Bishop, Yopp, and Yopp later lead to two wonderful books on early literacy education. Read about Ruth’s wonderful presentation at the dinner in the feature article

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2003-2004 Board Members Approved

The current REG Board was approved for a second term by REG membership present at the Winter Dinner in March. Jan Bagwell will serve her second term as President. We are very excited to have her heading up the supporting board members who are as follows:

Toni Chambers, Vice President Membership
Jan Lee, Secretary
Donna Padgett, Treasurer
Jordan Fabish, Graduate Liaison
Kathi Bartle Angus, Faculty Liaison
JoAnne Greenbaum, Website Coordinator
Jan Court-Keller, Newsletter Editor

Hancock Fund

The Hancock Fund was established to honor Dr. Deborah Osen Hancock for her contributions to the field of reading and specifically to the Reading Department. The fund is solely for use by the CSUF Reading Clinic. Over the years, the fund has supplied books and technology for use by clinicians and students. REG would like to thank the following members for their generous contributions to the Hancock Fund:

Dr. Julie Chan
Maria Duran
Dorothy Erick
Kathleen Engstrom
Andrea Sward
Chris Parmenter
Joan O'Toole
Cathy Knowles

Lifetime Membership Award

A special part of the REG Winter Dinner was the presentation of the Lifetime Membership Award. This new award was created to recognize outstanding contributions by REG members to the organization, the university, and the community. The first recipients of this award were Dixie Shaw, Pat Irot, and Peggy Hammer, the "founding mothers" of REG. As graduate students in the Reading Program over 30 years ago, Dixie, Pat and Peggy broke new ground by conceiving the idea for a Reading Department alumni organization and doing the hard work to get it up and running. REG thus became the first alumni group on campus associated with a particular program. Later they created REG fundraising activities to help support the Reading Clinic. This was also a first on campus since until then, there had been no fundraising activity by alumni groups. Without the vision, persistence, and continuous support of these ladies, REG would not be the thriving organization it is today. We are truly proud of them!

Reading Educators' Guild Newsletter Staff

Editor: Jan Court-Keller
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If you would like to have something published in the REG Newsletter, please contact the REG staff at kellermrs@hotmail.com.