

Title: “Comprehension Instruction in the Primary Grades”

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Subject(s): Comprehension

Grade Level: K, 1–2

Synopsis: The authors argue that comprehension strategies can be taught to children in the primary grades, even as young as kindergarten. They cite specific studies to support this claim.

Story Elements: Bauman and Bergeron (1993) taught story structure to grade 1 students by providing explicit instruction in story elements (character, setting, problem, events, solutions). Children taught story elements outperformed control groups, and could provide longer, more coherent, more organized retellings.

Guided Story Retellings: Morrow (1985) studied kindergartners. Half were given practice in guided retellings. After listening to a story read aloud, they sat one-on-one with the teacher, retelling the story while the teacher asked leading questions to help them focus on story structure. Results showed this method improved their listening comprehension of written text.

Explicit, Direct Instruction in Comprehension Strategies: In a study reported by Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, & Schuder (1996), second-grade students were taught using the SAIL approach, which included explicit instruction, modeling, and discussion to teach comprehension strategies. Children taught using this approach did better on both comprehension and word attack. Pressley et al. (1994) describe the use of the SAIL program with first graders, with similar results.

Activities that support understanding text: Several other studies are mentioned. An evaluation of the KEEP program is reported by Tharp (1982). This Hawaiian program uses the E-T-R (experience-text-relationship) sequence in reading literature. Before reading, student experiences related to the text are discussed. Then students read the text. Finally, they discuss relationships between their own experience and what happened in the text. At grades 1–3, children taught using this method outperformed control groups on tests of vocabulary and comprehension.

Other studies are also examined.: Stahl, Heuback, & Cramond, 1997; Dowhower, 1987; and Eldredge, Reutzel, & Hollingsworth, 1996, who found that shared book experiences were of greater value to children’s comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary development than round-robin reading practices.

Studies of exemplary teachers have found that such teachers in the primary grades give attention to both comprehension and decoding. See, for example, a study of first-grade teachers (Morrow et al., 1999), and a study of first- and second-grade teachers (Taylor et al, 1999).

Most research on comprehension instruction has been done with students at grades 3 and higher. While the studies described above show that comprehension instruction is effective in the primary grades, there is more research that needs to be done to answer questions. Three important questions yet to be answered are:

- (1) How can comprehension instruction transfer from listening to reading?

- (2) Are some comprehension strategies more foundational than others?
- (3) How can we position young learners to develop comprehension skills for the information age? (help them with informational text, nonlinear text, hypertext, etc.)

Quote(s): “Comprehension and decoding can exist side by side as instructional goals and valued student outcomes in an exemplary and comprehensive literacy program for primary grade children.” (p. 247)

“Comprehension instruction should have a prominent place in primary-grade curricula.” (p. 253)

“Research shows that it is possible to affect children’s comprehension development at least as early as kindergarten.” (p. 253)