

**Title:** "Comprehension Instruction"

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**Subject(s):** Comprehension

**Grade Level:** All

**Synopsis:** This is a review of the research on comprehension instruction from the 1980s, especially the last five years of the 1980s. As background, the authors tell us that Pearson and Gallagher, in a review of the research in 1983, "came out foresquare in favor of what they label a model of explicit instruction, in which teachers demonstrate to students how to carry out particular strategies, then engage them in guided practice, followed by independent practice. Finally, students apply the strategies on their own while *reading* regular texts." (p. 817) Another milestone occurred when Pearson (1985) published an article in *The Reading Teacher* and Gersten and Carnine (1986) published an article in *Educational Leadership*, both advocating direct instruction in comprehension strategies.

#### Narrative Text

Studies have focused either on background knowledge (especially knowledge of *story grammar*) or on asking questions/discussing the story. There are weaknesses in the *story grammar* concept, however, and Beck's work on *story ideas* may be more productive (see Beck, Omanson, & McKeown, 1982). The authors wonder how well instruction in story grammar or story ideas will work when used with "real" children's literature that may not conform well to an abstract story grammar.

#### Expository Text

*Text Structure* instruction seems to work well with expository text if the goal of instruction is for students to produce a summary or graphic organizer of the text. It has no advantage (and may be a disadvantage) when the outcome is general comprehension of the content (e.g., students must answer detailed multiple-choice questions or short-answer questions). In these cases, simple rereading or skimming works just as well. (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984) Studies of *visual representations* of text include teaching students networking, flowcharting, mapping, and graphic organizers to display information. Conceptual frames (Armbruster, Anderson, & Ostertag, 1987) have been used to teach fifth-grade students how to use a problem-solution structure while reading content area textbooks.

Recent studies on teaching students to *summarize* have shown good results, although older studies had generally negative results. The difference seems to be that now the instruction is better designed and "includes conscious attempts on the part of the teacher to let students in on the 'metacognitive' underpinnings of the instruction: the *what, how, why, and when.*" (p. 835)

#### Any Kind of Text

Attempts to Get Students Actively Involved In Learning

*Self-questioning* and *self-monitoring* instruction has shown positive results in several studies.

Working Together With Peers And Teachers

*Cooperative learning* and *peer tutoring* can increase comprehension and learning.

*Student-teacher dialogue* is also important.

#### Opportunities to Read Connected Text

Studies that were designed to increase the amount of reading children do have met with only mixed success. (p. 844)

Repeated reading of the same text has led to improved comprehension as well as improvements in fluency and reading speed.

#### Summary

Using text structure, making connections to background knowledge, monitoring comprehension, and summarizing all help students improve their comprehension. This leads to a general conclusion that any time students are *active* in using the ideas from a text they understand and remember more from the text.

- Quote(s):** “In a number of studies, comprehension improvement after instruction in story structures [e.g., setting, problem, goal, action, outcome] has been noted both beyond the specific stories used during instruction and in ‘natural’ storybooks.” (p. 821)
- “Morrow (1984a, 1985, 1986), for example, found that frequent practice in retelling, bolstered by adult feedback focused on story structure, improved kindergarten children’s story comprehension, their understanding of story structure, and even their oral language complexity and ability to produce their own stories.” (pp. 823–824)
- “In general, we have found incredibly positive support for just about any approach to text structure instruction for expository text. It appears that any sort of systematic attention to clues that reveal how authors attempt to relate ideas to one another or any sort of systematic attempt to impose structure upon a text, especially in some sort of visual re-representation of the relationships among key ideas, facilitates comprehension as well as both short-term and long-term memory for the text.” (p. 832)
- “It is clear from our review of recent work that helping students learn how to summarize the texts they read has a positive effect on their comprehension and recall of text.” (p. 835)
- “Questioning oneself while reading seems to be a characteristic activity of good readers.” (p. 836)
- “The general finding of the vast literature about *cooperative learning* . . . is that both high-achieving and low-achieving students benefit from the opportunity to learn together in mixed-ability groups or pairs.” (p. 839)
- “In various studies, different tutor/tutee relationships have been examined. . . . Generally tutors as well as tutees learn more lesson content than students not involved in peer tutoring, and tutors especially show growth in self-esteem.” (p. 840)
- “Recent thinking suggests that it is not explicit instruction per se, but the nature and content of the interactions that occur between teacher and students during instruction that count. Two features of teacher-student

interactions are especially interesting: the degree of student control in discussions, and the teachers' instructional scaffolding." (pp. 841–842)

In the most recent explicit instruction studies, teacher modeling and explaining of thought processes (what Paris, 1986, calls making thinking public) has replaced an earlier focus on stating rules or procedures; in other words, didactic 'telling' has been replaced by an increased emphasis on learning strategies fully—ensuring that students understand *when* and *why* the comprehension strategies are helpful and providing feedback at key points in the learning process." (p. 848)

"Although repeated reading originally was viewed as a way to improve word identification, reading speed, and fluency (see Dahl & Samuels, 1979), its connections to improved comprehension also have been established through several direct and indirect measures." (p. 844)

"Students of a variety of ages and abilities benefit when teachers take the time to help them either recall or build knowledge of text structure by paying systematic attention to it." (p. 846)

"Students' comprehension, particularly inferential comprehension, is improved when relationships are drawn between students' background knowledge and experiences and the content included in reading selections." (p. 847)

"Students understand what they read and learn how to understand what they read in the process of learning how to monitor their comprehension." (p. 847)