Teaching comprehension to beginning readers

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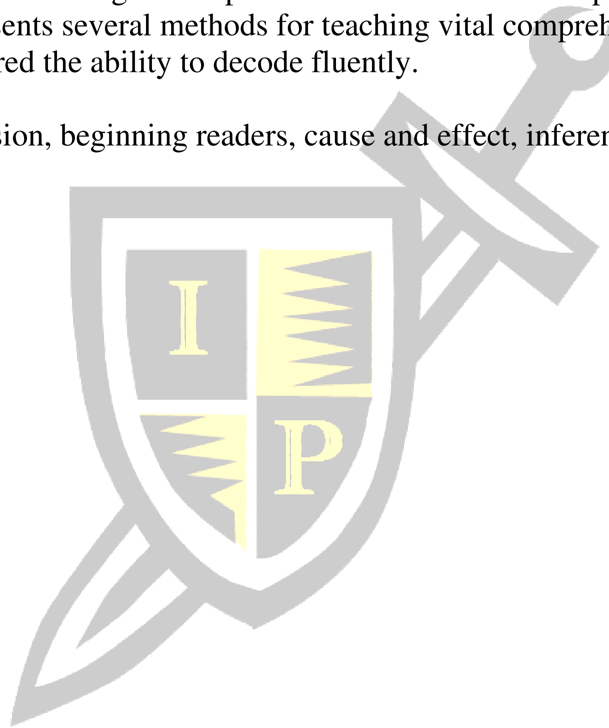
ABSTRACT

Teaching reading can be simplistically divided into two sections: learning how to read, known as decoding, and deriving meaning from the printed word, known as comprehension. Many educators still hold to the position that these skills should be taught linearly with an emphasis on comprehension lagging considerably behind the teaching of decoding. Extensive experience, however, has demonstrated that the skill of comprehension can be taught alongside instruction on how to read as long as comprehension instruction is adapted for the beginning reader. This article presents several methods for teaching vital comprehension skills to students who have not yet mastered the ability to decode fluently.

Key words: comprehension, beginning readers, cause and effect, inference, main idea, compare and contrast



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INTRODUCTION

Learning how to read is in itself a rather complex and multifaceted process. However, the reason for learning to read is rather singular in nature – to be able to comprehend what has been written (Acosta-Tello, 2020; Dickey, 2018). Teachers usually delay the teaching of comprehension skills to children until they are fluent decoders, even though comprehending, understanding and interacting with what is written is the purpose for learning to read (Dolean, Lervag, Visu-Petra & Melby-Lervag, 2021; Dooley, 2010; Trinkle, 2006).

Many educators still hold the position that young learners who have not matured into proficient readers will not benefit from explicit instruction in comprehension, however, extensive experience provides evidence that instruction in comprehension is extremely beneficial for younger students if the instruction is delivered in a scaffolded, student-friendly manner (Acosta-Tello, 2020; Brown, Pressley, Van Meter & Schuder, 1996; Paris, 2003; Smolkin & Donovan, 2003). It has been shown that waiting until children are fluent readers to teach comprehension will affect the child's progress in the area of comprehension (Dickey, 2018; Dolean et al, 2021; Dooley, 2010; Paris, 2003). Children should be taught comprehension skills from the very beginning of their educational careers so that a foundation is solidly established upon which children are able to build as they become fluent decoders (Danner, 1976; Dooley, 2010; Williams, Pollini Nubla-King, Snyder, Garcia, Ordynans, Atkins, & Graesser, 2014).

When children are read to and discussion is centered around story content, then comprehension can occur even before formal instruction in decoding has begun (Dooley, 2010). Little attention has been given to enhancing comprehension among pre-readers and beginning readers, however, children's experiences both at home and in an early educational setting promote the development of narrative comprehension skills long before children become proficient readers (Dickey 2018, Paris, 2003).

The dilemma, of course, is how to teach comprehension skills to children while they are also learning to decode, before they can read fluently for themselves. Children can be taught complex comprehension skills when the teacher scaffolds her instruction and eliminates the need for the student to decode by reading material aloud and presenting comprehension skill-based tasks visually and orally during comprehension instructional time. Compartmentalizing instruction in this way and separating learning how to read from understanding what is written will free the learner to focus all of his cognitive skills on one complex task at a time.

COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

Several comprehension strategies can effectively be taught though children have not yet mastered reading, such as inference, cause and effect, compare and contrast, and main idea. These are strategies which have proven to be beneficial in a child's literacy development and all which can be strengthened as a child learns to master the skill of reading. They are equally applicable when teaching second language learners, students experiencing difficulty with learning to read, students needing remediation, and are even appropriate strategies when teaching an entire class of learners, regardless of their reading proficiency.

Teaching Inference

Inferencing is the point where the reader goes beyond the information in the text and fills in information needed to understand or enhance what is stated based on previous experiences, either personal or those encountered in literature. Problems in inferencing have been called the "hallmark of poor comprehension" (Duke, Pressley, & Hilden, 2004, p. 502), therefore focus on the area of comprehension needs to occur early in the teaching of reading. Waiting to intervene in the teaching of inferences until decoding and fluency are mastered in the third or fourth grade is not a logical solution when preschoolers have demonstrated the ability to engage in inferencing (Kim & Phillips, 2014; Kleeck, 2008). Before children are fluent readers, educators tend to ask literal questions, asking children what they know because they have been given the information explicitly in the story. Inferential questions, on the other hand, ask children to think, apply, and build their knowledge, referencing what they have heard through listening, through observation, and/or which they have experienced themselves.

One method of teaching inference is by asking questions. Once a portion of a book or selection has been read aloud to a child, inferential questions may be asked regarding what has been read and before more information is presented. For example, when reading some of the classic children's stories, inferential questions might include:

Why do you think Papa Bear's chair (or bed or bowl) was big and Baby Bear's chair (or bed or bowl) was small? (when reading Goldilocks and the Three Bears);

Why do you think Goldilocks felt more comfortable in Baby Bear's bed than in Mama's bed? (when reading Goldilocks and the Three Bears);

Why do you think Cinderella's sisters wouldn't share? (when reading Cinderella);

Why do you think the cat in Green Eggs and Ham didn't want to eat the eggs at the beginning of the story? (when reading Green Eggs and Ham);

Why do you think the mouse would want milk with his cookies? (when reading If You Give a Mouse a Cookie);

Why do you think the three little pigs wouldn't let the wolf in? (when reading The Three Little Pigs).

In answering all of these questions, children need to reference personal experiences such as knowing that big people have difficulty sitting in small chairs and are more comfortable in big chairs; or calling upon their own experiences with eggs, which are usually yellow, so if they're green they probably won't taste good.

Children may be taught inferencing strategies in a conversational manner through the use of "think aloud strategies" in which a short story or selection is divided into manageable portions and children are guided in dialogue to predict, infer and present solutions to story situations (see further Acosta-Tello, "Teaching children to apply comprehension strategies through interactive, progressive conversations," 2020).

Teaching Main Idea

Identifying the main idea is generally taught once children are fluent readers in second grade and above, however, research findings suggest that teaching children how to summarize and find the main idea of a passage may help improve their reading comprehension even before the second grade (Hudson, Owens, Moore, Lambright & Wijekumar, 2021; Steven, Park & Vaughn, 2019).

In light of such research, it is imperative to explore methods to teach children how to find the main idea early in their academic reading career.

A simple method for teaching main idea is to highlight for the children that the main idea is the concept that is mentioned the most in the story. This process could proceed as follows: Read the story aloud to the children. Then have the children identify what they feel the main idea of the story might be, making a list of what they say. Reread the story and each time one of the words or phrases on the list is mentioned, place a tally mark next to it. When you are finished re-reading the story, identify which word or phrase on the list has the most tally marks. This then would be the main idea.

A secondary method to teach the main idea is to show the children a simple way to summarize a story and, from the summary, create a title. The process could proceed as follows: Have the children read a story, or, if they are beginning readers, read the story aloud to the children, however, do not let the children know the title. Let the children know that together you are going to find the most important idea of the story, the main idea. Then reread the story, stopping at the end of each paragraph and asking the children, "What does this paragraph tell us?" The class, with the teacher's help, will need to, by consensus, come up with a single sentence per paragraph. Do this for every paragraph. Then take all the sentences the children have generated and inform them that what they have created is a summary of the content of the story. Read the summary and ask the children what title they would give their summary. The title would be the main idea. Though not the focus of this article, this is also a simple way to teach children how to summarize.

Teaching Cause and Effect

Explicit instruction focused on cause and effect has been shown to improve the performance of seven- and eight-year-old students in the area of comprehension (Brown et al, 1996; Williams, et al, 2014). Cause is the action, the driving force. Effect is what happens as a result of the action. Cause is the "why" and effect is the "what." When teaching cause and effect, it is advisable to teach children that the signal words "because" and "since" often indicate the cause, and words such as "therefore" and "so" often indicate the effect. The initial teaching of this strategy can easily be demonstrated by relating to experiences the children themselves have probably had, such as, "My ice cream melted because I left it out in the sun;" or, "Because the sun came out, the snow melted;" or, "I ate a sandwich because I was hungry;" or, "Since I was tired, I fell asleep." As a reinforcement to a lesson utilizing life experiences to teach cause and effect, an activity may be designed in which causes are drawn or written on one card and the corresponding effects are drawn or written on separate cards. The children would then be asked to match up the corresponding causes and effects. Stories such as "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie" or "There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly" would also prove beneficial in showing students the relationship between an action or cause and its corresponding effect.

Teaching Compare and Contrast

Research suggests that of all the comprehension text structures, "compare and contrast" may be one of the most difficult for students to be able to master (Dreher & Gray, 2009; McKee & Carr, 2016). Therefore, providing exposure to this strategy and reinforcing it as frequently as possible would be advisable when teaching children how to read. When teaching compare and

contrast, students are asked to look for similarities and differences between characters, settings, storylines and resolutions in stories. In teaching compare and contrast, we are teaching students to look for relevant details within a story and make observations regarding how these differences affect the outcome of the story. When first beginning to teach this strategy, the teacher might ask the children to compare and contrast experiences that could be part of the child's life experiences, such as the differences and similarities between being at the pool versus being at the beach; between using pens or crayons to write and draw; between living in a house or in an apartment. Visuals and manipulatives might also be used to teach compare and contrast, so that the teacher could bring in two balls, different sizes and the same color, followed by showing the children 2 or 3 balls which were the same size yet different colors. As children become more familiar with the concept, you could compare and contrast two stories, such as "Rumpelstiltskin" with "The Girl Who Spun Gold;" "Cinderella" with "Cinder Edna;" "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" with "Somebody and the Three Blairs;" and "The Three Little Pigs" with "The Three Little Javelinas." All of these sets of stories have strong similarities, yet glaring differences. Venn diagrams and comparative charts could be utilized for any of these comparisons.

Important, though often overlooked, Point

In teaching all of these strategies, it is advisable to use the correct name for the strategy with children of all ages, even the very young. Hearing the actual terms such as "main idea" or "cause and effect" will prepare the children for when they encounter these words in print and come across them as they become more proficient readers.

CONCLUSION

These ways of teaching comprehension strategies are useful for laying a strong foundation for the goal of literacy, comprehension. These methods are applicable with slight adaptations for children who are non-readers, beginning readers, second language learners, students needing remediation, and even with an entire class. These methods of teaching may be employed when teaching social studies, science, and other subject areas, as well as when teaching children how to read. They will allow all students to engage in, interact with, and understand the material being presented without being hindered by a lack of proficiency in decoding. These methods would allow teachers to teach content and engage in higher order thinking with students while still allowing time for them to master the fundamentals of learning to read.

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