

Strategies for Helping Struggling Readers

Comprehend Expository Text

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Most would agree that the primary goal of reading is comprehension (Gajria, Jitendra, Sood, & Sacks, 2007). In underscoring this point, Jennings, Caldwell, and Lerner, (2006) stated: “comprehension is the essence of reading (p. 15).” McCormick (2007) agreed when acclaimed: everything we do in reading instruction should be directed at helping students comprehend text. Furthermore, Manset-Williamson and Nelson (2005) wrote: “comprehension is reading (p. 60).”

Neufeld (2005) defined comprehension as the “process of constructing a supportable understanding of a text (p. 302).” Neufeld (2005) went on further to say that comprehension involves two important features: being actively involved with the text and using appropriate background knowledge to interpret the text. Neufeld’s (2005) definition implies that comprehension is a complex process involving a variety of thinking processes. Moreover, the type of text being read further complicates comprehension. McCormick (2007) stated that expository texts, also known as informational texts (e.g. textbooks, journal articles, lab procedures government documents), are more difficult to comprehend than narrative texts (e.g. realistic and historical fiction, myths, fairy tales, plays, legends).

With much of what students are required to read coming from expository texts, it seems critical for them to learn and apply strategies for comprehending these texts. Hall (2004) stated that the failure to comprehend expository text may lead to negative consequences, such as not learning the required content, failing to pass high-stakes tests, low self-efficacy and behavioral problems. Thus, the ability to construct meaning from a variety of texts can be key to academic success (Manson, Meadan, Hedin, & Corson,

2006). Montelongo and Hernandez (2007) stated that “for students to be successful in today’s information age they must be able to comprehend the information in their textbooks... (p. 538)” and “in an era of high-stakes testing for students, teachers, and schools alike, 70-80% of the reading content on standardized tests is informational (p. 538).”

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it is to present the challenges that accompany comprehending expository texts for students who have learning disability. Second, it is to discuss the implication of these challenges for special educators. Third, it is to provide descriptions of pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading teaching strategies that educators can employ to develop comprehension strategies for expository texts used among students who are struggling to comprehend.

Challenges of Expository Texts

To fully understand the complexities of comprehending expository text, it is necessary to recognize two challenging factors: first, the problems faced by students with learning disabilities and second, the characteristics of expository text. More specifically, students with learning disabilities do not use the same strategies that good strategic comprehenders use and expository text present unique challenges that even good comprehenders struggle with. (See Table 1 for a comparison of good strategic comprehenders with poor strategic comprehenders).

Students with learning disabilities

Large portions of students with learning disabilities (over 70%) are at risk for academic failure because they lack basic literacy skills (Manson et. al., 2006). Thus, comprehension of expository texts can further be complicated if a students has a learning

disability. Gajira et. al. (2007) stated that children with learning disabilities are often characterized as passive readers, failing to activate reading comprehension strategies and to monitor their understanding of the text. They also wrote that these students generally experience problems in recalling textual ideas, identifying main ideas and supporting ideas, and they tend to have difficulties monitoring their comprehension and relating new information to what they already know. Furthermore, Gajria et al. (2007) stated, “students with learning disabilities often experience problems comprehending expository texts, despite fluent decoding skills (p. 210).”

Characteristics of expository text

McCormick (2007) listed six factors that make expository texts difficult to read, which were: text structure, new information, specialized vocabulary, readability level of the text, abstract concepts, and the expectation that information should be retained by the reader. Similarly, Hall (2004) wrote expository texts tend to be problematic because they contain content-specific vocabulary that may be unknown to the reader and there is often insufficient background information to make sense of new information. Jennings et al. (2006) presented the challenges of expository text by comparing it to narrative texts. Specifically, they stated that expository texts are: less personal, more concept dense, contain more vocabulary and technical terms, require more background knowledge, and the reading level is often above students’ frustration levels. Further, Mastropieni, Scruggs, and Graetz (2003) reported, “many students with learning disabilities at the secondary level read on a fourth and fifth grade level (p. 103)”, but many of the expository texts they read are on grade level and sometimes higher.

Implications for Special Educators

Given the challenges as noted above, it is crucial for special educators to consider ways for teaching students who are struggling to comprehend expository texts. Neufeld (2005) stated simply providing student with opportunities to read does not ensure students will develop and use comprehension strategies, but explicitly teaching comprehension skills will help students comprehend the text. Similarly, Radcliff, Caverly, and Peterson (2004) wrote that explicit teaching of comprehension strategies “prompts students to apply their prior knowledge and monitor their comprehension (p. 146).” A study by Manset-Williams & Nelson (2005) comparing more explicit comprehensions instruction with less explicit comprehension instruction for students with learning disabilities in grades four through eight found students benefited more for more explicit instruction. Duffy et al. (1987) found similar findings in their study in which students who received direct instruction in comprehension strategies obtained higher levels of reading success than students who received traditional instruction.

However, despite evidence that explicitly teaching comprehension strategies is effective, various studies have reported that few teachers do (Radcliff et al., 2004). If special educators want their students to better comprehend expository text, they need to explicitly teach students comprehension strategies. Marcell (2007) suggested that comprehension strategies be explicitly taught before, during, and after reading. Similarly, Gripe (2006) wrote skilled readers are observed as studying text in three different stages: pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading.

Teaching Strategies for Comprehending Expository Texts

This section provides specific descriptions of comprehension strategies that can be taught to students during the pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading stages.

Pre-reading

Comprehension instruction must begin with activities that take place before reading the text (McCormick, 2007). Specifically, these activities should activate and/or build prior knowledge. Neufeld (2005) wrote that activating prior knowledge improves both understanding and recall of text content. Similarly, Gripe (2006) noted that during pre-reading readers should consider what they already know about the text because that knowledge can help them better comprehend the text. However, Jennings et al. (2007) stated that students with learning disabilities often fail to apply their prior knowledge to the text. Thus, educators need to teach students strategies for evoking and building prior knowledge. K W L (K-W-L), expectation grids, audiovisuals, scanning and skimming, and pre-questioning are all strategies that can be used during this stage. Each are discussed below.

Ogle (1986, as cited in McCormick, 2007 and Gripe, 2006) suggested using the *K-W-L* strategy. The *K-W-L* strategy involves students in three steps, two of which take place prior to reading. More specifically, the *K* step requires that students identify what they already know about the text by brainstorming independently or with a group (Gripe, 2006). The *W* step requires that students determine what they still want to know, and the *L* is a reflection after reading (Gripe, 2006). Manson et al. (2006) found a similar strategy to be effective for upper elementary students with learning disabilities.

Specifically, their study involved using a different acronym for the three steps: T W A (think before reading, while reading, and after reading); and during the first step, students were taught to “think about the author’s purpose, what they know, and what they want to learn (p. 49).”

Similar to the K-W-L strategy, Caldwell (1993, as cited in Jennings et al., 2006) suggested using *expectation grids*, a visual representation of students’ knowledge created before reading. Specifically, students place a general topic, usually provided by the teacher, in the center of their paper and then around this topic students write categories of information they expect to read about (Jennings et. al., 2006).

Using *audiovisuals* such as videos and DVDs is a strategy teachers often use after having students read the text, however it can be very effective when used before reading the text by building students’ background knowledge and vocabulary (McCormick, 2007).

Having students *skim and scan* the text is a strategy that involves directing students to read and think about the title, major headings, introduction, conclusions, and tables and graphs before they read the entire text (Neufeld, 2007). Neufeld (2007) went further and wrote that students should be directed to read these items with the purpose of answering the following questions: “What does this text appear to be about?...What are some of the major topics covered in the text?...How is the text organized (p. 304).?”

Similarly, McCormick (2007) suggested using a *pre-questioning* strategy. Specifically, before having students read the text, the teachers should ask students questions about details and impressions that they want the students to comprehend. These types of pre-questions are considered important to ask before reading because they

focus students' attention and support comprehension (McCormick, 2007). More specifically, McCormick stated: "If you want students to learn something, tell them what it is (p. 386)!"

During reading

During reading strategies should encourage students to be actively involved in the text (Gripe, 2006). The ability to monitor one's comprehension, also called metacognition, is critical during this stage of reading (Gripe, 2006). Students with learning disabilities tend to continue reading long after the material has stopped making sense to them (Jennings, et al., 2006). Thus, teachers should provide students with strategies that will teach them to monitor their own understanding of the text. Neufeld (2005) stated that the best way for students to learn skills is for them to watch others modeling the skill.

Think-aloud, reciprocal teaching, ReQuest, hierarchical summarization, topic-detail-main-idea, text coding, yes...no...why, cloze and fix-up strategies are all strategies that teachers can use during reading with students. These are each discussed further.

The *think-aloud* strategy is a great way for teachers to model how to comprehend text while reading. Specifically, the think-aloud strategy involves the teacher picking a short passage that contains unknown words and points of difficulty (Jennings et al., 2006). Then the teacher provides each of the students with the same passage, and reads the passage aloud to students stopping after each paragraph to verbalize thought processes used to make sense of the passage; and as students feel more comfortable they are encourage to take part in their own think-alouds (Jennings et al., 2006).

Similar to the think-aloud strategy the *reciprocal teaching* strategy begins with

the teacher modeling and the students taking over; however, in this strategy four specific comprehension steps are identified which are: questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Specifically, questioning focuses students' attention on evaluating their current understanding of the main ideas and clarifying focuses students on "unpacking" confusing information in the text (Slater & Horstman, 2002). The last two steps, summarizing and predicting, involve students in determining what important information they have learned and what they might expect to read next (Slater & Horstman, 2002). Research conducted by Palincsar and Brown (1984, 1986) found reciprocal teaching to effectively build self-monitoring strategies among seventh grade students who were described as adequate decoders by poor comprehenders. Similarly, Oczkua (2003) reported comprehension gains of one to two years after just a few months of using the strategy.

The *ReQuest* strategy developed by Anthony Manzo (1969, as cited in Gripe, 2006) involves the students reading a passage silently and stopping after each sentence to answer questions asked aloud by the teacher. The questions that the teacher asks are to serve as a model for the questions students should be asking themselves as they read independently (Gripe, 2006). Similarly, McCormick (2007) suggested teachers insert questions in the text for students to answer while reading because it can help students better respond to questions asked after reading.

Hierarchical summarization is a strategy that involves students creating outlines while reading (Taylor & Beach, 1984, as cited in McCormick, 2007). Specifically students begin an outline by drawing lines on a sheet of paper for the topic and subheadings and as students read the text they fill in their outlines (McCormick, 2007).

Topic-detail-main idea strategy is used by teachers to help students identify the topic of the passage, the details of the passage, and the main idea of the passage (Jennings et al., 2006). Specifically the students are to read the entire section, reread the first paragraph, locate the topic of the paragraph, and state the topic in one to two words (Jennings et. al., 2006). Next, they are to underline each thing that the author wrote that related to the topic (the details); this process should be done for each paragraph in the passage (Jennings et al., 2006). Once students have done this for the entire passage they are to identify the main idea based on the topics and details they have already identified (Jennings et. al., 2006). Lubliner (2004) even suggests while using the topic-detail-main idea strategy that students use questioning cue cards to generate questions about topics and details in passages.

The *text coding* strategy involves the teacher instructing students to put a plus (+) sign next to information in the text they already know, an exclamation (!) mark next to information that is new, and a question (?) mark next to information that they have questions about (Caldwell 1993 as cited in Jennings, et al., 2006). Marcell (2007) used a strategy similar to that of Caldwell's (1993) and found comprehension by an elementary school student with a learning disability to increase significantly. Specifically, Marcell (2007) adapted Caldwell's text coding strategy by using sticky notes instead of marking up books and using a smiley face instead of a plus (+) sign to indicate information already known or to which there is a personal connection.

Yes/no...why is a strategy involving the students answering yes, no and why questions (Richards & Gripe, 1992, as cited in Gripe, 2006). Specifically, the teacher begins by modeling a yes and a no; a yes is something the reader liked or understood

about the text and a no is something the reader did not like or understand (Gripe, 2006). After the teacher models a yes and a no the students do the same and give explanations for their answers (Gripe, 2006).

The *cloze* strategy involves the teacher deleting words (every fifth word usually) from passages and asking students to fill in the blanks (Gripe, 2006). Specifically passages typically contain 250-300 words that represent the content being read; and students are to begin by first reading the cloze passage and then read the text and finally end with filling in the blanks (Gripe, 2006).

Neufeld (2005) suggested using the *fix-up* strategy to help students deal with information they have questions about. This strategy involves teaching students what to do when a comprehension breakdown occurs. Specifically it teaches students to reread, look ahead, stop and relate information to what they already know, examine other resources, and seeks support from others (Neufeld, 2005).

Post-reading

Strategies used during post-reading should involve activities that help students organize and remember key information (Gripe, 2006). Paragraph frames, think-links, semantic mapping, alpha boxes, accountability talk, learning journals, and dramatization are all strategies that teachers can use during this stage. Each are discussed below.

Paragraph frames is an instructional strategy in which the teacher writes a few key words such as *first*, *next*, *then*, *now*, and *finally* on the board or on students' papers. The students are to write individual sentences, related to what they just read, under each key word relating to what they just read (Cudd & Roberts, 1989 as cited in Gripe, 2007)

The *think-links* strategy involves the teacher directing the students to write on the center of the paper the topic of what they just read and surround it with details or “links” that go with the topic (Wilson, 1981 as cited in Gripe, 2007)

Semantic mapping is a strategy that allows students to graphically represent and connect the information they just read (MacNeil, 2007). Dye (2000) noted that because students with learning disabilities often have trouble organizing information, semantic mapping is a useful strategy to help students organize information in a clear and understandable manner. Hanf (1971, as cited in Gripe, 2007) suggested having students follow three steps when designing their maps which are: identifying the main idea, identifying secondary categories, and identifying supporting details. Further, Gripe (2007) states that the map should be first completed from memory, but if the student cannot complete the map by memory, they must go back and reread the material, which can act as a feedback devise.

Alpha boxes is a strategy in which students summarize key ideas by identifying concepts and making connections (Allier & Elish-Piper, 2007). Specifically, after students read the text they are to identify at least one idea from the text that goes along with each letter of the alphabet (Allier & Elish-Piper, 2007).

Accountability talk is a strategy that can occur during teacher-student conferences, small-group discussions, whole class instruction, or student presentations. This involves students discussing the text by making connection between ideas in single texts, several text, and the real world while questioning and comparing each others’ perspectives on the text (Resnick & Hall, 2001). Allier and Elish-Pipe (2007) more simply put it as making “text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections (p. 340).”

Learning journals involves having students write personalized journal entries about what they just read, and the teacher writes individual replies to each student (Jennings, 1991, as cited in McCormick, 2007). Similarly, Allier and Elish-Piper (2007) suggested using a double-entry journal entry strategy in which students copy a quote on one side of their notebook and write a reaction to that quote on the other side of their notebook.

Dramatization also known as melodrama is a strategy that teachers can use that has students prepare skits based on the text just read (Gripe, 2006). More specifically Cooter & Chilcoat (1990, p. 274, as cited in Gripe, 2006) explained this strategy as an “expository text response activity that uses sensational action, exuberant emotions, and somewhat stereotyped characterization to present a message (p. 312).”

Discussion

In summary, reading is a process involving the three stages of pre-reading, reading, and post-reading. Pre-reading strategies should activate and/or build prior knowledge since students with learning disabilities often fail to apply their prior knowledge to the text (Jenning et al., (2007). During reading strategies should encourage students to monitor their understanding since students with learning disabilities tend to continue reading long after the material has stopped making sense to them (Jennings, et al., 2006). Post-reading strategies should help students organize and remember key information (Gripe, 2006).

Teachers need to explicitly utilize comprehension strategies at each stage if they expect their students to successfully comprehend expository text. Table 2 provides a graphic design of the strategies presented in this paper.

In addition, as a result of researching this topic I have developed my own “best practices” for teaching students with learning disabilities, how to comprehend expository texts. They are as follows:

- Begin by telling students exactly what it is you want them to know
- Activate and build students’ prior knowledge
- Teach self-monitoring strategies
- Teach organizational strategies
- Provide time for students to practice comprehension strategies

There is a need for further research in this area. Specifically, additional research needs to be conducted to determine why many teachers are not explicitly utilizing the comprehension strategies summarized in this paper; is it because of time management issues or because of lack of knowledge about these strategies. In addition, further research to determine if students use these strategies long after being taught them and if students like these strategies might be helpful.

The ultimate goal of all teachers is for their students to succeed in their adult lives and one part of accomplishing that goal involves building students’ comprehension of expository texts by explicitly teaching the strategies mentioned in this paper. By using the strategies presented in this paper, educators can help students become better comprehenders, and thus more independent and successful in their adult lives.

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Table 1

Good Comprehenders	Poor Comprehenders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply prior knowledge to text • Clarify purpose for reading • Monitor understanding • Use fix-up strategies for comprehension breakdowns • Evaluate understanding of text • Aware that reading increases knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unaware reading involves using prior knowledge • Do not set a purpose for reading • Do not recognize comprehension breakdowns • No not evaluate what read • Not aware that reading increases knowledge

Source: Adapted from Gripe, (2006) p. 227