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Annotated Bibliography

Welcome to Reading Weekly. I’m Megan Amadio, back with you as your host. In the last few weeks we’ve been talking about the progression of reading development including the development of skilled and engaged readers, word-level knowledge, fluency, and vocabulary. But this week we’re going to talk about the ultimate goal of all reading instruction. That’s right, we’re discussing reading comprehension. This is, after all, what all reading instruction is ultimately leading to. Now, you would think that reading comprehension is an easy and natural progression for all readers once they’ve mastered the basic building blocks of reading. I certainly did when I first started out as an intermediate teacher. However, I found that comprehension is a complex process that many readers struggle with.

So we need to start today by first defining comprehension. I know what you’re thinking…it’s understanding what you read. Pretty easy definition, right? However, it’s a bit more complicated than that. You see, true comprehension is more than just understanding the literal definitions of words as you read them. So let’s discuss a few theories that can help us create a better picture of reading comprehension. A schema theory maintains that comprehension is the ability to connect what you’re reading to prior knowledge you have. The transactional theory defines reading comprehension as taking away meaning based on the experiences you bring to the text. The constructivist theory is similar to the first two, supporting that readers actively construct their own meaning from a text based on connections between it and prior knowledge (Gill, S., 2008, p. 108). Ok, it still sounds easy to some of you, but let me give you an example of the complexity of comprehension by reading you a paragraph. ”In June 1777, British General John Burgoyne left Quebec, Canada, for Albany, New York. The British wanted to separate the New England colonies so that they would not be able to help each other. Burgoyne planned to attack form the north, and General Howe would attack from the south. They hoped to trap the Continental Army in between. The orders did not reach General Howe in time, however, and he did not move his army into position. The plan failed” (Gelzheiser et al., 2014, p. 55). As I read that, I’m sure you understood, or should I say comprehended every word, but what could you tell me about it? Do you need me to read it again? If you’re like me, someone who has some knowledge about the Revolutionary War but not to this extent, I can’t summarize it, discuss it, or have much insight on it for that matter without rereading it more carefully or knowing more about it. Comprehension is about much more than reading and understanding the words.

So now that we’ve discussed some theories, or definitions of comprehension, let’s talk about how it can be affected by different factors. Factors can include the reader, the text, and the situation (Gill, S., 2008, p. 107). Think about your own experiences with reading. Have you ever found yourself reading a passage and getting to the end without the slightest idea of what you’ve just read (maybe with the text I just read)? Why does this happen? Perhaps it’s because you’re distracted by something that occurred during your day. Maybe you’re not into the text because it’s a requirement and not a choice, so you consider it boring, or maybe the structure is confusing or just unappealing. All of these can influence comprehension. But understanding these factors can help teachers with designing an effective reading program. So let’s get down to it. How do you effectively teach reading comprehension?

You don’t have to look far to come across comprehension strategies. Basically, any class, professional development, or reading program will include and support the instruction of different reading strategies to build comprehension. Most of the strategies are pretty consistent between sources, with just a few variations. They include making connections, asking questions, summarizing, visualizing, inferring, predicting, retelling, determining importance, synthesizing, and monitoring comprehension. In addition, research also supports building disciplinary and world knowledge, providing exposure to a volume and range of different texts, providing motivating texts and contexts for reading, engaging students in collaborative discussions, building vocabulary, and integrating reading and writing (Duke et al., 2002, p. 52). Oh, did I mention that none of these be done in isolation? Starting to feel overwhelmed yet? I mean, how do you teach students to organize and effectively utilize all of these cognitive skills? Well, that’s where the matrix comes in. No, I’m not talking about the movie. Fortunately for us, it doesn’t take Neo or Trinity’s insane stunts to plan and implement an effective reading framework. We can do it with the Comprehension Matrix.

The Comprehension Matrix can be used by teachers to organize activities into pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading categories in an effort to help students learn and use of a variety of strategies and skills. The pre-reading goals should include building and activating prior knowledge, getting students interested, modeling strategies, introducing difficult vocabulary, discussing the text structure, and providing a purpose for the reading (for example, through the use of a K-W-L chart). During-reading activities should help students use the various comprehension strategies we’ve discussed. Using think-alouds, graphic organizers, or annotations are a great way to develop the use of these strategies. Students should also continue to build on text structure by using something like a story map. And of course, we want to help students continue to construct and extend their understanding of the text, which can happen through discussions, the Reciprocal Questioning Strategy, or predictions to name a few. Last, it’s important to remember that post-reading activities should not always be about answering questions. We want students to extend their thinking and understanding. They can do this by creating news reports, drawings or graphic organizers, or even writing a letter or song (Gill, S. 2008, p. 107). Now, I don’t think there’s anything new to you about what I’ve just said, but I do think we’re focusing so much on strategy instruction that we’re underutilizing a few critical components that are necessary for effective growth in comprehension.

You see, for any comprehension strategy to be effective, students need background knowledge. Even our theories demonstrated the significance of background knowledge. Students can’t connect new information to existing knowledge, or make connections without it. So we need to build this for our students. One way to accomplish this is by using thematically related texts. This can be particularly helpful for struggling readers. In fact, research has found that a limited knowledge base is one cause of poor comprehension for intermediate students. Having students build vocabulary and concepts using texts that are organized by content themes (such as science or social studies) and starting with simpler and shorter texts, can create vital background knowledge necessary to tackle more challenging texts on the same topic (Gelzheiser et al., 2014, p. 55). You can essentially give your students background and worldly knowledge through the sequencing of texts.

Another important component that needs to be a part of your reading block is the use of dialogic teaching. For too many years, instruction has been dominated by the teacher’s voice and centered on recitation. Be honest, you know you’re thinking about Charlie Brown’s teacher right now. And though we may joke about it, the lack of engagement for many students with a teacher’s voice dominating the airwaves hits too close to home. However, a dialogic classroom encourages collaborative construction of knowledge through discussions. Questions promote meaningful inquiry and discussions toward higher understanding of concepts. Students’ voices dominate the learning environment as they elaborate in their thinking and build on each other’s insights. You’ll see them take on different responsibilities for the flow of discussion as the teacher gives meaningful and specific feedback (Reznitskaya, A., 2012, p. 447). How cool does that sound? Not only will dialogic classrooms support the development of student thinking, but it will increase student engagement as well. Which brings me to the final component we’re going to talk about today…student engagement and motivation.

It would make sense to say that the more students are engaged in what they’re doing, the more they will get out of it. Well, engagement can increase by offering a variety of interesting texts, giving students choice and autonomy, or encouraging a collaborative leaning environment. But another way we can motivate students is through the use of content goals. With content goals, students focus on gaining meaning and understanding of a topic at a deeper level, as opposed to focusing on isolated reading skills. This can be particularly helpful in the content classrooms or other parts of your day. Reading should not be limited to just your reading block, and students need to experience reading for what it is…an opportunity to learn new things (especially if you find something that interests them). You see, students need to possess the will to read and learn. It doesn’t matter how immaculate or well thought-out our lessons are, the skills we’re teaching won’t work if students aren’t motivated to use them. But if we expand their options, structure in time for collaboration and discussions, provide an abundance of great texts, match those texts to their interests, and give them knowledge-related goals and outcomes, we’ll most likely see students far more engaged in the reading process (Brozo, W, & Flynt, E. S., 2008, p. 172-173). In fact, a study showed better outcomes for reading comprehension when strategy instruction was combined with motivational practices, than when it was taught alone (Guthrie et al., 2004, p. 416). I’ve seen it happen in my own classroom with content goals. When I gave an unmotivated reader the task to research and present a PowerPoint on the famous Wyoming gang, The Wild Bunch, he got so into it, he didn’t even think about all the reading he was doing. We need to be smarter about how we’re motivating students to actually use what we’re teaching. That’s my challenge to you and me. Comprehension strategies are necessary and great, but let’s teach them in a way that will encourage simultaneous use, increased discussions, and motivation to use them well.

That’s it for me this week. Thanks for listening, friends!

Bibliography

Brozo, W. G. & Flynt, E. S. (2008). Motivating students to read in the content classroom: six evidence-based principles. *The Reading Teacher*, *62*(2), 172- 174.

Research supports that engaged and motivated readers are more successful readers. Students who aren’t motivated, particularly with content texts, risk not acquiring important background knowledge and falling further behind. They need practice and experience with content texts, but often lack interest. Knowing that motivation is important is one thing; finding ways to motivate readers is another. Six evidence-based principles can be used to guide instructional practices in content areas that are engaging and motivating to students. They include: elevating self-efficacy, engendering interest in new learning, connecting outside with inside school literacies, making an abundance of interesting texts available, expanding choices and options, and structuring collaboration for motivation. Such practices will help increase students’ motivation and provide them with positive reading experiences.

Duke, N. K., Pearson, P. D., Strachan, S. L., & Billman, A. K. (2002). Essential elements of fostering and teaching reading comprehension. In Farstrup, A. E., Samuels, S. J. (Eds.), *What Research Has to Say About Reading,* *Third Edition* (pp. 205- 242). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Proven instructional techniques within a balanced literacy program have been shown to help students acquire effective reading comprehension skills and strategies. Through a supportive classroom context, students spend a significant amount of time reading, experience reading for real and meaningful reasons, experience a range of text genres, develop a rich vocabulary and content knowledge, facilitate accurate and automatic decoding of words, and spend time participating in high-quality talk about text. Comprehension instruction is used to explicitly teach reading strategies, model the strategies, and gradually release the responsibilities onto students. Effective comprehension strategies fostered through this gradual release of responsibility model should include prediction, think-aloud, text structure, visual representations of text, summarization, and questions/questioning.

Gelzheirser, L., Hallgren-Flynn, L., Connors, M., & Scanlon, D. (2014). Reading thematically related texts to develop knowledge and comprehension. *The Reading Teacher,* *68*(1), 53-63.

The Interactive Strategies Approach-Extended (ISA-X) is a comprehensive and responsive approach to intervention for intermediate elementary students (grades3-7). Through the use of thematically related texts, students will build content/background knowledge, vocabulary, self-efficacy, and genre knowledge. Limited knowledge base is often a contributing factor to poor comprehension with intermediate students. This can perpetuate struggling readers to avoid reading even more and fall further behind in skills such as vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.. A thematic related text approach to reading would help students acquire knowledge and key vocabulary with multiple (and simpler) texts, which could then support students with the reading of a culminating (and more challenging) text. This is supported with the Common Core State Standards, which suggests in Standard 10 the use of an “adequate number of titles on a single topic that would allow children to study that topic for a sustained period.”

Gill, S. R. (2008). The comprehension matrix: a tool for designing comprehension instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, *62*(2), 106-113.

Reading Comprehension is at the heart of every reading program and assessment; yet, many teachers still seem to struggle with how to teach it despite the many resources available. One of the struggles for teaching reading comprehension may lie in the overwhelming number of techniques and strategies suggested for instruction. Many of these strategies are presented in an isolated way, and it’s difficult for instructors to design a complete program in which all strategies fit together. The Comprehension Matrix can guide teachers in planning their comprehension instruction in a more cohesive way. By designing pre-reading, during-reading, and post- reading activities, students can learn how to utilize a variety of comprehension strategies.

Guthrie, J. T., Wigfield, A., Barbosa, P., Perencevich, K. C., Taboada, A., Davis, M. H., Scafiddi, N. T., & Tonks, S. (2004). *Journal of Education Psychology*, *96*(3), 403-423.

Motivation and engagement contribute to reading comprehension. However, these factors aren’t usually taken into consideration with most reading comprehension programs/instruction. The authors investigate if both strategy instruction with motivation support would produce better reading outcomes than an instructional framework that did not provide motivation. Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) was constructed to provide the instruction of multiple reading strategies (i.e. activating background knowledge, questioning, searching for information, summarizing, organizing graphically, and structuring stories) along with motivational practices such as, using content goals, hands-on activities, students choice, using interesting texts, and promoting collaboration. They found that reading comprehension did increase more when motivation practices were used in combination with strategy instruction.

Reznitskaya, A. (2012). Dialogic teaching: rethinking language use during literature discussions. *The Reading Teacher*, *65*(7), 446-456.

Monologic approaches are commonly found within group reading discussions and exemplify a behaviorist perspective on teaching. Within this approach, teachers maintain control and transmit knowledge to students who passively reproduce the transmitted knowledge. However, research is supporting the use of dialogic teaching, which is more reflective of the social- constructivist theory of learning. With dialogic teaching and discussions, authority over the content and discussion is shared, questions are open or divergent, teachers provide meaningful and specific feedback, students engage in meta-level reflection, elaborate with their thinking, and engage in collaborative construction of knowledge with each other. This instructional strategy can develop independent thinkers, higher order thinking, and support reading comprehension.