

The CORE Reading Expert

Fall 2004

5855 Christie Avenue ■ Emeryville, California 94608 ■ (888) 249-6155 ■ www.corelearn.com

The Complex Challenge of Comprehension

Comprehension Not Where It Should Be? Mind the Language Gap.

Any conversation about reading comprehension wisely starts by discussing what is variously called the “reading gap,” “the language gap,” or “the fourth-grade slump.” To borrow a British phrase, we must “mind the gap.” Research and experience show that some students who seem to master the beginning reading skills (such as decoding) begin, and continue, to fall behind starting around the fourth grade. As famed researcher Jeanne Chall noted in her study of impoverished children, “Although the children’s language seemed to have been sufficient for the first three grades, they were not prepared to meet the challenge of the greater number of abstract, technical, and literary words characteristic of the reading materials of grades 4 and beyond.” (Chall, J. S., Jacobs, V. A., and Baldwin, L. E. 1990. *The Reading Crisis: Why poor children fall behind*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University.)

So what can be done? In an article published last year in *American Educator*, Donald Hirsch concludes, “There is current scientific agreement on at least three principles that have useful implications for improving students’ reading comprehension. (1) *Fluency* allows the mind to concentrate on comprehension; (2) *Breadth of vocabulary* increases comprehension and facilitates further learning; and (3) *Domain knowledge*, the most recently understood principle, increases fluency, broadens vocabulary, and enables deeper comprehension.” *Domain knowledge* is the threshold level of

knowledge needed to understand a topic. Mr. Hirsch uses the example of a newspaper article on baseball. If you know nothing of the game, you can’t comprehend a sentence such as: “Jones sacrificed and knocked in a run.” The more domain knowledge acquired, the easier it becomes to read and understand a wider variety of material. (Hirsch, E. D. 2003. “Scientific Insights into the Fourth-Grade Slump and the Nation’s Stagnant Comprehension Scores.” *American Educator*, Spring, 10–20.)

“Any school that aspires to close the reading gap will need to deliver a carefully focused, cumulative curriculum that supplies the knowledge and vocabulary necessary for general reading comprehension.”

—E. Donald Hirsch Jr.,
Professor of Education and
Humanities, University of Virginia

The language gap presents complex problems that call for equally complex treatments—clearly beyond the scope of a newsletter. In this issue we focus on how to teach students to access text, especially while building their background, or “domain,” knowledge. One important teaching method we cover here is “text talk,” which builds on the fact that children understand what they hear better than what they read through 8th grade. For specific assistance with fluency and vocabulary we refer you to CORE’s *Teaching Reading Sourcebook* as well as our fall 2003 newsletter, which focuses on assessment, and our winter 2004 newsletter, which focuses on vocabulary. You can access book ordering information and a copy of the newsletters on our website, www.corelearn.com. ■

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Sources

- Consortium on Reading Excellence, Inc. 2004. *CORE Focus Seminar, Comprehension*. Professional development seminar developed by Consortium on Reading Excellence, Inc.
- Diamond, L. 2002. “Implementing and Sustaining a Middle and High School Reading and Intervention Program.” Paper published by Consortium on Reading Excellence, Inc.
- Honig, B. et al. 2000. *Teaching Reading Sourcebook: for kindergarten through eighth grade*.

Critical Comprehension Strategies Students Must Master

As we know from the research, reading is not an automatic or passive process, but is highly interactive—good readers apply a variety of strategies to process text (Presley, El-Dinary, Gaskins, Bergman, Almasi, and Brown 1992). *Strategies* are conscious plans that readers apply and adapt to make sense of text and to get the most out of what they read. The goal of strategy instruction is to turn students into interactive readers who are in control of their own reading comprehension.

Most researchers agree that students need to master certain key comprehension strategies to become proficient, strategic readers (Pearson et al. 1992).

- Predicting
- Using prior knowledge
- Identifying the main idea and summarization
- Questioning
- Making inferences
- Visualizing

Knowledge of text organization or the physical presentation and structure of text, especially expository text, is also a key ingredient of proficient, strategic reading.

Proven Techniques for Teaching Reading Comprehension Strategies

Teaching the specific strategies listed above equips students with the tools they need to control their reading comprehension (Dickson, Collins, Simmons, and Kame'enui 1998). It is important to teach these strategies in explicit and clear ways.

1. *Direct explanation:* The teacher explains to students what the strategy is and its purpose.
2. *Modeling:* The teacher demonstrates how to use the strategy by “thinking aloud” while interacting with actual text.
3. *Guided practice:* The teacher works with students to help them figure out how and when to use the strategy, again within the context of reading actual text.
4. *Feedback:* As students practice, the teacher may engage them in discussion or ask them to think aloud. During this time, the teacher provides feedback about correct and incorrect responses.
5. *Application:* The teacher asks students to apply the strategies to other texts. At this point, students move toward assuming responsibility for determining what strategy to use, and how, when, and why to use it.

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Examples of Widely Used Procedures and Models for Teaching Comprehension

The following examples teach comprehension strategies by using the explicit teaching techniques listed above. Find out more about each in CORE’s *Teaching Reading Sourcebook*.

Story Maps

A graphic representation of the story grammar of a narrative. Story maps help to identify the important elements in an upcoming story, helping students see the relationship among these elements.

Retelling

As students retell what they have just read or heard, they must synthesize and organize information, make inferences, and draw on their prior knowledge.

DRTA (Directed Reading and Thinking Activity, developed by Russell Stauffer)

Teaches students how to make and verify predictions throughout their reading. They take part in a predict-read-prove cycle.

QAR (Question-Answer Relationships, developed by Taffy Raphael)

Based on the idea that a three-way relationship exists among the question, the text to which it refers, and the reader’s prior knowledge. QAR enhances students’ ability to answer comprehension questions.

K-W-L Plus (What I Know, What I Want to Know, and What I Learned Plus, developed by Donna Ogle)

Involves four steps: What I Know (accessing prior knowledge), What I Want to Know (setting a purpose for reading), What I Learned (recalling what has been read), and Categories of Information I Expect to Use.

Identifying the Main Idea

In order to summarize expository text, students must be able to identify the main idea as well as supporting details.

Summarizing helps students clarify, comprehend, and recall what they read.

Graphic Organizers

Highlight how ideas are interrelated, help students understand the most important ideas presented, and facilitate the recall of information.

Reciprocal Teaching

Discussion leaders guide small groups in questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting as they read segments of text. ■

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The Key Role of Expository Text

While students enjoy narrative text, most of the knowledge they gain will be from expository text. Research findings indicate a strong link between text comprehension and understanding the way expository text is organized (Seidenberg 1989; Pearson and Fielding 1991; Weaver and Knitsch 1991).

As students learn about the physical presentation and underlying structure of expository text, they become more strategic in their reading—using prior knowledge to see a purpose for reading, identifying what is important, questioning and clarifying, making inferences, summarizing, and using their awareness of structural patterns to better determine main ideas and recall text information. ■

What About English Learners?

Students who are able readers in their primary languages often have mastered comprehension strategies that they can then transfer to reading in English. For English learners comprehension difficulties may be due to a lack of specific vocabulary or of cultural concepts presented in the text (or they can't decode English sounds and can't read text fluently because of this).

Text Talk: Getting Students to Think Out Loud About Text

The most valuable aspect of reading, including hearing read-alouds, is that it gives students of any age experience with decontextualized language, requiring them to make sense of ideas that are about something beyond the here and now. The key to learning to handle the decontextualized language of text is getting students to think about what was going on in the text, the “talk surrounding the text.”

The most effective text talk

- Focuses the discussion on the major ideas in a selection
- Gives students opportunities to reflect on content or language in a selection
- Deals with ideas as they are encountered, not after the entire selection is read

The importance of reading aloud

- Listening comprehension levels determine maximum reading comprehension levels.
- Comprehension of print lags behind comprehension of spoken language.
- Students understand what they hear better than what they read through 8th grade.
- Teacher point-of-use discussions and explanations during read-alouds are effective at any grade level.
- Below-grade-level readers gain access to the curriculum, age-appropriate concepts, and vocabulary.
- All students gain domain and background knowledge.
- English learners gain concept language and background knowledge.
- Read-alouds allow access to richer materials, and to single-copy materials.

Adapting read aloud practices

Text selection

Texts with an event structure and complexities of events should be selected, to provide grist for students to build meaning.

Initial questions

Open questions interspersed during reading require students to describe and explain text ideas, rather than to recall and retrieve words from text.

Follow-up questions

Questions scaffold students' thinking by using their initial response to form questions that encourage elaboration and development of initial ideas.

Pictures

In general, pictures should be presented after students have heard and responded to a section of text.

Background knowledge

It is important to help students retrieve background knowledge pertinent to understanding a text but to avoid encouraging students to digress from the text into tangential experiences.

Tips for getting started

Students may not know how to answer open questions at first. To help them formulate fuller answers:

- Repeat and rephrase what students are saying to focus them on important information.
- Use generic probes (“What’s that all about?” “What does that mean?”) to prompt students to explain.
- Reread the relevant portion of the text and repeat the question. ■



FREE

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The Newsletter for Committed Reading Leaders

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Gain insight into today's most pressing literacy issues.

Upcoming CORE Events

- **CORE Reading Leader Institute, Elementary**
November 3–5, 2004, Emeryville, CA
- **CORE Reading Coach Institute (Just added!)**
December 8–10, 2004, Emeryville, CA
- **CORE Reading Leader Institute, Secondary**
January 19–21, 2005, Emeryville, CA
- **CORE Literacy Leadership Summit 2005**
March 10–11, 2005, Oakland, CA

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