Reading in the Elementary Classroom
Chapter Two: Passage Comprehension

Key Terms

analysis	inference
analytic learner	knowledge
application	passage comprehension
background experience	prior knowledge
Bet Lines	prediction questioning strategies
Bloom's Taxonomy	relate
comprehension	summarize
connecting	synthesis
evaluation	Q-A-R
factual recall	Think-Aloud Strategy
global learner	Writer Response Journal
Graphic Response Technique	

Passage Comprehension

Introduction

Teaching a child to comprehend a passage can be a challenging task--at times more daunting than teaching a child to decipher the relationship between phonemes and graphemes (decoding skills). Much of the complexity of teaching comprehension is due to the complex nature of comprehension itself, as well as the fact that comprehension is *not* a visible process; whereas, decoding *is* visible. A teacher *can* "see" or hear the accuracy of oral decoding. As the child reads orally to the teacher, the teacher can easily determine strengths and weaknesses in the decoding process. Errors and accuracy of oral decoding are clearly visible to the teacher. However, the learners' reading comprehension is not fully visible to the instructor. The instructor may gain glimpses of a child's understanding through dialogue and questioning, but the child's complete understanding of the passage is not visible to the teacher. The teacher attempts to see as much of the picture as possible through questioning and dialogue; however, it is only part of the picture because the child is limited in being able to verbalize or write about his or her full understanding of the text. Also, because interpretations of passages vary, the determination of whether or not a child is truly comprehending a passage is, at best, a subjective activity in that passage comprehension varies from reader to reader, depending upon background knowledge, experience, and values.

Reading is not primarily a visual activity, though its base is a visual activity--with obvious exceptions, such as tactile reading (Braille) or auditory reading (Morse code). The base or foundation of the reading process is clearly decoding, the ability to lift print off the page through an understanding of the grapheme/phoneme relationship. Reading comprehension, however, is more than a visual processing activity because when you consider comprehension, you are examining what happens behind the eyes (in the brain) as the reader "digests" the written passage. Because reading comprehension is thinking, that

is processing in the brain ideas represented by print, it is challenging for the teacher to determine whether or not a child is truly understanding the intent of the passage. Yet, from a reading instructor's perspective, passage comprehension *must* become "visual" so that the teacher can determine the entry point into the curriculum and teach the child strategies to assist him or her in becoming a more developed, proficient reader.

Reading comprehension is multifaceted. It involves the intent and clarity of the writer as he or she attempts to harness thoughts in words. Comprehension also involves the interpretation of the text by the reader as well as a myriad of other variables, such as the reader's background knowledge, experience, and subject area expertise. Comprehension in large part is dependent upon the reader's ability to interact with the text, asking questions, making predictions, finding answers, and thoughtfully exploring ideas with the author. Frank Smith describes reading comprehension as a series of predictions: question-prediction-answer-question-prediction-answer (Smith, 1971).

A Definition of Passage Comprehension

For the purposes of this discussion, passage comprehension will be defined as the ability of a child to interpret large chunks of texts in a sensible, defendable fashion. This means that a young child in first grade might be able to retell a story in sequence, accurately capturing the basic plot. Passage comprehension might mean for a fifth grade child, the ability to retell a passage of his history book, capturing the essence of the Revolutionary War, and synthesizing critical issues and events on both sides.

Levels of Comprehension

There are several ways to think about levels of comprehension. One of the easiest ways to think about comprehension is to consider three layers: on the lines, between the lines, and beyond the lines. Another view of comprehension, as it is represented through questioning, is Q-A-R which involves four levels of reader response--the three listed previously with a fourth level inserted in the "beyond the lines" category. A third model for thinking about

levels of comprehension is the Bloom's Taxonomy levels of questioning which reflects a more sophisticated parsing of comprehension into six levels.

Three-fold View of Comprehension

While teaching reading in the elementary classroom, it can be difficult to hold the six levels of Bloom's taxonomy in one's mind and ensure that, as an instructor, each child is being asked to reflect on meaning at each of these levels. Because of this, many elementary classroom teachers find it easier to think of reading comprehension in three broad categories: on the lines, between the lines, and beyond the lines.

On the Lines

"On the lines" comprehension reflects a person's ability to recall the basic facts of a passage. The basic facts of Luke 5:1-11 are that the fishermen had toiled all night and had caught no fish, yet at Jesus' command, they let down their nets and their nets were filled with fish. Jesus used this event as a metaphor for a spiritual ministry.

Between the Lines

"Between the lines" comprehension reflects the reader's ability to make inferences. For example, one might infer from Luke 5 that Jesus' authority is over all and that He wanted the fishermen to experience the abundance that came with direct obedience to the master. Or, one might infer that Jesus wanted a visual illustration of the abundant "spiritual catch" that awaited the disciples if they faithfully followed their calling. A reader could also infer that believers can attempt to create their own abundance or success through hard work, but must finally come to the realization that ultimately God is in control of success and all the circumstances surrounding a person's work.

Beyond the Lines

"Beyond the lines" comprehension reflects the ability of the reader to take the passage beyond the text and to apply it in another context. For example, reading beyond the lines, a reader might contemplate his or her ability to trust God during turbulent circumstances. A reader might also apply concepts in this passage as they contemplate following God's

calling to the mission field, embracing the fact that God is completely in charge of the harvest, yet asks believers to follow Him in the harvest crusade.

Applying these three layers of passage comprehension--on the lines, between the lines, and beyond the lines--to another context, consider a person's ability to read a car manual. The person who can simply regurgitate sentences from the car manual on how to use jumper cables when a car battery dies, may reflect some rudimentary comprehension of the text, but regurgitation of a passage is not enough. In the event that the manual is not explicitly clear, the individual must be able to infer various concepts, such as location of the car battery, positive and negative clips, the critical nature of appropriately sequencing the steps, "clipping the cable to the engine head," the concept of grounding, and so forth. So a person who can read between the lines, interprets at a deeper level and is able to jump his or her car battery based upon the written directions (assuming a fairly clear writing of the manual). However, a person who could read only "on the lines" might miss the seriousness of keeping the positive and negative clips from touching each other and have an electrifying experience! Additionally, the person who is reading between the lines understands some limited information about how a car runs and the important role of the battery.

Those who read "beyond the lines," however, may have picked up a myriad of additional ideas that are related but beyond the scope of the text. For example, "there is incredible order in this world, even at the molecular level. One example of God's miraculous design is captured in the alignment of electrons."

Clearly, the reader who is able to comprehend at all three levels--on, between, and beyond the lines--demonstrates mental dexterity and cognitive interaction with the passage.

Interestingly, assessing students at the basic, knowledge level recall of comprehension can be a misleading task. For example, read this nonsense passage:

The four burnzies fiborously frintztied the pulpiliptous purdles.

Now answer basic knowledge level, on the lines, questions about this passage. For example:

- How many burnzies were there?
- How did the burnzies frintzy?
- What kind of purdles were present?

If you looked back to the original passage, you were more than likely able to answer the questions correctly. (Answer One: There were *four* burnzies. Answer Two: The burnzies *fiborously* frintztied. Answer Three: *Pulpiliptous* purdles were present.) You were able to answer these "on the lines" questions because of your knowledge of English syntax, though you probably have no idea what the nouns, *burnzy* or *purdle*, mean. Additionally, you are probably in the dark about the adverb, *fiborously*, and the adjective, *pulpiliptous.* Yet, a student who was asked only on the lines reading comprehension questions, would, more than likely, successfully answer these questions. Interestingly, many of our second language students as well as English only students who may be word callers can correctly answer basic knowledge level questions when, in reality, they do not understand the passage's meaning. Insightful teacher practitioners, aware of this phenomenon, avoid limiting passage comprehension questions to just on the line, factual recall. Higher level questioning is necessary for the teacher practitioner to have accurate insight into whether or not the young learner is processing the deeper meaning of the text.

Four-fold View of Comprehension: Q-A-R

A four-fold view of passage comprehension is represented by the Question-Answer-Relationship (QAR) reading comprehension strategy developed by Taffy E. Raphael (1986). "Right There" and "Think and Search" are text-oriented questions; whereas, "Author and You" and "On My Own" are reader-oriented questions. The four levels of questioning represent four types of strategies for assisting the students in processing text meaning.

Right There

"Right there" questions are factual, "on the line" questions. For example, in the story of *The Three Little Pigs*, "How many pigs were there?" or "What kind of house did the first pig build?" are "right there" factually-oriented questions. An example of a "right there" history question would be, "In what year did the Revolutionary Ward begin?" Notice that these questions are more oriented toward tiny bites of factual recall as opposed to comprehending a large passage of text.

Think and Search

"Think and Search" questions demand more from the reader, because the reader needs to put together different sections of the story in order to reflect a deeper level of comprehension. For example, "Describe the three types of houses the three little pigs built and tell what ultimately happened to each house." In this case, the reader needs to go back to several parts of the story and combine the parts to adequately respond to the question. A correct response would reflect a comprehensive understanding of the entire story or passage. An example of a "Think and Search" question from a history passage would be, "What were the major events that led to the Revolutionary War?"

Author and You

"Author and You" questions ask the readers to combine their own background experiences, knowledge, and values, and in combination with the text provided, respond to a particular question. For example, "If you were a cousin of the three little pigs and you were to move into the area, having heard about your cousins' experiences with the wolf, what type of house would you build and why?" Now, some children might immediately respond that they would build a brick house, because it was the only safe house that could withstand the wiles of the wolf. However, the teacher at this point might probe to help the student make more connections. For example, the teacher might query, "Are there other materials besides bricks that might be even stronger?" Thoughtful responses would reflect further connections between the reader's life experience and the author's text, incorporating

building materials with which the student was familiar or creative strategies not mentioned in the story that might withstand the potential onslaught of the wolf.

An example of an "Author and You" question from a history text might be, "If you had lived during the colonial era, which side would you have fought on during the Revolutionary War and why?" In this case, students make a decision that is based upon factual knowledge provided in the text combined with personal values and prior knowledge. The insightful practitioner does not settle for student responses that are simply, "The colonists' side." The insightful practitioner has the student reread the question to notice that the second part of the question was "why?" The insightful practitioner asks for elaboration, pushes the envelope, and probes further, encouraging the student to make connections between the text and personal values.

"Henry, why would you have chosen to fight on the side of the colonists?"

The student might respond, "Well, the colonists moved to North America to seek independence for a variety of things, like religious freedom and so forth. If England continued to control the colonists, like heavily taxing them on tea, who is to know where the control would end? The English government could have just kept on bossing around the colonists, controlling their government, taxes, and places of worship until the colonists were right back where they started. If I were a colonist, I would have been frustrated to have taken that long trip over the Atlantic for freedom, only to find the English government was still trying to rule everything I did, plus take all my money through taxes. I think people have a right to rule themselves. That is what America is all about."

This type of "Author and You" response reflects a student's thorough comprehension of the basic components of the passage--an understanding of the colonists' need for religious, monetary, and governance freedoms--and combines this passage content with personal values (e.g., belief in democracy and religious freedom). In this case, the "Author and You" response reveals deeper passage comprehension, not just surface comprehension. The student makes connections between new knowledge from the text passage and prior

personal knowledge, creating a new level of understanding. The "Author and You" response helps the student to personalize the knowledge, adding it to his or her own schema. "Author and You" questions provide the teacher with a transparent "look" into the child's mind, revealing his or her ability to make connections between the printed text and personal understanding, values, and prior knowledge.

On My Own

"On My Own" questions ask students to go completely "beyond the text," responding to queries for which the text is not needed. For example, an "On My Own" question springing forth from *The Story of the Three Little Pigs* might be, "If you were to build your own house on the coast, in the mountains, or in the desert, what kinds of materials would you like the house to be built from and why?"

An "On My Own" question based upon a Revolutionary War passage might be, "Have you ever been involved in a conflict? If yes, what happened? How did you decide which stand to take?"

"On My Own" questions are not dependent upon the given reading passage; however, in order for the student to respond, he or she must have a thorough grasp of the major concept of the passage (e.g., conflict) and some type of experience with this concept in his or her personal background experiences or reading.

Note that reading *can* build background knowledge and experience. For example, even though students may never have visited the Northwest Territories in Canada, students may have a sense of northern Canadian terrain, climate, and living conditions if they read Will Hobbs' *Far North* (1996). Similarly, students may have never entered a dog sled race; however, if they read John Reynolds Gardiner's *Stone Fox* (1980), they will understand the dogsled race in question. And, of course, none of us experienced the California Gold Rush of the 1840s; however, we can build background knowledge about the California Gold Rush by having students read Sid Fleischman's *By the Great Horn Spoon!* (1963). So students, exposed to rich literature, can have vicarious experiences that enrich their background

knowledge, better preparing them to contextually understand new passages and to think beyond those passages.

Bloom's Taxonomy

Bloom's levels of questioning reflect a six-fold model: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Though the most precise definitions of these categories overlap, generally accepted definitions of these levels of questioning are as follows.

Knowledge

Knowledge level questions are factual recall, "right there," "on the line" questions. Key words, like *who, what, when, where, why, identify,* and *find* clue the reader into the type of on the line, factual information the test writer or reading teacher is seeking. Students can regurgitate knowledge level questions without fully understanding the passage. For example:

1. *Who were the main characters?*
2. *What did they do?*
3. *When did Columbus sail the ocean blue?*

Comprehension

The comprehension level of Bloom's taxonomy requires the reader to reflect the intent of the passage. The reader does not provide exact facts or information, but processes the information in his or her own words. Cue words, like *explain, paraphrase, distinguish interpret, defend,* and *summarize* let the reader know that a higher level of processing is required to reflect his or her own personal comprehension of the passage. A reader cannot fake the comprehension of a passage.

1. *Explain why the Gold Rush created such "gold fever."*
2. *Defend the author's argument for school choice.*
3. *Summarize the four major sections of the book.*

Application

Application level questions require the reader to take the ideas of the passage and to apply them in another context. Cue words like *infer, construct, imagine, what if, associate,* or *chart* force the reader to apply the ideas to a new context. For example:

1. *What principles can you infer from the consequences of the main character's behavior?*
2. *Construct a graphic organizer to show what you learned from this passage.*
3. *Imagine yourself in a similar situation, how would you respond and why?*

Analysis

The analysis level of questioning requires the reader to break down the ideas into elements. Cue words like *categorize, classify, analyze, compare,* and *simplify* each force the reader to break down information into "chunks." Examples of analysis questions are:

1. *Classify the characters according to their behavior.*
2. *Analyze the actions of the protagonist.*
3. *Compare the reasons Sally and Rex gave for working in the convalescent home.*

Synthesis

The synthesis level of questioning requires the reader to take the ideas of the passage and to put the elements of the passage into a new whole. Cue words like *revise, associate, reconstruct, write,* and *prepare* help the reader reorganize information. For example:

1. *Write a short newspaper article reporting the first Olympics.*
2. *Reconstruct the novel in three to six paragraphs.*
3. *Prepare a series of overheads for the social studies passage to make it easy for a young child to understand.*

Evaluation

This level of questioning asks the reader to make a judgment about the ideas in the passage. This requires the reader to call upon his or her values as well as background

information from the story. Cue words like *support, explain, argue, defend, determine,* and *differentiate* help elicit this level of understanding.

1. *Identify the wisest character and support your selection.*
2. *Did you think the ending of the story was fair? Explain your viewpoint.*
3. *Provide three arguments to justify Nathan's unusual decision.*

Questioning students' comprehension is without a doubt a crucial element in the literacy classroom. However, questioning, though it exposes levels of understanding, can become simply assessing, rather than teaching. So it is essential that every elementary teacher practice behaviors that strengthen comprehenion.

Practices that Strengthen Comprehension

Dolores Dirken, during the 1980s, analyzed teachers' behavior during reading and social studies classes. She found that teachers were not teaching comprehension; instead, they were assessing comprehension. For example, many teachers were guilty of simply assigning students stories or chapters to read in their social studies and science books and then asking them to answer the questions at the end. This behavior is assessing, not teaching comprehension. Certainly there is a place for simply answering questions at the end of a passage; however, in elementary school, the teacher's role is to teach students *how* to comprehend passages as well as to assess their comprehension. The *how* is often neglected and students suffer because they are unable to see how their teacher does it, that is, how their teacher actually comprehends text. The difficulty lies in the fact that the students can hear the teacher read aloud and so have a model of good decoding skills, but good comprehension skills, that is thinking and processing passages, can be invisible and internal--an "in the head" type of action that the teacher seldom makes visible to the students.

Practices that strengthen comprehension set the stage for success: 1) facilitate students reading a lot, 2) activate background knowledge, 3) have students dialogue about text, and 4) teach reading comprehension strategies. The FADS approach is easy to remember:

F = facilitate
A = activate
D = dialogue
S = strategies

Facilitate (a special thanks to Marie Hseu, M.A. in progress, and Michelle Jackson, M.A., for additions to this section)

The "F" of the FADS approach stands for "facilitate." Facilitate students reading a lot. The more students read, the better readers they become (Krashen, 1996). Much literature exists suggesting that the time students spend in reading or reading activities greatly impacts reading comprehension and academic success (Applebee, 1998; Foertsch, 1992; McEady-Gillead, 1989; Meyer, 1992).

Brekke (1987) conducted a study of students in different regions of the country that compared the amount of time spent reading at different grade levels in 1961 with the amount of time spent reading at those same grade levels in 1985. Brekke found an average increase of 31 minutes per week allotted for formal, basal reading; and an average of 32 minutes per week allotted for other reading in 1985 as compared to 1961. Indeed, it appeared that elementary schools were doing more content and free reading in 1985 than in 1961. This emphasis may reflect, in part, overall increased national attention to reading competency and literacy over time which has carried into the new century with literacy leadership at national and state levels. As Brekke observed, "If more time devoted to reading may be assumed to have a bearing on how well students read, the changes which have occurred may start to be reflected soon in improved reading achievement" (p. 3).

A study by Foertsch (1992) supported Brekke's suggestion that the amount of time spent in reading was related to student reading achievement. Foertsch focused on the results of the NAEP to determine the factors that influenced the literacy achievements of American students in grades 4, 8, and 12 in 1988 and 1990. The study measured the students' average reading performance on a scale of 0 to 500 and allowed for direct comparison across the grades and among the subgroups. The amount of reading students did in and out of the classroom was positively correlated with the students' achievement.

Students who reported coming from home environments that fostered and encouraged reading had higher reading achievement.

In a related study, Applebee and his colleagues (1988) also researched factors related to reading achievement. The study involved a sample of 36,000 students in grades 3, 7, and 11. It was based on the NAEP 1986 assessment of the reading achievement of American school children. The researchers found that poor readers reported doing less independent reading than good readers and that reading proficiency was related to students' general literacy experience. They concluded that "the more successful readers are likely to be enrolled in academically-oriented programs and advanced courses, to spend regular amounts of time on homework each day, and to have home support for reading" (p. 6). Applebee and Foertsch's NAEP assessments suggest that American schools continue to have difficulty in narrowing the performance gap between better and poorer readers as they progress through school.

These studies support a positive relationship between increased reading time and increased reading achievement, but exactly how much time is allotted for reading in schools on a daily basis? According to the California State document, *Every Child a Reader* (1995), it is recommended that "in kindergarten, at least one-third of the day should be devoted to language arts. In early primary grades, students should spend at least one-half of the day in reading and other language arts activities" (p. 11). This recommendation appropriates a large amount of time to reading instruction, but the students themselves may not be actually reading as much as the state suggests. In a NAEP report on 1994 trends in academic progress, Campbell and others (1996) found that only 17% of students age nine, 14% of students age 13, and 23% of students age 17 read more than 20 pages daily in school and for homework. Foertsch found in her sample of 13,000 students in 1988 and 25,000 students in 1990, that of fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders in public and private schools in the U.S. only "45% of the fourth graders, 63% of the eighth, and 59% of the twelfth graders reported reading ten or fewer pages each daily" (p. 4). Perhaps low levels of

reading achievement in the some schools can be related to the paucity of pages students are actually reading at school and at home.

Thus, the importance of the elementary school teacher facilitating reading a lot through shared reading, reading aloud, and independent reading cannot be underscored enough. Key to the child reading a lot, of course, is text access. The teacher must ensure that his or her students have plenty of interesting reading materials available from a wide variety of genres and at a variety of reading levels. Bright, colorful books, magazines, encyclopedias, and technological resources motivate the young learner to read.

McQuillan's studies in *The California Reader* (XXXX) show that lower socioeconomic neighborhoods, particularly in urban environments, suffer the worst in providing text access to children. Urban educators, such Alejandro Jauregui, Buena Park City School District's "Teacher of the Year" and adjunct professor at Biola University, shares creative ways for teachers to collect more books at low cost. "Go to garage sales. Ask people at your church. Ask your friends. Lots of people who have grown children still have boxes of children's books in their garages. Ask them to share and help today's kids learn to read."

Activate

The "A" for the FADS approach stands for "activate." Activating background knowledge means tapping into what students already know. For example, if a class was about to read a passage in a social studies book about rocks, a good place to start would be to ask students to bring in their rock collections, share the collections, and tell what they know about rocks. An amazing amount of information already collectively exists in the children's heads. This information is drawn out by tapping into prior experiences, particularly common experiences, such as observing and collecting rocks.

Building upon prior experience and background knowledge, expands class discussions to stretch student learning as they approach the text chapter on rocks. For example, as children share their rocks and what they know about them, terms such as sedimentary,

igneous, and metamorphic come up in the discussion. Write the terms on the board, providing succinct definitions. In this manner, students begin to attach new linguistic labels to prior experiences and knowledge (rocks), moving them to new levels of understanding by connecting the known to the unknown.

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Tharp & Gallimmore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978) is a prime example of what happens when you activate background knowledge and take learning one more step as the instructor provides support. The children's current level of understanding is brought to the forefront through the concrete experiences of sharing their rock collections. The children use simple language to describe their understanding of each of the rocks. As the teacher interacts with the students, she gives new labels for old labels (e.g., the child calls the rock "black and white speckled" and the teacher begins to call the rock "granite"). In addition, the teacher begins to introduce new concepts built upon the children's previous observations (e.g., a child points out that he or she has a "striped rock" and the teacher begins using terms and phrases, such as "layers," "sedimentary," "change over time," and eventually "metamorphic"). This dialogue, previous to and during the reading of the text, helps connect the known to the unknown and take the children to the next level of understanding. Students also learn from one another, adding breadth to their collective experiences prior to reading a passage.

When the teacher activates background knowledge prior to the reading of a passage, vistas open for the learner. Curiosity is engaged, connections are made, and in a larger social milieu, concepts are stretched far beyond the understanding of an individual learner.

Dialogue

The "D" of the FADS approach stands for "dialogue." Dialogue about text promotes cognitive interaction about text, strengthening the connections between the known and the unknown, capitalizing on other people's perspective about text. For example, what is the first thing you want to do after you have read a great book? Talk about it, of course. Talking about text helps us process text--thus underscoring the importance of shared literary

experiences. Talking about text also helps the readers make connections and clarify understandings.

What causes a child to pick up a book in the first place? Social interaction. For example, students pick up books when someone has told them that it is a great book to read. They also pick up texts when they have heard something about the author. Children also enjoy series books and make social connections about specific series books that continues to build a common bond between themselves and fellow readers. Stated simply, the educator's desire is to help children get "hooked on books" through continued dialogue and sharing about great literature.

One of the best things you can do as a teacher is to promote parents and children reading together and dialoguing about text. Books like *Family Time Reading Fun: Helping Your Child Become a Successful Reader* (Clinard, 1997) provide practical strategies for attaching the emotion of fun and the concept of dialoguing about text in the home. Dialogue about text in the classroom is critical also and will be woven through most of the strategies shared in the next section. Naturally, all the questioning strategies discussed in the previous section promote dialogue about text and can be used in the context of text, not just at the end of a story or chapter.

Strategies

The "S" of the FADS approach stands for strategies. Reading teachers need to directly teach reading comprehension strategies. Dirken's findings over a decade indicated that the majority of reading and social studies teachers were simply assessing comprehension as opposed to teaching comprehension. This finding is directly related to the common practice of assigning passages to read and answering questions at the end. Remember, asking questions at the end of an assigned passage is a perfectly acceptable way of determining passage understanding and promoting processing of the material at deeper levels. However, for the elementary school teacher, his or her primary role is to pass on the skill of literacy to the next generation. This most easily occurs when the teacher practitioner explicitly and

intentionally *teaches* strategies for passage comprehension. Explicitly teaching comprehension strategies first begins with modeling.

Modeling Passage Comprehension

To be an effective teacher of reading comprehension, one must first model what good comprehension is all about by modeling what good readers do to process and interact with text. Modeling of effective reading comprehension makes comprehension "visible" to the less mature reader and can occur through a variety of oral reading techniques, including the Think-Aloud Strategy, Bet Lines, Writer Response Journals, and the Graphic Organizer Technique.

Think-Aloud Strategy

The Think-Aloud Strategy is a technique where the teacher reads a passage aloud and spontaneously says whatever comes to mind as he or she is reading, including questioning, making personal connections, predicting, evaluating, and clarifying. For example, if the teacher reads *The Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher* by Beatrix Potter, she might read aloud the story, inserting comments, as follows:

Once upon a time there was a frog named Mr. Jeremy Fisher. (I love frogs! They are cute little amphibians. Mr. Jeremy Fisher is quite a fancy name for a little frog.*) He lived in a little damp house* (damp means moist or sort of wet, that's okay for frogs) *among the buttercups on the edge of a pond.* (Buttercups are flowers and a pond is a small lake. Frogs usually live by the edge of ponds, at least that's where I always saw frogs when I was a kid.) *The water was all slippy sloppy in his kitchen and by his back door.* (Slippy sloppy, slippy sloppy. I love the sound of those words. Slippy sloppy reminds me of the way pond water lightly laps the ground around the pond's edges.) *But Mr. Jeremy liked getting his feet wet. Nobody ever scolded him, and he never caught a cold!* (Oh look! The illustration shows Mr. Jeremy Fisher sitting in his house reading the newspaper and he's letting one of

his feet dangle in the slippy sloppy water. Too cute. I wonder if something is going to happen to him. Like maybe he'll fall into the water. That happened to me once when I was dangling my feet in the slippy sloppy water off the side of a boat. Hmnnn, let's see what happens next.)

He was quite pleased on day when he looked out and saw large drops of rain splashing in the pond. (Oh, Mr. Jeremy Fisher loves the rain like me.)

"I will get some worms (yuck!) *and go fishing and catch a dish of minnows* (minnows are tiny fish like sardines) *for my dinner," said Jeremy Fisher. "If I catch more than five fish, I will invite Mr. Alderman Ptolemy Tortoise and Sir Isaac Newton to dine with me*. (Those sure are fancy names for animals. I wonder what kind of animal Sir Isaac Newton is going to be. Maybe he's another tortoise.) *Mr. Tortoise, however, eats only salad.* (Well, then probably Sir Isaac Newton is a different animal, because if he was a tortoise, he'd probably just eat lettuce too.)"

The Think-Aloud is a metacognitive approach that verbalizes the actual thinking about the text that goes on in a fluent reader's head. The Think-Aloud strategy is one of the few strategies that actually allows the learner to get a visual auditory glimpse of how it works inside the proficient reader's head. Interestingly, many teachers and parents intuitively go about similar dialogue when reading aloud to young children.

Bet Lines

Bet Lines are key stopping points (lines) where teachers ask students to dialogue about what they have just read and make predictions about the future. Similar to the Think-Aloud, the Bet Line promotes group interaction about the content of the story. Teachers often introduce this strategy with a short story. The short story is duplicated with lines following certain key paragraphs. Students are instructed to fold back their paper at the first line and NOT to read ahead. Everyone shares reading the first section aloud (unison, round robin, or popcorn reading) and stops at the Bet Line. Students make predictions about what will happen next, supporting their predictions from story content or personal experiences. After

the discussion finishes, the class folds their paper down to the next Bet Line. The next section is read and predictions are confirmed or refuted based upon story content. Further predictions about what will happen next follow. Let us continue with Mr. Jeremy Fisher.

Mr. Jeremy put on a raincoat and a pair of rubber overshoes. He took his fishing rod and basket and set off with enormous hops to the place where he kept his boat.

The boat was round and green and very much like the other lily pads. It was tied to a water plant in the middle of the pond.

----------BET LINE----------

The students stop at the bet line. The teacher asks, "What do you think will happen next?"

A student responds, "I think Mr. Jeremy Fisher is going to catch a lot of minnows." "Why?" the teacher probes.

"Because he's well prepared. He's got all his stuff, like a boat and everything. I think he knows what he's doing. He's fished before."

"What does everyone else think?" the teacher asks. Several children express agreement.

"Let's fold down our papers to the next 'bet line' and see if all of you are right about Mr. Jeremy Fisher having a successful fishing trip."

Using a twig pole, Mr. Jeremy pushed the lily-pad boat out into open water. "I know a good place for minnows," he said.

Mr. Jeremy stuck his pole into the muddy bottom of the pond and fastened his boat to it. Then he settle himself cross-legged and arranged his fishing tackle. He had the dearest little red bobber. His rod was a tough stalk of grass. His fishing line was a long strand of horsehair. He hooked a little wiggly worm at the end of the line.

--------BET LINE-------

"Now a few moments ago, Carlos told us that he thought that Mr. Jeremy was an experienced fisherman. Most of you agreed. Do we have more evidence that Carlos was correct? What is the evidence?"

"Mr. Jeremy has all the fishing stuff. He's got a pole and a boat and bobber. What's a bobber teacher?"

"A bobber is something connected to your line that floats on the surface of the water. Here let me show you in the picture."

"Oh. What's the bobber for?"

"Well, the bobber helps keep the bait at a certain depth in the water. You don't want your bait and hook dragging at the bottom of the pond and getting stuck on grass and mud down there. Also, if a fish bites the bait and gets hooked, it will pull on the line. When it pulls on the line, the bobber on the surface of the water will 'bob' up and down. This gives the fisherman a visual clue that there's a fish on the end of his line."

"Can't the fisherman just *feel* the pull? I felt my fish pull my line," one child queries.

"Yes, of course, but the visual clue helps. The most important role of the bobber is to help keep the bait and hook at the proper depth. Now, what do you think is going to happen next to Mr. Jeremy Fisher?"

"I think he's going to catch a shark."

"Really?" (A big smile on the teacher's face.)

"Yes, really, but . . . maybe it won't be a shark because I'm not sure if sharks live in little lakes like those frog ponds. Maybe he'll catch something smaller . . . but I sure would like it if the frog would catch a shark!" The child laughs wholeheartedly and peels of laughter break out all over the room. The predictions go on and the children continue reading.

The rain trickled down his back, and for nearly an hour as he stared at the bobber. "This is getting tiresome," said Mr. Jeremy Fisher. "I think I would like some lunch."

He pushed his boat back among the water grasses at the edge of the pond. Then he took some lunch out of the basket. "I will eat a butterfly sandwich and wait until the shower is over," said Mr. Jeremy Fisher.

(A few squirms ensue from the second grade audience.)

Just then a water beetle swam under the lily-pad boat and tweaked Mr. Jeremy's toe! Mr. Jeremy crossed his legs out of reach, and went on eating his butterfly sandwich.

Once or twice something moved about the pond's edge with a rustle and a splash. "I certainly hope that is not a rat," said Mr. Jeremy Fisher. "I think I had better get away from here."

Mr. Jeremy shoved the boat away from shore and dropped in his fishing line. There was a bite almost immediately! The bobber went way under the water! "A minnow! A minnow! I have him by the nose!" cried Mr. Jeremy Fisher, pulling up on his rod.

But what a horrible surprise! Instead of a smooth fat minnow, Mr. Jeremy had caught a huge fish covered with sharp spines! The big fish snapped and flopped about, sticking Mr. Jeremy, until he was quite out of breath.

After the big spiny fish finished flopping around, it jumped back into the water.

A school of minnows put their heads out of the water and laughed at Mr. Jeremy Fisher.

Mr. Jeremy sat sadly on the edge of the lily pad, sucking his sore fingers and peering into the water. Suddenly, a much worse thing happened. It would have been a really frightful thing if Mr. Jeremy had not been wearing his raincoat!

----------BET LINE--------

"My goodness! All sorts of awful things are happening to Mr. Jeremy Fisher. He got attacked by a spiny fish and laughed at by the minnows. Poor Mr. Jeremy. And now, the story tells us something worse is going to happen. What do you think it will be?" the teacher queries.

"He will catch a shark and it will eat him up!" The children roar, shaking from peels of laughter.

"I'm scared," one child cries out in exaggeration, relishing in the suspense. More laughter breaks out.

After the laughter dies down, the teacher smiles as she calls upon one child who is frantically raising her hand. "Really teacher, I think something really bad is going to happen and I think it is going to be a shark or some kind of really big mean fish. It might eat him."

"No, it can't eat him," another child challenges. "He's the main character. He can't die. It's got to end good."

"Well, let's see what happens next . . . " the teacher says. Students anxiously turn back the text to see what happens next.

The Bet Line strategy elicits more and more dialogue as time goes on and the children can hardly wait to read the next section of the text. The Bet Line encourages highly, interactive group dialogue, increasing cognitive curiosity as suspense in the story plot grows. Through the course of the dialogue, summarizing, clarifying of vocabulary, making connections with personal experiences, questioning, and predicting all come into play. The Bet Line simply couches these interactive strategies of proficient reading within a different context, providing another nice way to reinforce these critical skills of proficient readers.

Writer Response Journal

The Writer Response Journal is again a method of promoting interaction with the text in the form of predicting, clarifying, making personal connections, questioning, and evaluating; however, in the case of the Writer Response Journal, the predominate interaction is written language. The journal entries can be handled in a variety of ways and the students determine whether or not their responses to the text will include a question, prediction, and so forth.

The students may be directed to make a journal entry following each page of reading, each section of reading, or particular query points indicated by the teacher.

Below is a Writer Response example from the last section of *The Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher.* The text is provided for you in italics and an example written response follows.

An enormous trout jumped--ker flop-p-p-p!--with a splash. It seized Mr. Jeremy with a snap!

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" cried Mr. Jeremy. The trout turned and dove to the bottom of the pond!

But the trout didn't like the taste of the raincoat. In less than half a minute it spit Mr. Jeremy out! The only things it swallowed were Mr. Jeremy's rubber overshoes.

Mr. Jeremy bobbed up to the surface of the water like a cork. He swam with all his might at the edge of the pond. He scrambled out of the water and hopped home across the meadow with his raincoat in tatters.

WRITER RESPONSE JOURNAL ENTRY

The frog was lucky he didn't die. He was like Jonah and the whale and got spit out.

"What a mercy that was not an even bigger fish!" said Mr. Jeremy. "I have lost my rod and basket, but it does not much matter. I am sure I will never dare to go fishing again!"

That evening he bandaged his fingers and invited his friends to dinner. He could not offer them fish, but he had something else in the pantry.

WRITER RESPONSE JOURNAL ENTRY

He'll probably feed them grass.

His guests soon arrived. Sir Isaac Newton wore his black and gold waistcoat. Mr. Alderman Ptolemy Tortoise brought a salad with him in a string bag.

WRITER RESPONSE JOURNAL ENTRY

It was nice of Sir Newton to dress up. I like it when poeple where fancee clothes.

Instead of a nice dish of minnows, Mr. Jeremy served Mr. Tortoise and Sir Isaac Newton a roasted grasshopper with ladybug sauce for dinner. Frogs consider it a beautiful treat, but I think it would have been awful! THE END

WRITER RESPONSE JOURNAL ENTRY

I WOULD NOT EAT LADYBUG SAUCE. I think I'm going to be sick right now. Maybe I could go to recess early. (Jus kidding.)

What a fun story! The Writer Journal Response helps the reader continue to cognitively interact with the passage, connecting the reading/writing processes. The written responses help the teacher see if the student is really tracking with the story content, and in this case, the student definitely was right on target with the content of the text. The Writer Response Journal not only revealed that she understood the passage, but also revealed a bit about the child's personality--sense of humor, enjoyment of fancy clothes, and ability to make connections between this story and the story of Jonah.

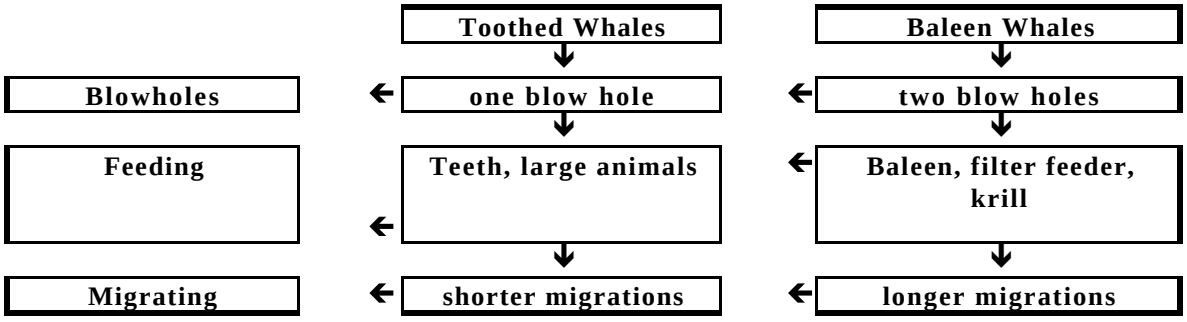
Graphic Response Technique

A variation on the Writer Response Journal is to have the students draw graphic organizers or sketches to illustrate sections of a passage. The Graphic Response Technique is particularly helpful with content area materials, such as social studies and science texts. *Graphic Organizers* (Flynn, 1995) is an outstanding source book, demonstrating many

helpful diagramming techniques across all curricular areas. Consider the following brief passage on whales:

There are two large groupings of whales, toothed and baleen. Though whales are all cetaceans, the toothed and baleen whales have a number of distinctive differences. The toothed whales have one blowhole while the baleen whales have two, giving their spouts a heart-shaped spray. Toothed whales, of course, have teeth and are meat eaters; whereas, baleen whales have baleen and are filter feeders. Baleen whales feed primarily on small creatures, such as krill; whereas, a toothed whale, such as a killer whale, might attack larger animals like sea lions. Baleen whales tend to be much larger and migrate for longer distances than toothed whales.

After reading this passage, the reader would be required to graphically organize the information in the passage. For example, one reader organized the passage as follows.



The readers' ability to organize pieces of information in the passage into a cohesive whole demonstrates their ability to process the text.

Artistically-oriented children enjoy illustrating their understanding of text. Note this third graders visual summary of a scene from *The Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950).

The teacher can easily model the Graphic Organizer Technique by introducing graphic organizers prior to reading a passage to show how the passage is organized. This is particularly helpful for nonfiction text so that over time the students begins to grasp

common text patters: sequential or chronological order, comparison/contrast, cause and effect, definition or explanation, simple listing, and problem/solution (Tompkins, 1994).

Conclusion

Passage comprehension is the ability to interpret large chunks of texts in a sensible, defendable fashion. The teacher elicits understanding and processing of text through questioning strategies and direct modeling and teaching of reading comprehension techniques. Three common models of questioning include the three-fold view (on the lines, between the lines, and beyond the lines), Q-A-R (question-answer-relationship), and Bloom's Taxonomy.

Teaching passage comprehension is difficult because how a fluent reader understands text is an invisible processing task that occurs inside a person's head. Modeling the invisible seems a daunting task; however, proficient teacher practitioners can use the Think-Aloud and Bet Line strategies to orally model the thought processes of fluent readers. The Think-Aloud and Bet Line strategies helps the children see what a mature, fluent reader experiences during the act of reading. Think-Aloud and Bet Line strategies are particularly helpful for auditory learners and those who enjoy talking a lot; however, these strategies can benefit all types of learners.

The Writer Response Journal and the Graphic Organizer Technique are methods of helping children monitor their own understanding during the reading/writing process. These strategies can also be modeled. The Writer Response Journal assists the child who is more kinesthetically and linguistically oriented and enjoys the writing process. The Writer Response Journal connects the reading/writing literacy processes. The Graphic Organizer Technique is particularly helpful for the visual learners, spatial learners, and global learners. These learners like to see the big picture and drawing the big picture of comprehension helps imbed the content of the passage in their minds. The more analytical the learner, the more details that tend to show up in graphic organizers and illustrations.

The FADS approach highlights four critical components that help increase a child's growth in the area of passage comprehension: 1) facilitate reading a lot, 2) activate background knowledge and experiences, 3) dialogue about text, and 4) explicitly teach passage comprehension strategies.

Most importantly the teacher should facilitate the connection of enjoyment and positive emotions to the reading process. This can be accomplished through shared reading experiences with child and parent, child and teacher, and child and peers as they enjoy poetry, drama, short stories, Reader's Theater, and classics, such as C.S. Lewis' Narnia series. The social dialogue surrounding the text helps the reader construct meaning, building upon his or her background knowledge and experience as he or she discovers the meaning of a new passage.

Literacy is "more than learning to read, write and spell proficiently. It is learning to enjoy words and stories when someone else is reading them. It is learning to love books and all the worlds that can be opened by books. It is a way of achieving social closeness through sharing literary experiences with friends or classmates. It is finding out about the way things are in places we have never visited or in places that have never existed. If we understand that literacy is all of these things and more, we can also understand that everyone can achieve some degree of literacy if given opportunities and exposure" (Mirenda, 1993).

Chapter Two: Glossary of Terms

analysis-a skill where the reader breaks down the content of a passage into chunks

analytic learner-a learner who learns best by detail or part to whole

application-the ability to apply the information in a book or passage outside the context of the text

background experience-prior life experiences that assist the reader in interpreting text

Bet Line-a reading technique with stopping points in the text (bet lines) where readers make predictions about the content of what is to come

Bloom's Taxonomy-six levels of questioning that require the reader to process text from different perspectives

comprehension-understanding text at a variety of levels

connecting-associating the content of text with personal experiences or knowledge

evaluation-making a judgment (e.g., Evaluate the character's motives.)

factual recall-recollection of explicit pieces of information

global learner-a person who learns best from whole to part, a person who needs the big picture first

Graphic Response Technique-a strategy where the reader illustrates his or her understanding of a passage by drawing diagrams or illustrations

inference-reading between the lines, a hunch based upon evidence in a passage

knowledge-information about a particular subject

passage comprehension-understanding of a large section of text

prior knowledge-information that a reader brings to the text

prediction-guessing what will happen next in a story or passage

probe-when a teacher asks a comprehension question that gently forces the learner to think more deeply about his or her response

questioning strategies-strategies to assist readers in processing text and to show evidence of text understanding

relate-to associate two or more pieces of information, text, or experiences; to make connections between separate data, to consider how the data are related

summarize-to state the big idea of a passage

synthesis-to take the elements of a passage and to bring them together into a new whole

Q-A-R-a reading comprehension technique that helps the learner understand four types of questions ("Right There," "Author and You," "Think and Search," and "On My Own") and whether or not the questions are reader-oriented or text-oriented

Think-Aloud Strategy-a metacognitive reading comprehension strategy that combines reading aloud and spontaneous thoughts about the passage, including predicting, questioning, clarifying, connecting, and so forth. This strategy shows the less able reader what goes on in a fluent reader's head as he or she interacts with text.

wisdom-application of knowledge

Writer Response Journal-a literacy processing strategy where readers stop and respond to text intermittently

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Chapter Two: Think It Over

1. What characteristics of Jesus' teaching indicate that He was sensitive to the learners' background knowledge and experiences?

2. How did Jesus' sensitivity to His listeners' background experiences help connect the known (learners' background experiences) with the unknown (new knowledge)? Provide examples from Scripture.

3. What types of questioning strategies did Jesus use in His teaching? Compare Jesus' questioning strategies with the three-fold, four-fold, or Bloom's Taxonomy model of questioning.

4. Though many educators (Edelsky et al., 1991; Goodman, 1996) have said that learning to read is a natural process, like learning to talk, why do some researchers (Stanovich, 1995) oppose this point of view?

5. How did Jesus know if His followers truly comprehended his teaching?

6. How can a reading teacher truly know if his or her students are truly comprehending a passage?

7. Describe the benefits and liabilities of factual recall, "on the lines", or "right there" questioning. How do these benefits and liabilities parallel our spiritual lives?

8. What additional passage comprehension strategies are you aware of? Choose one and describe how it works.

9. Of everything you read in this chapter, what was the most useful information to you and why?

10. What aspect of passage comprehension would you like to know more about?

Permissions

Use of Mr. Jeremy Fisher text.

Use of third grade writing sample.

Credit

Michelle Jackson

Marie Hseu

Hallie Yopp

Bet Line--GATE inservice, 1990/91 (Wantanabe & _____)

Think Aloud source