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## COMPREHENSION MONITORING STRATEGIES OF COLLEGE READING METHODS STUDENTS

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The classroom teacher asks a familiar question: "What is the main idea of our reading assignment?" The students respond in a variety of ways, searching their memory for ideas about the selection, ideas that can somehow be brought together in the form of a generalization about the topic or story. The answer is conveyed either orally or in writing, and the teacher evaluates the quality of the response. "Yes, that is the main point that the author is trying to make," or "No, that's not exactly what the author had in mind." The criteria for correctness of response usually come from either a basal or literature text teacher's manual or from the teacher's own notion of the underlying message. Once determined, discussion of the main idea possibly ceases or evolves into a broader discussion of issues surrounding the main point relative to factors beyond the reading lesson; i.e., "How does the main idea relate to our own daily lives?"

"How did you determine the main idea?" is a question less often asked. The metacognitive nature of the question requires the student to articulate what s/he was thinking while reading and after reading, to describe his/her comprehension monitoring strategies (Flavell, 1976). The task of explaining what one knows or does not know about any subject or process cannot be taken for granted, however. Realistically, we cannot expect elementary or secondary students to have all the vocabulary necessary to tell us about their thinking skills. What they may tell us is, "I

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just knew the answer," or "I don't know how I came up with the main idea. I just wrote it down."

And then there's the undergraduate reading methods student, struggling to understand concepts such as metacognition and main idea, all for the purpose of knowing how to teach children to read. What is the best way to introduce them to theoretical issues that have definite practical value?

Recent theoretical and applied research into metacognition has provided important pedagogical implications for improving reading comprehension skills, specifically through comprehension monitoring strategies. A promising breakthrough in reading comprehension methodology involves asking students how they came to know what they know and then directly teaching them comprehension monitoring strategies through teacher modeling techniques (Heller, 1986; Palinscar & Brown, 1984). Thus, an effective way to teach the concept of metacognition to college juniors and seniors is to involve them in a comprehension monitoring activity.

This paper is about the results of a study in which 50 undergraduate reading methods students learned about and demonstrated the strategies that they used to construct the main idea of E. B. White's personal essay, "Education." Basic to the lesson described here is the idea that teacher modeling and concrete example-giving are important to all levels of instruction, kindergarten through university senior.

This study was undertaken with the following research questions in mind: (a) Are university reading methods students able to articulate the strategies they use to help them recognize and express (in writing) the main idea of an expository essay? (b) What are these strategies? (c) What is the relationship between the students' comprehension monitoring strategies and the quality of their expressed main ideas?

#### Method and Procedure

Fifty undergraduate elementary education majors enrolled in two sections of a reading methods course participated in the study. None of the 48 women and two men had previously been introduced to metacognitive theory or the concept of comprehension monitoring.

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As part of their introduction to metacognitive theory, the students participated in an in-class, nongraded activity designed to illustrate the concept of comprehension monitoring. The activity began with 15 minutes of prereading time devoted to activating the students' prior knowledge of the topic--public versus private schooling. The instructor asked the class to discuss everything they already knew or thought about the differences between public and private schooling. Ideas were written on the chalkboard without instructor comment. Following the discussion, the students were instructed to read E. B. White's (1983) essay, "Education," for the following purposes: (a) to recognize and ultimately write the main idea (or thesis) of the essay, and (b) to describe the comprehension monitoring strategies they used while constructing the main idea.

After reading the essay, each student completed response sheet A, and the following research questions:

1. State the main idea or thesis of E. B. White's essay, "Education."

2. As you read the essay, what sorts of things were you thinking about in relation to the stated purpose for reading (Read the essay and write the main idea or thesis)? In other words, what strategies did you use while reading to determine the main idea of the essay?

Upon completion of response sheet A, each student then completed response sheet B which contained a multiple choice main idea question and a checklist of comprehension monitoring strategies. The whole demonstration lesson, including prereading, reading, and writing activities, took place during a single 50-minute class period.

Results and Discussion

Three groups of students emerged in this study, based upon analysis of main idea multiple-choice responses (Table 1). I will discuss each group separately, in conjunction with their written protocols and the checklist of comprehension monitoring strategies.

Table 1

Responses to Multiple-Choice Main Idea Question

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The thesis or main idea of E. B. White's essay, "Education," is the following: N = 50

1. Public country schools are better for children than private city schools.	10 (20%) <sup>a</sup>
2. Private city schools are better for children than public country schools.	5 (10%) <sup>b</sup>
3. There is not real difference between public and private schools.	35 (70%) <sup>c</sup>
4. Time goes by faster in public schools.	-----
5. The country is a better place to live than the city.	-----

<sup>a</sup>Group A.    <sup>b</sup>Group B.    <sup>c</sup>Group C.

Group A was made up of 10 students who not only answered the main idea question correctly but also wrote correct responses to the short answer main idea question (see Figure 1 for example responses). The criteria for the correct answer were determined by two authorities: (a) the instructor's manual which accompanied the The Little Brown Reader from which White's (1983) essay was taken; and (b) two independent readers, both of whom were university English professors. They agreed upon main idea or thesis, that it was "Public country schools are better for children than private city schools."

Group A students named a wide variety of strategies used while reading the essay, as did all other students in the study (see Figure 2 for example responses). However, Group A students were the only one who mentioned the essay's tone, author bias/attitude, and noticing irony as useful in determining the main idea. Their checklists of comprehension monitoring strategies (Table 2) revealed 9 out of 10 students making inferences about the author's intended meaning and 8 out of 10 attending to details while trying to construct meaning and achieve their purpose for reading.

Figure 1

Selected responses to short answer question: Write the thesis or main idea of E. B. White's essay, "Education."

Group A: (100% match between written responses and multiple-choice answer)

"Regardless of bias, the country public school is just as good if not slightly better than the private city school."

"There is actually more learning (not just academic) taking place in public country schools."

"I felt the main idea of the essay was that when comparing the public and private schools, the public country school is the best."

Group B: (20% match)

"Schools in the country are a personal place, yet one can easily survive and like the school in the city, the better place to be."

"Education in a country school is more personal and somewhat more casual than in a city school, and this more relaxed attitude contributes to quality education."

"The author is comparing the private city school to the country public school."

Group C: (57% match)

"Education in the country and in the city is fundamentally the same in that the children still learn and play and thrive in either situation."

"The benefits of a country public school are as many (and maybe more) than the benefits of a private school."

"This essay compares the school in the country to the city school."

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Figure 2

Selected responses to comprehension monitoring question: As you read the essay, what sorts of things were you thinking about in relation to the stated purpose for reading: Read E. B. White's essay, "Education," and then write the main idea or thesis of the essay. In other words, what strategies did you use while reading to determine the main idea of the essay?

Read between the lines

Focused on literal information

Recognized a comparison was being made

Made some inferences

Asked the question: How do the facts relate to the main idea?

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- Looked for explicitly stated main idea.
- Focused on intro and concluding paragraphs and beginning sentences
- Relied on previous experiences to picture what was happening
- Tried to pinpoint the issues that were referred to often
- Tried to analyze which one idea was the main idea
- Read/reread to determine main points
- Summarized first paragraph, reflected on each paragraph
- Tried to understand the meaning of each sentence
- Paid close attention to the first few paragraphs looking for main idea
- Asked question: What is the author trying to tell me?
- Tested hypotheses as I read, trying to come up with a central theme
- Looked for key sentences or descriptions of the author's feelings and opinions
- Sorted out background information and descriptive information
- Found out what seemed to be the predominant theme and decided what the author concluded from the essay
- Asked the question: Is the author supporting the ideas that he presents as important?
- Noticed biases\*
- Noticed sarcasm and tone of the essay\*
- Focused on language and the feelings experienced by narrator and son\*
- Tried to make predictions from the first paragraph\*
- Noticed subtle irony being used\*

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\*Responses found only in Group A written protocols.

Table 2

Responses to Checklist of Comprehension Monitoring Strategies

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While reading the essay, I used the following strategies in preparation for the task of writing the main idea of thesis of "Education": N (%)

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Whole Group (N = 50)

- |  |          |
|--|----------|
| 1. Looked for an explicit statement of main idea | 25 (50%) |
| 2. Focused on details in the text                | 33 (66%) |
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3. Focused on generalizations in the text	34 (68%)
4. Made some inferences about the author's intended meaning	43 (86%)
5. Adjusted my reading rate	27 (54%)
6. Reread some parts of the essay I did not initially understand	30 (60%)

Group A (N = 10)

1. Looked for an explicit statement of main idea	3 (30%)
2. Focused on details in the text	8 (80%)
3. Focused on generalizations in the text	4 (40%)
4. Made some inferences about the author's intended meaning	9 (90%)
5. Adjusted my reading rate	7 (70%)
6. Reread some parts of the essay I did not initially understand	4 (40%)

Group B (N = 5)

1. Looked for an explicit statement of main idea	3 (60%)
2. Focused on details in the text	5 (100%)
3. Focused on generalizations in the text	2 (40%)
4. Made some inferences about the author's intended meaning	3 (60%)
5. Adjusted my reading rate	2 (40%)
6. Reread some parts of the essay I did not initially understand	1 (20%)

Group C (N = 35)

1. Looked for an explicit statement of main idea	18 (51%)
2. Focused on details in the text	18 (51%)
3. Focused on generalizations in the text	26 (74%)
4. Made some inferences about the author's intended meaning	28 (80%)
5. Adjusted my reading rate	17 (48%)
6. Reread some parts of the essay I did not initially understand	18 (51%)

Group B was made up of five students, all of whom missed the multiple-choice item (Table 1). However, only one student's short answer response matched the multiple-



choice response. And one other student correctly wrote the main idea of the essay (Figure 1). Students in this group appeared to use the strategy of focusing on essay details more often than other strategies (Table 2). However, no one comprehension monitoring strategy appeared to stand apart from those mentioned by other groups in the study. In short, Group B scenarios (see Figure 3, examples) mentioned virtually the same strategies articulated by Group A and Group C students, aside from the exceptions already mentioned with regard to Group A.

### Figure 3

#### Example comprehension monitoring scenarios

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Group A Sample: "While reading E. B. White's essay, I thought about my days in a private school, first through eighth grades, and compared his description to them. I looked for attitude in his writing. I watched for negative-/positive comments of the writer. I noticed sarcasm and irony throughout. I looked for a connection and opinion about some point at the beginning and the ending of the story."

Group B Sample: "I asked myself: (a) What is he discussing? (b) Is there more than one thing he is discussing? (c) If so, does he compare them or just give examples and facts about each?"

Group C Sample: "As I was reading E. B. White's essay, I was looking for the main points of each section, so I would be able to compare how Mr. White regarded private education and public education. I looked for the points he made about public education, then the ones he made about private education, then his comparison statements in the final paragraphs helped me to conclude as to his main thesis--education is education."

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Group C comprised the largest number of students (35) who responded incorrectly to the multiple-choice question. About half of the students' responses to the multiple-choice item matched their written responses. Two students correctly wrote the main idea of the essay. Students in this group appeared to use inferencing as well as

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focusing on text generalizations most often. No single strategy, however, appeared to characterize Group C student scenarios (see Figure 3, examples).

All students in this study appear to be fully capable of articulating what they were thinking about while achieving their purpose for reading. Their responses, once tallied and compared, reveal typical strategies that most fluent readers use when constructing meaning. The two significant observations that can be made from the data are: (a) the relatively low number of students responding correctly to the main idea questions, and (b) the comprehension monitoring strategies unique to the students in Group A.

### Conclusions

What does it mean when only 20% of the reading methods students in a study are able to infer the main idea of an essay about education? Several conclusions as well as questions for further research may be drawn.

First, students who achieved their purpose for reading by correctly ascertaining the main idea clearly understood the nature of the language used by White to present his argument--public schools are better for children than private schools. Although 90% of the students in the study made mention of the fact that White was comparing two types of schooling, only Group A students recognized and mentioned his bias toward public over private schooling. One inference that might be drawn is that Group A students simply had more experience reading personal essays of this type, therefore had significant prior knowledge of persuasive discourse and author use of irony.

Second, aside from the unique features of Group A strategies, all students articulated similar types of metacognitive strategies that could be termed "generic." For example, the responses contained in Figure 2 could be divided into categories roughly corresponding to the checklist of comprehension monitoring skills (Table 2). Read/reread, focused on details, made inferences are all very useful thinking skills that help fluent readers construct meaning. Indeed, we encourage direct instruction of such skills in our reading methods classes. However, it is important to note that while all students in the study articulated and used typical comprehension monitoring strategies, 80%

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failed to accurately achieve the purpose for reading.

Other variables to consider are student concept of main idea as well as knowledge of text structure. Fifty percent of the students wrote a main idea that reflected a generalization of some kind, indicating that most students understood that a main idea, whether implicitly or explicitly stated, speaks to the author's overall intended message. The remaining 50% had an incorrect notion of what a main idea entails. For example, of this group 35% focused on the structure of the essay, suggesting that the main idea had something to do with the comparisons being made by White. (White was indeed comparing public and private schooling, but comparison was his method of development, not the main point.) And 15% of the students merely summarized the details of the essay without drawing conclusions or making generalizations.

#### Questions for Further Research

An important question for further research seems to be, which comprehension monitoring strategies are unique to certain forms of discourse and methods of development and thus enable fluent readers to construct or reconstruct the author's intended meaning? Further, can these strategies be directly taught? And does direct instruction (Roehler & Duffy, 1984) help improve students' understanding of the text while reading?

The answers to such questions have important implications for those of us who teach reading methods courses. We not only want to encourage pedagogically sound instructional strategies but also to train our students to model fluent behaviors. The comprehension monitoring activity described in this paper was a powerful tool for teaching the concept of metacognition to college students who were able to see the logic of their own thinking and realize that reading comprehension cannot be taken for granted, no matter how familiar the subject may be.

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