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THE COMPREHENSION DILEMMA

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The term "comprehension" has become a "catch all" item. If a student is failing in school, his teacher will probably tell you that he does not comprehend what he reads. In addition, the teacher may mention that the student gets more from just listening than he does from reading. Another teacher will tell you that a student reads well in his social studies book but cannot quite figure out his math problems. Yet another teacher will tell you that one of her students comprehends when there are pictures on the page but take the pictures away and the student is lost.

It seems that a partial answer to the total comprehension dilemma is two-phased. One part is the type of material students are exposed to during the first three grades, and the other is the type of comprehension questions asked.

Types of Materials

Let's explore the first—the types of materials students are exposed to during the first three grades, when the basis for future skill in comprehension is being developed. Usually, the type of material used to teach reading in these grades is in narrative form—more specifically, basal readers. One of the reasons for failure to develop interest in reading may stem from the discrepancy between the type of material used to teach reading and the reading skills children are expected to develop.

Skills which are emphasized in reading might be better taught by using expository material thus giving students the option of reading fiction for fun. It is common to find a student who can rattle off phonetic rules or perform with ease on a workbook page but is unable to read the social science text. The question of transfer is especially acute in the fourth grade when he is confronted with a relatively uncontrolled vocabulary. If expository material were introduced sooner, the transition to fourth grade would be easier for the student.

Some examples of skills to be taught are:

1. Seeing causal relationships.
2. Identifying main ideas.
3. Evaluating relevancy of details to the main idea.
4. Comparing two or more sources of information.
5. All location of information skills (preface, index, glossary).

6. Organizing (outlines, summaries).
7. Rereading to locate information.
8. Following printed directions.

One can immediately see a problem here. If students in the first three grades are exposed mainly to narrative writing, can they be expected to transfer their skills to expository material? We hear so often fourth grade teachers comment on the lack of comprehension performance of their students. Apparently the comprehension skills taught through narrative texts *do not* transfer to expository material.

What are the alternatives in our teaching? We could not use the basal reader at all. We could also provide extensive language experience activities along with our basal program. Or we can begin to incorporate into our primary program supplementary content materials for specific purposes.

Types of Questions

Now let's consider a second aspect, types of comprehension questions asked. As far back as 1912, it was estimated that four-fifths of school time was occupied with question-and-answer recitations. In one study it was found that ten primary teachers asked an average of 348 questions each during a school day; 12 elementary school teachers asked an average of 180 questions each during a science lesson; and 14 fifth-grade teachers asked an average of 64 questions each in a 30-minute social studies lesson.

Consider spoken questions only. Findings from research are fairly consistent. It is reasonable to conclude that in a half-century there has been no essential change in the types of questions asked in the classroom: about sixty percent of the questions require students to recall facts; about twenty percent require children to think; and the remaining twenty percent are procedural.

Coupled with teacher questions are the types of questions asked in basal readers. A study was recently compiled directed toward just that main question. Types of questions looked for were 1) recall, 2) translation, 3) application, 4) analysis, 5) synthesis, and 6) evaluation. It was found that recall questions were most frequently asked in the primary grades and declined in the upper elementary grades. However, the incidence of higher level questions appeared slightly in the primary grades and came into view full force in the upper elementary grades with no transition. It was also found that there was no consistency in asking different types of questions at any level.

Therefore, it seems that if the basals are not doing the job of questioning, we have to supplement the basals with pertinent questions.

Three aspects of questioning should be kept in mind: 1) a certain kind of question leads to a certain kind of thinking, 2) the teacher should be aware of the subject area knowledge each student has, and 3) a teacher should be aware of the instruction preceding the asking of a question.

Look more closely at what different types of questions may involve.

Memory:	recall or recognition of information.
Translation:	change of information to a different symbolic form of language.
Interpretation:	discovering relationships among facts, generalizations, definitions, values, (cause-effect, identical or unrelated ideas, implications).
Application:	solving a lifelike problem that requires the identification of the issue and selection and use of appropriate generalizations and skills.
Analysis:	solving a problem in light of conscious knowledge of parts and forms of thinking.
Synthesis:	the solving of a problem that requires original, creative thinking (requires a product).
Evaluation:	judgment of good-bad, right-wrong, according to standards he designates.

It is important to consider, however, that the use of teacher questions is only a means to an end. If teaching students to think is one desirable goal in education, then we should be able to adjust the curriculum as well as our own behavior to meet this goal.