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Enhancing Comprehension Competencies Through Questioning

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Enhancing Comprehension Competencies Through Questioning

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The primary goal of questioning based on a selection read is to determine if purposes designated for reading have been achieved. Asking probing questions of our students is critical for determining how well specific comprehension objectives have been achieved as well as the overarching goal of fostering comprehension competencies in general. In this light, Roe, Smith, and Burns (2005) determined that “critical reading depends on both literal and interpretive comprehension; grasping implied ideas is especially important” (p. 236).

Literal comprehension of a message—that is, being able to recognize what is directly stated—is the foundation of reading comprehension. On the other hand, substantial research has demonstrated that teachers ask a disproportionate number of questions requiring only literal comprehension of the material read (Durkin, 1993). Further, literal comprehension questions, although easy to formulate, involve little in the way of creative or thoughtful activity upon the part of students. One must not dismiss the importance of literal questions, however. Literal questions can get the students “off to a running start.” I have found that asking literal questions in a variety of learning

environments is highly productive at the outset of discussion relative to material read. Literal questioning can naturally and comfortably flow into more complex questioning strategies that require interpretation beyond the literal text.

Interpretive questions require students to delve beyond what is explicitly stated and “read between the lines” to develop a richer understanding of the message read. This is often referred to as “critical thinking” and/or “higher order thinking” (Harris & Hodges, 1995).

The questioning categories proposed by Trosky (1972) have worked very well for me at all levels. Although more than 30 years have passed since Trosky’s publication of the questioning categories, the strategies appear to be as effective as anything that has come along since. I have used the strategies with 4th graders, middle school students, and college-level developmental readers, as well as struggling readers in clinical environments. Trosky’s categories are (1) Recognition Questions, (2) Translation Questions, (3) Inference Questions, (4) Evaluation Questions, (5) Explanation Questions, and (6) Imagining Questions.

One might even argue convincingly that the teaching of comprehension strategies has often become overcomplicated. Trosky’s (1972) foundation for developing good questions through the six categories presented above is not complicated, while still providing substantial depth. These strategies can be used at almost any level. For example, I used the strategies for writing questions on a section of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* to be used with college students. In addition, in undertaking comprehension study with struggling readers in reading clinic environments, I found that applying Trosky’s questioning strategies using Aesop’s Fables (Anno, 1987) is very effective.

Trosky’s (1972) questioning strategies also lend themselves effectively and efficiently in preparing comprehension-enhancing activities based on articles from news magazines such as *TIME*, *U.S. News and World Report*,

and *Newsweek* and from news agencies such as the Associated Press. Topical subjects, such as homelessness, capture the attention of secondary and college-level students. This I discovered while working with students who were placed in college developmental reading classes because of their low ACT reading scores. Needless to say, these students were not enthralled with the prospect of studying how to improve their reading, believing they were off to college to study a variety of career-oriented enterprises. The text assigned by the department was totally devoid of material of interest to college students, developmental or otherwise, with the lead-off story being about how ducks “imprinted” on a psychologist and followed him around as if he were their natural mother. Current events provide students with interesting material. For instance, a newspaper article on a proposed plan to encourage the development of single sex classes and schools proved to be a very engaging topic (Associated Press, 2004) and perfect for applying Trosky’s questioning strategies.

The original story segment presented below and the questions that follow are designed to demonstrate how Trosky’s questioning categories can be effectively used to develop questions:

Dr. Benson drove his horse and carriage through the bitter cold night. He shivered even though he had wrapped himself in a heavy blanket. Old Rex bravely pulled the carriage. It had been almost two hours since Old Rex had eaten or rested but he did not complain. Dr. Benson felt bad that Old Rex had to work so hard, but he knew that every minute was important.

Recognition/Literal Questions

1. *What was the weather like?*
2. *Who drove the horse and carriage?*

Literal questions, as mentioned above, can be answered directly from information contained in the text. Even though recognition questions

are generally quite easy for the reader (or listener), they are still very important. Answering recognition questions correctly can inspire confidence and establish a basic level of comprehension for the selection. It must be kept in mind, however, as Norton (2004) determined through an extensive review of the research, that “questions must be sequenced from less to more abstract in order to get students to operate at higher thought levels” (p. 82).

Interpretive/Inference Questions

1. *What season of the year was it?*
The reader can determine that the season is winter even though it is not specifically stated. Of course, a crafty responder might suggest that it could be spring or autumn if the events take place in a northern clime!
2. *What was the name of the horse?*
The reader can determine from the overall context of the message that Old Rex is the name of the horse. Although not directly stated, the reader can logically determine the answer. Sometimes it is necessary to provide direct instruction in determining how one can determine information that is not specifically reported in a message. We have all too often heard readers respond with, “It doesn’t say.”

Imagination Questions

1. *Where was Dr. Benson going?*
2. *Did Dr. Benson feed Old Rex and find a place for him to rest when they arrived at their destination?*

The reader must use imagination and knowledge of the overall setting to determine possible destinations for Dr. Benson. On the other hand, the suggested possibilities must be reasonably grounded in events that are presented in the selection read.

Evaluation Questions

Was Dr. Benson mean and cruel to Old Rex because he did not stop to rest or feed him?

The reader is encouraged to evaluate the behavior of characters in the message and bring personal values into the response. Determining the correct response to a situation from an ethical standpoint provides for highly interesting and enlightening discussions among readers.

Translation Questions

What is another way of saying "bitter cold night"?

Inviting the reader to use his or her own language to describe what the author's words mean to them leads to a richer understanding of the text and often a greater appreciation of colorful and figurative language. A word of caution is in order! Do not ask, "What did the author mean when he or she said it was a bitter cold night?" This is confusing to students who often mimic the text in response: "The author meant it was a bitter cold night."

Conclusions

Trosky's (1972) categories of comprehension provide the teacher with a quick and effective method for developing comprehension questions. The goal is not to categorize questions as the categories often overlap. The goal is to become adept at generating good questions, often "on your feet."

Great literature must be part of the reading curriculum. I have found that using Trosky's questioning strategies as a major component of the comprehension building activities of a guided reading activity work well with all kinds of reading materials. For example, *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2000) is a magnificent story sure to inspire readers from 3rd grade

onwards. Why not have *Winn-Dixie* be the vehicle for building comprehension competencies? Another example, and there are countless others, is *My Hero, My Dog* (Byars, 2000). All children love dogs, and this book of tales of brave and good dogs can be readily used as a reading instructional text with the Trosky questioning strategies that are used to foster comprehension. Whenever you find a children's book that you really enjoy, you can use that as your reading instruction text.

A favorite follow-up activity of mine is the evening news report. The students get into groups of three or four and prepare a 45-second news report on an aspect of the material read. The model is the six o'clock local news format. For example, students prepare a news report on the story "Buster" from *My Hero, My Dog* (Byars, 2000) by interviewing witnesses to Buster's heroic deed. The news reports are very entertaining and academically sound while reflecting the students' comprehension of the material read. Though not using Trosky's strategies per se, the questions asked by the "anchor" and the reporter "in the field" as well as the comprehensive answers of interviewees reflect the kinds of questions discussed in class.

Practice using Trosky's (1972) questioning strategies. You will find, as I did, that you do not have to rely on a publisher to provide comprehension questions. Further, you can free yourself to use a variety of stories and not be locked into using a prescribed set of reading materials or scripted questions.

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About the Author

Ed Dwyer is a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at East Tennessee State University where he teaches graduate and undergraduate classes in reading/language arts. He taught in 4th and 6th grades in Massachusetts; middle school in Alaska and Quebec; and worked in reading clinical environments in Georgia, Saskatchewan, and Alberta and with college students in developmental reading programs. He can be reached at dwyer@etsu.edu.

Cover Artwork Needed for *IRCJ*

For each issue of the *Illinois Reading Council Journal*, we compile a collage of student artwork. The artwork should relate to some aspect of reading and/or to children's or adolescent literature. Artwork that is full color and shows time and effort is preferred. Children whose work is featured in the *IRCJ* will receive a letter, a certificate of appreciation, a copy of the cover photo suitable for framing, and a copy of the journal. The names of the students and teachers, as well as the schools, appear inside the journal in a special note about the cover.

Artwork should be submitted in a reproducible format accompanied by a signed parental permission form (see below). Please do not fold or staple the artwork. If possible, please send artwork electronically, preferably in 300 dpi (or greater) TIFF color format. **On the back of each piece submitted**, write (1) the name of the student; (2) the name of the teacher; (3) the grade; (4) the school; and (5) full contact information, including telephone number and e-mail address for the teacher and contact information for the parents. Mail all submissions to Dr. Kathy Barclay, Editor, *IRCJ*, Western Illinois University, 1 University Circle, Macomb, IL 61455-1390. Those students whose artwork is accepted will be notified; the remaining artwork will be kept on file for possible use at a future time.

We eagerly anticipate appropriate submissions from your students!

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