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Hannah L. Lockhart

Eastern Kentucky University, hannah_lockhart2@mymail.eku.edu

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Building Independent Readers:
Reading Comprehension Strategies
Hannah Lockhart
Eastern Kentucky University

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Even though many children can decode and read text fluently, they do not comprehend the text well (Elosúa, Garcia-Madruga, Gil, Gomez-Veiga, and Villa, 2013, 2). Decoding is an important stage of reading development in elementary school. However, the main goal is to teach comprehension during third through fifth grade. Teachers help develop students' comprehension, so that the children can learn from what they read. Many times children in elementary school look to adults or make appeals instead of using reading comprehension strategies to understand the text for themselves. Parents do not need to immediately provide an answer. Rather, they can guide children in answering their own questions.

Researchers suggest “that reading comprehension is improved by providing strategies that assist primary aged children’s working memory” (Elosúa et al., 5). As children read for comprehension, they construct meaning by assimilating and accommodating new information from the text they read (McLaughlin, 2012, 432). Thus, children need to use metacognition to become more effective readers (Yang, 2006, 317). Metacognition, the ability to monitor their own learning, develops as children use these strategies to become more independent learners. In this stage of the reading process, children begin to understand how they learn. “Higher elementary school is a critical period for the development of comprehension monitoring” (Kolić-Vehovec, 2006, 440). This happens inside and outside of the classroom, as children continue to process the world around them. They develop and practice many of their reading habits at home;

therefore, parents and/or guardians need to encourage independent reading through the use of reading comprehension strategies.

Types of Books to Read

There are two main modes of literature that primary aged children study: expository and narrative texts. For this reason, children must understand text structure in order to efficiently and strategically process text (McLaughlin, 2012, 433). Readers need to be able to accommodate new information from the text with their previous knowledge, so that they accurately understand what the text states (Woolley, 2010, 114). Therefore, knowing the structure of a text is highly important in aiding children's comprehension (Woolley, 2010, 114).

Research indicates that "good readers read both narrative and expository texts" (McLaughlin, 2012, 433). Each type of text utilizes various styles and structures. These styles and structures typically reflect the purpose of the writing piece. For instance, expository texts can be organized as cause and effect, comparison and contrast, chronological, and topical, etc. A paper may be written as comparison and contrast, so that a writer can compare and contrast two different subjects. Then, there are narrative texts, which tend to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The characters and setting are introduced in the beginning, so that the audience understands who they are and where the events are taking place. Then, there has to be a problem before it can be resolved, so the conflict must occur in the middle of the story with the resolution at the end. Children need to be familiar with the structure of each type of text, so that they are capable of navigating diverse literature.

Providing children with various types of literature at home “enhances the children’s motivation and increases their comprehension” (McLaughlin, 2012, 437). Children’s reading skills increase when they encounter diverse literature and various reading levels (McLaughlin, 2012, 437). Because of this, parents need to read various types of literature at home with their children. This offers children the opportunity to become skilled, independent readers, who understand that texts are written for different purposes.

How Parents Can Model Good Reading

Parents need to evaluate whether their children understand the content that they read at home. As developing readers, children need to ask themselves questions about the text as they read (McLaughlin, 2012, 433). Parents can model this process by asking questions to their children, as they read a book to them at home. Based on their children’s answers, parents and/or guardians can determine whether their children understand what they are reading together.

It is imperative for parents to be good reading role models, who engage their children in conversation about reading. Parents need to ask more than close ended questions, such as questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no. Instead, their questions need to be open-ended, so that they promote higher-order thinking and comprehension from their children. For example, parents can ask their children to predict what will happen next, to describe the setting, and/or to explain events within the story. In addition, Parents can encourage children to relate the story to their own life. For instance, parents can discuss how a garden in a story makes them think of their Grandma’s rose garden in the backyard. By doing this, parents demonstrate how to relate

the text to their own life. When children make connections with the text, they are more motivated to read, and they are more likely to understand the text.

Parents can also ask their children questions from a metacognition test, which evaluates whether they understand the main idea of the text (Kolić-Vehovec, 2006, 441). This test asks questions about the plot (character, setting, theme, etc.), and it asks about text features (letters, words, title, sentences, etc.). This helps parents assess whether children are capable of understanding each characteristic of the text. Also, parents can use a cloze task, which encourages children to use context clues, so they can fill in the blank areas of a text (Kolić-Vehovec, 2006, 441). For example, parents can print out a story with blank areas where words can be filled. Then, the child must determine which words from a word bank fit into each blank within the story. Both of these strategies challenge children to “independently decipher the deeper meaning of what they read” (Elosúa et al., 2013, 6).

Using Strategies to Build Understanding While Children Read

Children increase their understanding of the text when they readily apply comprehension strategies, as they read (Kolić-Vehovec, 2006, 141). When children do this, they actively participate in what they read (McLaughlin, 2012, 433). Therefore, parents need to encourage their children to “integrate, monitor, and control their own reading process, so that their children are capable of comprehending the meaning beyond the text” (Yang, 2006, 313). It is also important for children to know when and how to apply each of the strategies, so that the strategies aid their comprehension (Kolić-Vehovec, 2006, 440). There are various reading comprehension strategies that parents can encourage their children to use.

Rereading a text is known as a cognitive reading strategy (Yang, 2006, 315). If children do not understand what they have read, they need to stop and reread the text. Therefore, if children do not understand a word in the sentence the first time, their parents need to ask them to reread the sentence to see whether there are any context clues. For example, some children do not know the word *gigantic*, as they read the following. *The apple is gigantic! It's the size of a house.* If the children reread those sentences, they may recognize the clue in the sentence—*It's the size of a house.* Therefore, the children can infer that *gigantic* means big or large.

In the upper primary grades, children are still learning how to process what they read. Because of this, children need to learn how to decipher the main idea of what they read. Children can “highlight the main idea with a yellow marker, highlight the supporting details of a text in with a green marker, and highlight the irrelevant details with a pink marker” (Gaffney, Hedin, and Mason, 2011, 149). When children complete this activity, they can tell their summary of the content and restate what they learned. This activity promotes independent learning, and it challenges students to comprehend the main idea of the text.

Parents can motivate children to become independent readers by teaching them how to find information on their own (McLaughlin, 2012, 433). For example, if they do not understand what they read, they can use a resource to look up the information (i.e. dictionary, encyclopedia, internet, etc.). This teaches children how to be self-motivated and engaged in their reading process. Meanwhile, this strategy teaches them key skills, such as research.

Parents can also encourage their children to find educational information on the internet. The internet has numerous resources that provide independent learning strategies. However, children must learn where to find credible advice. By teaching children how to find credible information for themselves, parents help them become more effective students, who are self-directed learners.

Using Strategies to Build Understanding After Children Read

When children gain meaning or understanding from reading, parents need to motivate them to do something with their knowledge. Since “drawing and textual language reinforce one another,” (Woolley, 2010, 112), parents can paint or draw a picture with their children expressing what they read together. Research shows that “reading comprehension is aided when children make connections between verbal and visual processes, so that children can clearly visualize what happens in a story (Woolley, 2010, 108). Plus, this activity provides parents with another opportunity to engage their children in conversation about the story they are reading, which continues to reinforce their children’s understanding. Therefore, this simple activity can greatly benefit children’s reading comprehension skills.

In addition, parents can use tools and build objects with their children that relate to what they read. Research suggests that a story and its characters become more realistic when objects, items, pictures, and maps are used to represent or demonstrate various aspects of the story (Woolley, 2010, 113). Since children are at the concrete-operational stage in primary school, these tools help them to understand about what and whom they are reading. Also, research reveals that children’s recall and inference skills increase when they use objects to create characters in a story and demonstrate the characters’

actions throughout the text. (Woolley, 2010, 113). As parents use tools and build characters with their children, they are allowing their children to develop their own ideas and understanding of what they have read. This allows children to further develop their reading comprehension level, so that they can become more effective, independent readers.

If students gain interest in a specific reading topic, parents need to encourage their interest by searching for camps or community organizations that allow their children to socialize and actively learn. There are many reading and writing summer camps or clubs that schools endorse, so that children can stay engaged in reading and/or writing. This offers children more educational and social opportunities, so that they can communicate with others, who also have similar interests.

In conclusion, reading comprehension is a crucial stage in reading development that needs to be taught and reinforced in late primary school. Since many children look to their parents as role models, parents are the key influence and motivation students have in becoming independent readers. Rather than giving their children immediate answers, parents can guide their children to use effective reading strategies, so that they can answer their own questions. By teaching their children to refer back to the text, parents assist their children in developing effective reading habits that improve their overall comprehension. The comprehension skills children learn at this stage of reading development can branch into many other areas of their lives, so that children can succeed in school and life. These reading practices can render more successful, skillful readers in every home. The responsibility of children's reading development lies not only on the teacher, but the parents.

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