Taking a CLOSER Look: Teaching Students to be Metacognitive

By Sarah K. Clark

"Why do we have to do this, Mrs. Jenson? Can't I just tell you I read the whole book and let it count?" This question, asked by a fifth grader named Jeremy (all student names are pseudonyms), prompted the creation of a reading comprehension exercise I call, "Evaluating Reading Comprehension Strategies (ERCS)." Like many students, Jeremy was struggling to see the connection between the book he was reading and the comprehension activity assigned by his teach-

er. Marcell, DeCleene, and Juettner (2010) cautioned against producing students who are able to use comprehension strategies effectively, but do not see purpose in these strategies and are not using comprehension strategies to improve comprehension. The National Reading Panel (2000) placed emphasis on the importance of teaching comprehension strategies, yet according to DeWitt, Jones, and Leahy (2009), much of the strategy instruction found in current core reading programs is isolated, scattered, and provides little connection between the strategy and the reading material. One way to produce students who can use reading strategies independently and purposefully is to provide opportunities for students to evaluate their use of comprehension strategies and help them see how these strategies enhance comprehension.

Multiple studies have demonstrated that comprehension monitoring during the upper elementary grades is consistently and significantly related to reading comprehension. For example, Pazzaglia, De Beni,
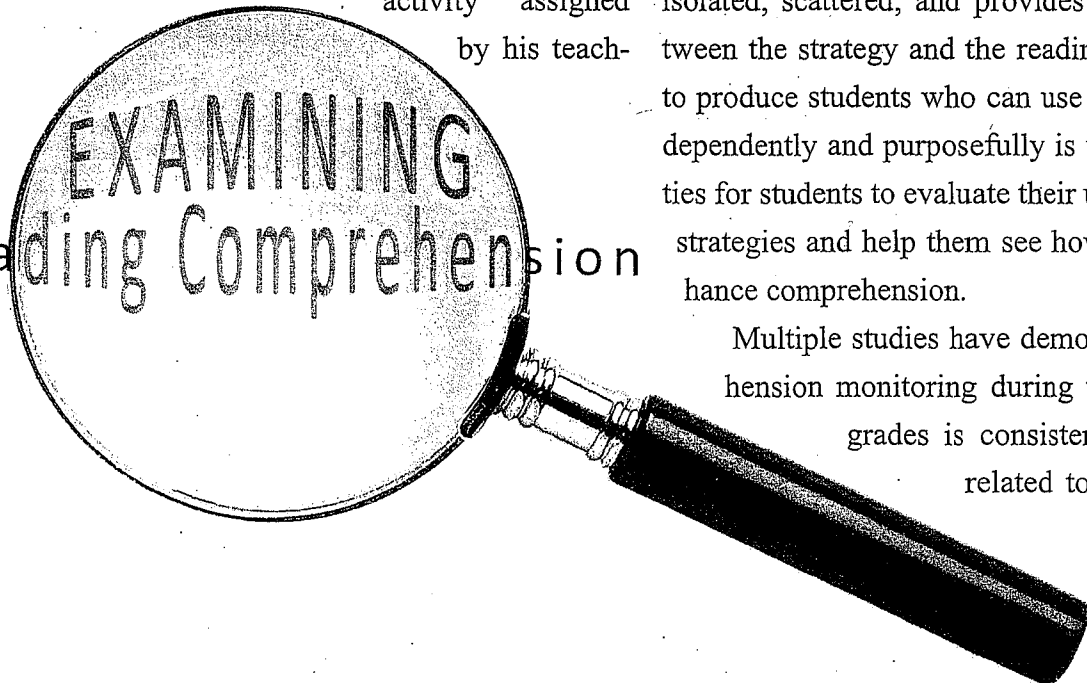
and Caccio (1999) noted a positive trend in the development of comprehension monitoring in children ages 8 to 13 years old. Kolic-Vehovec and Bajanski (2006) found that higher scores on various comprehension monitoring measures were all significant predictors of reading comprehension in upper elementary students. The results of these studies highlight the importance of emphasizing comprehension monitoring during elementary school (especially in the upper grades) so as to have an influential impact on comprehension development and metacognition.

Reading comprehension strategies are intentional and planned procedures designed to help readers comprehend text (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008). Duke and Pearson (2002) explained that we know good readers use multiple reading strategies and that the use of even one strategy has been shown to influence comprehension. For this reason, teachers incorporate a variety of reading comprehension strategies such as previewing, making inferences, making connections, activating prior knowledge, sequencing, summarizing, visualizing, generating questions, and organizing details in an attempt to help students make sense of what they read. But what if children aren't using these strate-

gies effectively? Garner (1990) explained, "If children do not notice that they are not learning they are unlikely to seek a strategic remedy" (p. 518). Garner asserted that if students have the illusion of comprehension, they are unlikely to seek help or value additional learning activities. As a current teacher educator, and a former elementary

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school teacher, I found that using the ERCS exercise has helped to improve my students' metacognition and their use of reading comprehension strategies.

How to Use the "Evaluating Reading Comprehension Strategies"

The ERCS form has been designed specifically for students in the upper elementary school grades or once students have moved be-

yond the decoding phase of learning to read. The ERCS form has also been used successfully with pre-service teachers learning to teach reading to elementary students. The ERCS form is simple and easy to use. Two student examples of how to use the ERCS form are described below and outlined in Figures 1 and 2.

Previewing Strategy

In the first example (see Figure 1), the student was assigned to read a chapter on Native Americans in her social studies textbook and to use the previewing strategy to aid with comprehension. When using the previewing strategy, the student looks through the chapter before reading it. The student reads the titles, headings, illustrations, and summaries. It is common to make predictions when using this strategy. The student has been taught to use the previewing comprehension strategy through teacher modeling, guided practice, independent practice, and assessment of her strategy use prior to this reading assignment. The student is then given a reading assignment and she is directed to use the previewing strategy while reading. Upon completion of the assigned reading, and using the previewing strategy, the student evaluates her reading and use of the previewing strategy by

1. Name of reading comprehension strategy you are using.

   Previewing Strategy

2. Describe how this reading comprehension strategy works:

   Before I do any reading, I need to look through the chapter. I should look at the titles, the headings, the summaries. I can even look at the pictures. It is kind of like getting a preview of a movie. I kind of know what the movie is going to be about before I watch it.

3. Strengths of this comprehension strategy (How does this strategy help my reading comprehension?):

   This strategy helped me know what the chapter was going to be about. My teacher told me it was about early Native Americans, but when I previewed the chapter, I could tell it was about how they lived. What kinds of foods they ate, and what they did during the day. It also showed me where they lived. Knowing these things before I read felt a little bit like cheating. I knew what was going to happen before I read it. Cool!

4. Limitations of this comprehension strategy (What I don't like about this strategy.):

   One thing that was hard about this strategy was that I didn't write down anything. I'm used to writing things down when I read.

5. How effective was this comprehension strategy? Please rate the strategy on a scale of 1 (not effective at all) to 10 (extremely effective).

   1   2   3   4   5   (6)   7   8   9   10

Figure 1: Evaluating Reading Comprehension Strategies

responding to the questions on the ERCS form.

It is apparent from the example that the student used the previewing strategy correctly. The student provided a brief, but thorough description of how to use the previewing strategy. Next, the student explained that she understood the strategy was helping to prepare her for what the text would be about. The student indicated a bit of dis-comfort with this strategy because she expressed a desire to be able to take notes while reading to help remember what she read. This self-evaluation provided important information for the teacher. First, the teacher could determine that in this case the student was using the previewing comprehension strategy correctly and did not need re-teaching. The teacher could tell by a student's inaccurate description of how to use a comprehension strategy that re-teaching is needed. Second, the teacher learned more about what helped this student's reading comprehension and could encourage the student to take notes as she reads. This exercise provided the teacher with specific information about what adjustments and reinforcement would be beneficial to the student.

1. Name of reading comprehension strategy you are using.

   Summarization Strategy

2. Describe how this reading comprehension strategy works:

   I need to read the chapter and then write about what I read.

3. Strengths of this comprehension strategy (How does this strategy help my reading comprehension?):

   This strategy can help me understand what I read. I'm not sure why I need to rewrite what I read, since you can just read the book.

4. Limitations of this comprehension strategy (What I don't like about this strategy.):

   One thing that was hard about this strategy was that I didn't know how to write something that wasn't already written by the author. I feel like I just keep repeating things.

5. How effective was this comprehension strategy? Please rate the strategy on a scale of 1 (not effective at all) to 10 (extremely effective).

   1   2   (3)   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Figure 2: **Evaluating Reading Comprehension Strategies**

Summarization Strategy

In the second example (see Figure 2), the student was assigned to read a chapter from a science fiction novel and to use the summarization strategy to aid with comprehension. Summarization is a strategy that requires the reader to read a text, determine the important as well as the unimportant parts, and then to synthesize these ideas into a new text which represents the main points of the original text (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, and Pearson, 1991). The summarization strategy is considered one of the most challenging strategies for students to master.

When using the summarization strategy, the student reads through the text and writes down notes as he/she tries to capture the main ideas of the chapter. This process requires the student to sift through the information and delete unnecessary or redundant material. In some cases, the student will need to use a new word to replace a list of terms and/or individual sections, and he/she will need to reread the key points and decide what the topic sentence of the summary should be (Duke & Pearson, 2002). After the student has read the text and written the summary, the student should then

evaluate use of the summarization strategy by responding to the questions on the ERCS form.

It is apparent from the example that the student did not using the summarization strategy correctly. The student provided a very limited description of how to use the summarization strategy. This indicates uncertainty about how to use the strategy. Next, the student explained that she understood that the strategy was supposed to help her know what the text is about, but she also indicated some discomfort with this strategy. She felt like she was just repeating what the author

wrote. She seemed overly concerned with how to write the summary correctly, and the emphasis was no longer on comprehending the text, but on completing the assignment. This self-evaluation provided important information for the teacher. The teacher can see that the student did not use the summarization strategy correctly and needs re-teaching.

Benefits from Using the "Evaluating Reading Comprehension Strategies"

After my students were trained to use the ERCS exercise, we began to use ERCS any time we utilized a reading comprehension strategy. As a result, I noticed changes in my students. First, my students became more engaged in their reading assignments and in the reading comprehension strategies assigned. My students reported feelings of empowerment when they had opportunities to provide feedback about reading tasks and assignments. For example, one student reported, "For the first time I got to tell my teacher what I felt about some of the reading strategies we were assigned to use. Some are so boring while others are really interesting! I know right away which ones are helping me and which ones aren't!"

Second, my students began to see purpose in the assignments they were given. More specifically, they were able to see the complexities involved in assessing and evaluating reading comprehension. A student shared the following, "Writing about the comprehension strategy really did help me remember how to do it. Sometimes I forget and skip steps because it's easier to do that than raise my head and wait for the teacher." Regardless of whether students felt positively or negatively about the reading comprehension strategies they were assigned, evaluating the strategies allowed them time to think and talk about their reading comprehension experiences, thus calling attention to the students' metacognition. These behaviors resembled what Duke and Pearson (2002) describe good readers doing. They state that good readers "read selectively, continually making decisions about their reading – what to read carefully, what to read quickly, what not to read, what to reread, and so on" (p. 205).

Third, my students became adept at recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of each comprehension strategy. Students determined which were more effective, which were the most time ef-

ficient, and which were the most meaningful for a certain type of text. An insight for students was that not all comprehension strategies are made equal. For example, some strategies may not aid comprehension as well as others. A student explained, "Writing about what you have read takes time, and you also have to know how to write good." Another student shared, "Thinking about what I read is good, but sometimes it is hard for me to pay attention and I start thinking about something else. I need to be able to write things down."

Conversely, some comprehension strategies may appear to be better than others but after closer examination, this isn't always the case. For example, discussions with a partner or small group of students were considered by my students to be the easiest and fastest way to demonstrate reading

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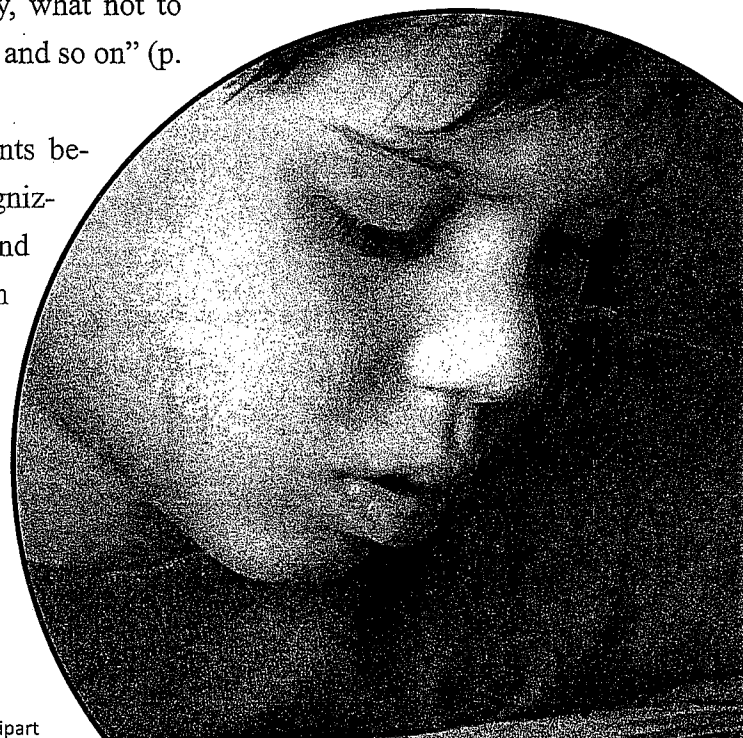
comprehension, but the students acknowledged that not all students participate at the same level, thus resulting in lower participation and engagement. This discussion led to students selecting more appropriate strategies for the text they were reading rather than selecting only the strategies they preferred. Students began to navigate and assume responsibility for demonstrating their reading comprehension. This is an important step in a student's developmental process as they move from teacher-centered comprehension instruction to more student-centered, metacognitive comprehension experiences (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Marcell et al. (2010) explained that these are the types of behaviors we want to see. We want our students to get to a point where they are "independent contractors" using comprehension strategies flexibly and purposefully.

Finally, time spent reflecting on reading comprehension strategies made my students more savvy consumers of text. Students began to make connections between reading assignments and comprehension strategies assigned. An example of this was when students finished a chapter from their social studies textbook and Ethan, a student, called out, "Oh man! Don't they know that multiple choice ques-

tions don't really give us students a chance to show what we know?" "Besides," added Megan, "How do we know that the questions they are asking are really that important anyway? Aren't they just random facts?"

Conclusion

What started as a rather flippant (and frustrated) comment from a student turned into a meaningful and insightful evaluative experience that has helped my students and myself analyze and think more closely about reading comprehension. What emerged from this experience were students who were more aware and more critical of the purposes and uses of reading comprehension strategies. Additionally, students appreciated and understood their role and their value in the reading process. A change took place in me as well. I began to incorporate a much wider variety of comprehension strategies and I was more mindful of which ones to use, for I knew my students would be evaluating and assessing each one. My students began to make recommendations for new comprehension strategies, which provided opportunities for further analysis and evaluation. Furthermore, I was able to determine which students used each comprehension strategy correctly, and which students need-

ed re-teaching. With this information, I designed explicit lessons on specific comprehension strategies to meet specific student needs. It made sense that if a comprehension strategy was to be used, it needed to be used correctly. I had not spent enough time in this area of instruction before.

As a current teacher educator working with pre-service teachers, I have also used the ERCS exercise with my college students. As is typical of most pre-service teachers seeking to create fun and exciting activities for students to do, this exercise has helped them recognize the value in using certain strategies that may not be considered "fun," but are meaningful and effective. It has also provided opportunities for pre-service teachers to analyze and evaluate a wide variety of reading comprehension strategies, thus helping them to become more familiar with multiple comprehension strategies, the strengths and weaknesses of each strategy, and how to use each strategy effectively. Ultimately, they are more knowledgeable about the complexities involved in assessing, monitoring, and evaluating the reading comprehension of their future elementary students. In conclusion, Pressley (2001) reminds teachers to take the time needed to teach comprehension strategies to their students

"for as long as required to get all readers using the strategies independently" (para. 21). By using the "Evaluating Reading Comprehension Strategies" exercise, teachers and students move ever closer to being able to do just that! ▪

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