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Teaching Teachers About Reading Comprehension

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There has been a virtual explosion of research in the area of reading comprehension in the past 10-15 years. The results of this research have seriously challenged the traditional view of comprehension as a passive meaning-getting process which results as a natural by-product of accurate word recognition. Rather, the evidence indicates that comprehension is an active process in which the reader *constructs* meaning as a result of an interaction between the information suggested by the text and the reader's existing knowledge (11). Thus, the source of meaning becomes the reader's head, not the printed page as implied by the traditional view. In addition, it has become clear that the comprehension process is adaptive, not static, and that it varies as a function of reader, task, materials, and setting factors.

This view implies that in order to teach our students how to become independent readers we must teach them how to: evaluate their purposes in reading; deploy appropriate processing strategies; monitor their progress towards achieving their goals; and redirect their efforts when necessary. However, Durkin (7, 9) reports that current instructional practice is characterized by teachers and programs that focus almost exclusively on activities such as assigning, mentioning, or assessing as opposed to the direct instruction of how, why, and when to use a particular skill. This situation has resulted in a concentrated effort on the part of reading researchers and educators to encourage teachers (administrators and publishers) to adopt instructional procedures which are more consistent with recent knowledge about comprehension. Hence, the current proliferation of conferences, publications, college courses, and inservice training programs designed to provide teachers with information regarding

recent advances in understanding of comprehension and comprehension instruction.

Up to this point researchers and educators have focused their efforts on determining *WHAT* teachers should be taught about comprehension. Generally, most agree that teachers need to acquire an understanding of the nature of the comprehension process, the factors which influence this process, and methods for evaluating reader-text-task-setting interactions and for developing and implementing appropriate instructional programs. However, in laboring to impart this information to teachers, it has become painfully clear to me that we have overlooked a very important factor — namely, *HOW* to effectively teach teachers. Ironically, it appears that the traditional lecture-discussion format used in most college courses and inservice training programs suffers from problems similar to those of the traditional classroom procedures we are seeking to change.

The failure of traditional instructional methodologies to promote the kind of internalized knowledge which is necessary to produce independent readers and learners is not always immediately apparent. Students often appear to be learning when, in fact, what we are observing is the manifestation of highly developed answer-memorizing skills. For example, Meyers and Ringler (10) report that 50 percent of their teacher interns verbalized a concept of reading which was consistent with the orientation of the training program and the information presented in class. However, when asked to specify diagnostic hypotheses and recommended intervention strategies using case study data, only one-third of these interns actually analyzed the case study in a manner which was consistent with their previously verbalized concepts of reading. Of further in-

terest is the fact the 90 percent of the students whose verbalized concepts of reading and case study analyses were consistent with the orientation of the training program were interns who lacked teaching experience. While in many cases interns with teaching experience verbalized a concept of reading which was consistent with what they were being taught in their course-work, their analyses of the case study revealed an approach to diagnosis and remediation which was more reflective of current instructional practice than their previously verbalized concepts of reading. Meyers and Ringler conclude that modifications of the instructional strategies used in teacher training programs are necessary if we want teachers to not only say what we say, but also to develop appropriate and effective teaching strategies.

When considering how best to teach teachers, it is important to remember that many teachers bring to classes and inservice programs a set of previously defined concepts about reading and reading instruction which may conflict with the ideas we wish to impart. Although many teachers are unaware of their own preconceived notions about reading, they do exist and have been developed through previous experiences as students and teachers with various instructional methods, materials, reading tests, etc. This complicates the teaching task because, as Wyer (15) notes, it is likely that the implications of new information will be resisted if acceptance requires a major cognitive reorganization. Thus, the task becomes one of finding ways to facilitate teachers' *reconceptualization* of the comprehension process.

So, what can we do to promote this kind of cognitive reorganization in teachers? I believe that many of the instructional strategies we are encouraging teachers to employ with their students may also be ap-

appropriate for use with adult learners such as teachers. For example, teachers are currently being admonished to "prepare" their students for reading and learning by means of instructional procedures which are designed to examine and engage students' prior knowledge and to promote the development and elaboration of requisite concepts. The importance of these procedures is too often overlooked in our instruction of teachers. They, too, must be helped to become consciously aware of their prior knowledge and to develop and elaborate the concepts which are requisite for further learning.

Thus, it appears that an important first step in enabling teachers to reconceptualize reading comprehension is to make explicit the traditional text-based model of reading which underlies many of today's instructional procedures. It is not sufficient simply to present an explanation of the newer interaction model of comprehension. Rather, teachers must be made aware of the critical attributes of each model, they must be able to distinguish examples from nonexamples of each model, and they must be able to generate examples of each model. To begin this process, I have found it useful to present a prototype of the traditional text-based model starting with the TEXT as the point of entry and proceeding in a step-by-step fashion from the operation of perceptual, to syntactic, to semantic processes to the final product of meaning. As with children, it is helpful to concretize the steps in the model with relevant examples as much as possible. However, it is difficult to provide examples which permit adults to "experience" processes which have operated at an unconscious, automatic level for so long. This is a problem which has confronted researchers for years, and out of which has evolved a variety of innovative tasks which can be used to illustrate the component processes of this model. For example, sections of "mutilated" text (e.g., see reference 13) are useful in illustrating the operation of perceptual processes on the text. Similarly, tasks such as the following which utilize "nonsense" words are quite effective in demonstrating the role of syntactic processes.

The kragier multines grabulated the wogg of the bremulous keag.

1. Who grabulated the wogg?

2. Where does the wogg live?

What allowed you to answer these questions?

Once the traditional text based model has been described, then the idea of an interactive model can be introduced. The text-based model can be modified by adding the READER at the point where the model culminates in meaning, and by linking the reader with each step of the model through a series of feedback loops. Thus, the reader becomes another point of entry, and meaning can be seen as the result of the interaction between the reader and the text. As before, examples from the experimental literature can be helpful in illustrating the interactive model. For instance, the influence of reader knowledge on perceptual processes can be illustrated through the use of orthographically regular and irregular words (e.g., pgmo gomp). Some of the many examples which can be used to illustrate the effect of reader knowledge on the semantic interpretation of words, sentences, and connected discourse are presented below.

1. Words in Sentences

A. Sentences such as the following which illustrate how multiple interpretations of a word (e.g., *ball*) are possible.

The punter kicked the ball.
(football)

The baby kicked the ball.
(nerf ball)

The golfer kicked the ball.
(golf ball)

B. References to research which demonstrate that in sentences such as "The fish attacked the swimmer," a word which is not even in the sentence (i.e., shark) is a better retrieval cue than a word which is in the original sentence (i.e., fish). (4)

2. Sentences

A. A demonstration of how a scrambled sentence such as THE CHASED DOG COW THE is interpreted as "The dog chased the cow," rather than "The cow chased the dog," even though both sentences are syntactically appropriate.

B. Illustrating how knowledge of context can influence the interpretation of an ambiguous sentence such as "Flying planes can be dangerous," or how it can make meaningful a seemingly uninter-

pretable sentence such as "The notes were sour because the seams were split." (Note: The context is "bagpipe")

3. Connected Discourse

Presenting "trick" passages which illustrate the effect of the reader's interpretive framework through the use of aids such as clarifying titles (e.g., the "Washing Clothes" passage, see reference 6) or illustrations (e.g., the "Modern Day Romeo" passage, see reference 5).

Procedures such as the ones that have just been described will enable teachers to identify the critical attributes of both the text-based and the interactive models of reading. This is an important beginning, because as Anderson (2) suggests, the likelihood of change is maximized when difficulties with one's current position are recognized and it is clear that these difficulties can be handled within a different framework. However, it is my experience that teachers must be helped to go beyond the level of recognition if they are to be able to apply the concept of an interactive model of reading to their own instruction. They must also be able to differentiate examples from nonexamples of these models within the context of their everyday teaching activities. To develop this next level of understanding, materials which are descriptive of various instructional programs (e.g., scope and sequence charts) can be presented for analysis with the goal being to identify the frequently implicit, underlying model. Finally, teachers must be able to generate examples of each of these models as they appear in practice. The following task is one of the "preparatory" activities which has proved quite useful for this purpose. Divide the class into small discussion groups and provide them with the following instructions. Teacher A subscribes to a text-based view of the reading process, whereas Teacher B adheres to an interactive model. Give specific examples of how their teaching will differ.

Once the basic concept of comprehension as an interactive process has been developed and differentiated, it needs to be further elaborated. Teachers must learn that the nature of this interactive process varies as a function of reader, text, task, and setting factors. Again, there are a number of

procedures which can be employed to promote "active" learning on the part of the teachers, a few examples of which follow.

1. Task and Setting Factors

A. A "trick" passage such as the one used by Anderson and Pichert (3, 12) about two boys playing hooky from school can be used to illustrate how what one remembers from reading differs as a result of the perspective (in this case either a burglar or a homebuyer) which the reader has either at the time of reading or remembering.

B. After only a single class session, I ask students to predict the type of exams I am most likely to give. Following a discussion which focuses on the "setting" factors which enable them to answer this question correctly after such brief experience with me, I ask them how the knowledge that I am most likely to give essay exams will influence the manner in which they read and study their texts.

2. Textual Difficulty

With the application of two different readability formulas to a passage on an unfamiliar topic, such as the one used by Tierney and others (14) on "Cricket", students discover the variability between formulas, but more importantly, they discover that even first grade level material is incomprehensible to someone who is uninformed about the topic. The introduction of the cloze technique as an alternative provides a contrast which can be used to help the students tie theory (i.e., the text-based vs. the interactive model) to practice.

3. Text and Task Factors

Present students with passages on a familiar topic such as the American Revolution taken from a children's text and ask them to write several comprehension questions. Then teach them to "map" the relationship among ideas in the text using a simplified version of procedures developed by people such as Anderson and Armbruster (1). After the students have mapped the text, an examination of their questions will reveal if they can be answered by the information suggested in the text. The questions printed in the textbook can be evaluated in the same manner.

I have focused my discussion on the "preparatory" phase of instruction largely because it is a phase

that is often overlooked in the instruction of teachers. However, this is merely an example of the type of instruction which should characterize all phases of our teaching. Teachers must also be guided in the process of development and implementation, instructional programs which are consistent with an interactive model of reading. Therefore, it is essential that we employ procedures which require teachers to provide a rationale for their instructional activities and which allow for a continuous feedback of information to the teachers regarding the consistency between theory and practice. Ultimately, how we teach teachers will determine the extent of the impact of the "new" interest in comprehension (8) on reading instruction in our classrooms.

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