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Celeste M. Crouch

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“Understanding Expository Text: More Power to the Reader



by Celeste M. Crouch

Teachers often feel stymied and frustrated by the inability of some students to adequately understand expository text. Admonishments to “read it again” or “keep looking” seems to do little to aid students’ understanding. Many students, after reading a text in a cursory fashion, recall only unrelated, disconnected bits of information. And teachers, who deal with text confusion daily are left wondering how main ideas which seem so obvious to them can somehow remain so elusive for students.

The research on the comprehension of expository text is replete with studies indicating how widespread the difficulties are. Anderson et al, (1985) for example, concluded that:

“Subject matter textbooks pose the biggest challenge for young readers being weaned from a diet of stories” (p. 67). Similarly, Thelen (1982) found that many teachers expressed concern over the fact that students had difficulties understanding expository text. In short, elementary students have been found to have more difficulties with expository text than the narrative form (Alverman and Boothby, 1982).

Why is expository text so difficult?

Role of the Text

Researchers, have in the past, looked at expository text itself, as the root cause of comprehension problems. Structurally, expository text is more complex than its narrative counterpart. The language of exposition is derived from Latin which is structurally more complex, and sentences have a high density of nouns within single clauses (Slotky, 1984). Meyer (1975), elaborated on the concept that there can be

any one of five different structures operating in expository text. These top down structures are the writer’s way of organizing topics and are labeled causation, description, comparison, collection, problem/solution. Given these intrinsic complexities of expository writing, it is easy to see why the text has been singled out as the culprit. However, new research in reading has broadened the context of this issue dramatically and given the problem an entirely new focus.

New Role of Reader

Emphasis has now shifted to the constructive role of the reader in the process of interacting with text. Flood (1986, p. 784) cogently states:

“Current studies that look at the text as the source of the problem reflect outdated notions of comprehension because they are based on the principle that readers comprehend only when mental models of text are created. This inaccurate view of comprehension is potentially harmful because it does not acknowledge the role of the student or the teacher in the comprehension act.”

In the interactive model of reading, the reader constructs meaning using the text only as a guide or blueprint. The reader integrates his/her knowledge and life experiences with the text and this interaction produces a new text which is unique and personal. The reader becomes a collaborator with the writer, adding a fresh dimension to the text. This new concept of the reader’s role has important implications for how the text and reader are viewed in the instructional setting.

In the past, the text played the starring

role in the lesson. Students viewed the text as infallible, never thinking to question its style or organization. Meaning was thought to lie in the text, to be extracted. For those students who couldn't find the meaning, well, they were told to read it again. The power of the lesson emanated from the information in the text and the reader was viewed as a passive recipient of the author's message.

The new research has significantly changed this view. The reader now takes center stage and is considered the key player in this comprehension drama. The content and organization of the text are the script, and the lines, enlivened only when the reader is empowered to critique and question the quality of the script and to consider revisions when deemed appropriate. This changing view of comprehension has implications for not only the reader but the teacher as well.

New Role of Teacher

The teacher is now viewed as playing a critical role in improving the readers' comprehension with expository text. The research makes it clear that teachers can enhance comprehension by teaching text structure and comprehension strategies. But do these represent the most logical place for teachers to begin instruction?

This paper suggests that there is a more fundamental place for teachers to begin the teaching of reading comprehension. What do readers need to know about reading before they receive strategy instruction? It is believed that students first need to understand the interactive nature of reading and the authoritative position of the reader over text.

Instructional Activities

The following is a series of instructional activities which were designed to bring students to this new level of awareness. Implicit in these activities were certain basic assumptions about the reader. First it was thought that many students considered reading to be largely passive, that accurate decoding would lead to comprehension. Secondly, it was thought that this overemphasis on the role of decoding acted as a hindrance to the development of other interactive strategies. And finally, it was assumed that without direct teacher intervention, this passive notion of the reader's role would, for many students,

persist and prevail.

The initial activity asked students to write a definition of reading which was to be compared with a post definition of reading once the activities were completed.

Next, students were given a poorly organized paragraph to analyze. This type of paragraph was chosen to demonstrate that:

1. text is not always well organized
2. text organization does affect comprehension, for better or worse
3. Poorly organized text can be fixed-up in the reader's head

Students were asked to read the following paragraph found in a textbook for middle school students and to first determine what was wrong with the paragraph:

How then does the whale manage to live the life of a mammal in the ocean? The answer is that it has become adapted, or fitted, to an ocean life. Take its shape, for instance. A human cannot move easily through water. For one thing, his legs are too heavy. Normally they must carry his whole body about on land and work against the pull of gravity. In water, a human's strong legs will eventually cause him to sink. And besides, the angles of his body - his narrow limbs and unwebbed, spreading fingers and toes - are too awkward and numerous to cope with resistant water pressure. For easy traveling in the sea an animal needs a streamlined shape and evenly distributed weight.

The following are a few student comments about what was wrong with the paragraph:

"Too much about humans and the paragraph is about whales."

"The topic sentence doesn't go with the rest of the paragraph."

"It talks about too many different subjects."

"The paragraph had a question and it answers it in one sentence and then just prolongs the paragraph."

During this phase, students were encouraged to share their suggestions about ways to improve the paragraph. The teacher underscored the idea that there were a variety of ways to revise the paragraph to enhance its clarity.

After this discussion, students were asked what their feelings were about the existence of such a paragraph in a textbook written for middle school readers. Here are some examples of their thoughts:

"Did they put it in on purpose to see if we could read it?"

"I'm surprised."

"Most kids, or my friends, believe everything we read."

"Well, I think it will convince most kids and make themselves ask questions."

"I think its bad because it could teach kids the wrong organization."

"I really can't stand to read something that isn't well done because I have to redo it."

"Mad, I get really mad."

"I think it's all right because it even helps us do good thinking to find out what's wrong."

"It makes the article harder to understand and they should make them better before they give them to us."

"I think we should write the author and tell him how to write better."

"I think authors have to write good sentences or it's their fault."

"Reading from a textbook can be confusing if it's not organized."

"It makes me feel like even authors and publishers make mistakes."

"It makes me feel like real mad because it really could mess up some person's reading."

Most students were surprised to see that text so poorly organized could ever get into print. Others, seeing how important text organization is to comprehension were upset because now they could understand how much harder the reader had to work to achieve meaning.

Next, students were asked what readers should do whenever they come upon text which is poorly written. Here are some examples of their comments.

"We should take it and put it in our own words to make it easier to understand."

"Pay more attention to the book and protest."

"Read more carefully and watch out for

what you are reading."

"Don't let our teacher know because she'll make us fix it up."

"If I was a writer, I'd talk to other writers."

"Fix it in your head."

"Ask yourself some questions."

"Rearrange it in your head."

"Revise it in your head."

"Correct the mistake in your head."

In analyzing these comments, it is evident that when students were given the opportunity to review the text in a critical fashion they began to take control. Words such as fix, rearrange, revise, correct show that students felt the need to respond to this text in a very active way.

The next activity involved comparing a part of an original text with a version revised for inclusion in an anthology for 7th graders.

The purpose of this activity was first to demonstrate how even subtle changes in words and small deletions can seriously affect meaning and secondly, to show that text is written with an audience in mind. When the audience changes or becomes more specific, the text is changed to match the new set of readers.

Here is the original:

Often, calves have a "foster mother" or an "aunt" - a female who looks after them and protects them whenever their own mother has to leave them to search for food. The "aunt" fusses over the calf as if it were her own, and if the real mother dies, adopts it immediately, although usually not to the extent of letting it nurse. In the past, whalers often took advantage of the Cetaceans' protective instincts toward their young by capturing a calf first, knowing that its mother would then be an easy catch. But now, calves and nursing mothers are protected by law, although each year many are harpooned in error; unfortunately, it is virtually impossible for whalers to tell if a cow is pregnant.

Here is the revised text:

Often, calves have a "foster mother" or an "aunt". This is a female who looks after them and protects them whenever their own mother has to leave them to look for food. The "aunt" fusses over the calf as if it were her own. If the real mother dies, the "aunt"

adopts it immediately, although usually not to the extent of letting it nurse. In the past, whalers often took advantage of the Cetaceans' protective instincts toward their young by capturing a calf first. The whalers knew that the calf's mother would then be an easy catch. Now, calves and nursing mothers are protected by law.

The students became very involved comparing these two versions. They counted sentences, noted changes in words and discussed the possible rationale for deletions. They were asked to choose the version they found to be most interesting to read, and the original text was chosen almost unanimously. Students thought the original text:

"Told more."

"Had more exciting words."

"Was more specific."

"Was more challenging."

"Had a lot more info."

Here are some interesting opinions about the revised version:

"They made a simple version of the paragraph."

"They're acting like we can't understand the original."

"They think we can't read long sentences."

"Sounds like something I would write."

The students as a result of this comparison became more aware of the importance of text structure and style. And they also were able to see how the author's view of the audience has an impact on how the text ultimately is written.

The last activity involved writing post definitions of "reading" to see if student knowledge had changed. The following are samples of pre and post definitions for a few students in the group.

Pre - "Reading is understanding words you read."

Post - "Reading is not just understanding, it's revising."

Pre - "Reading is understanding written words and knowing how to comprehend those words."

Post - "Reading is a way of improving paragraphs in your own mind."

Pre - "Reading is comprehending words on a

page."

Post - "Reading involves a lot of thinking, like analyzing."

Pre - "Reading is understanding written words."

Post - "Reading is being able to understand, to question."

Pre - "Reading is looking at letters and understanding what they mean."

Post - "Reading is organizing a thought into a paragraph to have it make more sense."

Pre - "Reading is taking words in your brain."

Post - "Reading is something you have to think about."

In comparing the pre and post definitions of individual students, one can see an obvious change in knowledge about the process of reading. Students emphasized "words" in their pre definitions. In the post definitions, "thinking", "revising" and "organizing" were most prevalent.

In a systematic, thoughtful way students were given the opportunity and permission to exercise the kind of control over the text good comprehension requires. In analyzing their experiences, students became aware of the limitations of any text in conveying information. Most importantly they became sensitive to the active role of the reader in the comprehension process.

It is likely that students who experience text analysis in this fashion will be receptive to the numerous text structure, and comprehension strategies which are effective in increasing comprehension and recall. They will be more open to strategies because they will have a better idea of what active reading entails. Students will move into this strategy phase of their reading development with a heightened sense of control and power when reading expository text.

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