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ELEMENTS OF COMPREHENSION

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So much has been written about reading comprehension, yet relatively little has appeared that can help a teacher who is concerned about students who seem to have problems in this area. In fact some of the rehashes of the literature, taxonomies, skill lists, and tests have probably contributed to the confusion.

Consider the term, *comprehension*. The word is used to refer to the ability to understand or grasp ideas. Ideas may be expressed in non-verbal or verbal ways. Further, verbal expression may be spoken or written. While the reader is no doubt aware of this, a reminder seems to be in order, since *comprehension* is so often used imprecisely. With the exception of a very few who have suffered neurological trauma or a pathological condition, most people who are able to engage in the communication of thought in conversation do not have a problem in comprehension as a general ability. When one is said to have a "problem in comprehension", a reasonable question, then, is comprehension of *what*? A consideration of what a particular person can and cannot comprehend, under what circumstances, and especially how the judgment is made about comprehension abilities is especially pertinent to this discussion. Judgment about reading comprehension ability is often made after a student has read a passage and responded to questions that are assumed to test comprehension, or the student might retell what he or she has read, in which case a few key words may trigger previous memories that might enable the student to relate to the sense of the passage.

Should a student fail under either of these test conditions, he or she is thought to be deficient in reading comprehension, and the cure for this failure is to practice under conditions similar to the test until one can pass the test. These all too common procedures ignore elements that are vital to growth in comprehension.

First, understanding discourse on any given topic is dependent upon the store of concepts previously acquired. If a reader does not possess sufficient back-

ground knowledge, comprehension may suffer.

Second, one cannot recall what has not been seen or heard. If attention has not been focused on appropriate elements during reading or listening, comprehension may be poor.

Third, ideas that are perceived to be organized in a meaningful way are comprehended and remembered better than information that is received as unrelated fragments.

Fourth, sentences need to be processed by phrases and dependent clauses as chunks, or units, and the intersentence and intrasentence relationships identified if efficient language comprehension is to occur.

Fifth, knowledge of word meanings and the ability to infer meaning by the use of words within various contexts is important to comprehension.

Sixth, the ability to reason by seeing similarities and differences, identifying relationships, and using logic and critical thinking contributes to comprehension.

Seven, a very fast or very slow rate can affect information processing. Rate needs to be appropriate to the purpose for reading the material.

Eight, recall of information is, of course, related to other aforementioned factors such as attending, meaningful organization, and rate. In addition, students need a certain amount of academic sophistication i.e., identification of information they are expected to remember and acknowledge of effective memorization techniques.

A number of factors that are abstract and interrelated influence comprehension. Therefore, assessing ability to comprehend is not an easy task. Possibly, some allowances can be made for over-simplification in methods used to screen large numbers of students. But efforts should be made to improve evaluation and certainly efforts to improve comprehension should not be limited to tasks used in testing. Space permits but one example.

What is the best title of this story? is a question that frequently appears on tests. The assumption is made that the ability to "get the main idea" is being tested. *What is the best title . . . ?* was originally used as an instructional device that involved elementary children in a discussion about a story. One objective was to teach the concept of a summarizing statement, although some teachers used the device to encourage creative responses. Using the circular reasoning of if they teach it, we should test it, test makers employed the question and claimed it represented a comprehension *skill*. Students who take the test are assumed to know that "best title" means the phrase or sentence that is most inclusive of events or ideas in the passage. Some are tested, drilled, and retested without ever having that concept explained. (To me, "best title" means one that is catchy, but fortunately I don't have to take those tests!)

What is suggested here is that when teachers identify students who seem to

have a problem in comprehension, that they check:

- Conceptual background
- Attending behaviors
- Perception of organization
- Syntactic processing
- Semantic knowledge
- Reasoning abilities
- Rate of processing
- Recall of information

If any of these are inadequate, appropriate measures should be taken. Next, since taking tests is a fact of students' existence, teachers should carefully analyze the tasks and underlying concepts and help those students with the skills needed to pass the test.

However, comprehension skill lists and test tasks that are assumed to represent the ability to comprehend are often not complete and poorly conceived. Teachers cannot afford to accept them without close examination.