

Expository Text Comprehension 1

Running head: EXPOSITORY TEXT COMPREHENSION

Reading Comprehension Instruction for Expository Text in Elementary Education

Kristen Ephraim

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Fall 2009

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

Connie L. McDonald, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

Michelle B. Goodwin, Ed.D.
Committee Member

Janice DeLong, M.Ed.
Committee Member

James Nutter, D.A.
Honors Director

Date

Abstract

The thesis focuses on strategies for developing reading comprehension skills in relation to expository, or informational, text and the need for this type of instruction in contemporary elementary classrooms. Comprehension is the final product of reading, and therefore should require attention and emphasis during literary instructional time. Many students enjoy reading narrative text, as it is more relational and has a storyline or plot, so expository text is often neglected and considered uninteresting. However, as students begin the upper elementary grade levels, almost all of their reading experiences include informational text, such as textbooks. Through instructing students how to read expository text for meaning, the teacher better equips her children to read actively and with purpose. By understanding the importance of reading comprehension and strategies that increase reader knowledge, teachers and students will have a greater appreciation for the significance of comprehension skills and place a higher emphasis on expository texts in the classroom.

Reading Comprehension Instruction for Expository Text
in Elementary Education

In the contemporary classroom, literacy instruction is one of the most important disciplines used to prepare students for higher education and adult life. Through teaching children how to read, educators equip their students with the tools necessary not only to succeed throughout their education and careers, but also in everyday activities such as reading a menu or checking the weather forecast. While there are multiple aspects to literacy education, one of the most important components is reading comprehension. All reading instruction, including phonics, fluency, and vocabulary development, leads to the ultimate goal of comprehension. Michael F. Opitz and Roger G. Eldridge, Jr. (2004) note in their article “Remembering Comprehension: Delving Into the Mysteries of Teaching Reading Comprehension” that “[r]eading comprehension skills are frequently left untaught. How important it is to remember that comprehension is the essence of reading and that it has to be taught and cannot be left to chance!” (p. 772). While many students receive adequate instruction in phonics and vocabulary at an early age, many do not begin the process of understanding how to comprehend text until later. In their book *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read*, Bonnie B. Armbruster, Fran Lehr, and Jean Osborn (2003) explain that teachers often focus on basic reading instruction before teaching comprehension. By the time teachers decide to instruct students in comprehension strategies, many children have gotten into a routine of reading to decode words instead of reading to construct meaning.

In addition to the problem of not knowing how to comprehend text, many students completely neglect expository books. A well-represented genre, narrative text consists of

a fictional story that may range from the fantastical and extraordinary to a realistic or historical plot that parallels the human experience. These genres are often emphasized in the lower grade levels, as they teach students about the components of a story and are frequently fun and interesting to children. Expository text, on the other hand, provides information to the reader on a specific subject or topic. This type of text may be classified into three basic genres: biography, autobiography, and information books. According to Jerry L. Johns (2008) in his book *Basic Reading Inventory: Pre-Primer through Grade Twelve and Early Literacy Assessments*, narrative and expository texts cannot be approached or analyzed in the same ways. Many students associate informational books with subjects that are uninteresting and boring, not realizing the value or potential enjoyment in reading a text for information.

The task for modern teachers is to present a balanced literacy program which incorporates carefully-selected narrative and expository texts that cover a wide range of topics and genres. While students appear to have little trouble comprehending narrative books, children have difficulty in constructing meaning from expository texts. As a result, teachers should be encouraged to include more diverse and appropriate informational books in their classrooms. Linda Hoyt (1999) notes in her book *Revisit, Reflect, Retell: Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension* that in order “[t]o become reflective readers and writers of informational text, readers must have both extensive and intensive experience with information-bearing text” (p. 121). By exposing students to more nonfiction, teachers can adequately prepare learners for textbook-based classrooms in the upper grade levels. In addition to nonfiction exposure, teachers should also explicitly instruct students how to read for information. By balancing the literature

in a classroom and providing more expository texts to children, teachers can successfully instruct students to read nonfiction with awareness, confidence, and clarity, ultimately preparing them for future success in reading, education, and everyday life.

The Need for Expository Comprehension Instruction

In order to affect change in modern classrooms, teachers must first understand the pressing need for specific expository comprehension instruction in the elementary grade levels. In their book *Teaching Comprehension Strategies All Readers Need*, Nicole Outsen and Stephanie Yulga (2002) note that the goal of reading instruction is to prompt children to be critical thinkers. Through learning to analyze and think critically while reading, students develop into lifelong learners who can construct meaning from what they read.

Expository text is not only an important component in the classroom, but a constant companion in everyday life. Outsen and Yulga (2002) state, “We come in contact with nonfiction every day: maps, menus, guides, brochures, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. Therefore, studying it has real-life value for students” (p. 27). When students are not prepared to read and comprehend nonfiction from an early age, there can be devastating long-term consequences. Hoyt (1999) affirms that expository text presents the greatest hardship for students today. According to Jean Ciborowski (1992) in her book *Textbooks and the Students Who Can't Read Them*, this challenge in reading comprehension stems from a lack of nonfiction in the classroom:

Children are fed a steady diet of once-upon-a-time stories during the infant, toddler and learning-to-read years, and so become increasingly familiar with the format and structures of narrative text. Familiarity with story text format makes

comprehension easier. On the other hand, expository text is less familiar to the child in both content and format. Expository text structures differ dramatically from narrative text . . . [a]t the same time, the content of expository text is filled with many words and concepts the child has never seen before.

When textbooks are introduced in third and fourth grades, many children are caught by surprise, unprepared to make the transition from learning-to-read from stories to reading-to-learn from textbooks. (p. 11)

The lack of expository reading strategies taught in the classroom can account for students struggling to read informational books. Students need to be prepared for encounters with this type of text and consistently exposed to it in order to gain familiarity and confidence in constructing meaning.

The need for nonfiction comprehension instruction is evident in the struggling middle school, high school, and college students today. Editors of *Improving Comprehension Instruction: Rethinking Research, Theory, and Classroom Practice*, Cathy Collins Block, Linda B. Gambrell, and Michael Pressley (2002) assert that students in all grade levels struggle with expository comprehension. This widespread problem should act as the catalyst for change in contemporary classrooms. If there are so many students struggling to read and comprehend informational books, teachers must make changes in the way they teach literacy. Hoyt (1999) notes that as children read expository books “we must aggressively engage them at the earliest stages of literacy development with nonfiction reading” (p. 121). By beginning expository text instruction at an early age, parents and teachers can help children to become more familiar with the structure of informational books, which positively affects their ability to read for meaning.

Many teachers assume students have no interest in informational books because they may be boring or irrelevant. However, several authors promote the idea that nonfiction can stimulate a child's interest in reading because of the wide range of topics presented in informational books (Block et al., 2002). Similarly, Gail E. Tompkins (2007) writes in her book *Literacy for the 21st Century: Teaching Reading and Writing in Prekindergarten Through Grade 4* that the large representation of narrative text in early grade levels is due to idea that "constructing stories in the mind is a fundamental way of learning. Researchers, however, suggest that children may prefer to read informational or nonfiction books and are able to understand them as well as they do stories" (p. 238). In addition to students needing more exposure to expository text, teachers must change the way they perceive nonfiction and their assumptions about students' attitudes toward informational books.

Reading Comprehension

In order to instruct and remediate students in reading comprehension strategies, teachers must first understand the meaning of comprehension and its heavy influence in literacy. Many authors define comprehension, but J. David Cooper (2000) clearly depicts the concept in his book *Literacy: Helping Children Construct Meaning* when he writes, "Comprehension is a process by which the reader constructs or assigns meaning by interacting with the text" (p. 12). The main point of comprehension is to make meaning of a text in a way that is understandable and relatable to the reader (Tompkins, 2007). James L. Shanker and Ward A. Cockrum (2009) describe the interactive model of reading comprehension in their book *Locating and Correcting Reading Difficulties* when they say, "The interactive model of reading was developed to describe the reading process as

both concept and text driven, a process in which the reader relates information stored in his mind with new information in the text” (p. 161). Reading comprehension is based on the reader’s ability to interact with the text and assign a meaning to the topic presented in the material, as well as the text’s clarity in communicating ideas to the reader.

Prior knowledge plays an important role in the student’s ability to comprehend text. Cooper (2000) explains that the “interaction, or transaction, between the reader and the text is the foundation of comprehension. In the process of comprehending, readers relate the new information presented by the author to old information stored in their minds” (p. 12). When the student can connect what he or she is reading with something already known or understood, prior knowledge is being utilized to make sense of the new information. The importance of prior knowledge is not a new concept; it has long been recognized as a significant factor in reading comprehension. Charles W. Anderson and Edward L. Smith (1984) discuss their prior knowledge research in their chapter of the book *Comprehension Instruction: Perspectives and Suggestions*. They concluded from their findings that a lack of prior knowledge can often be the reason for a breakdown in comprehension, especially with expository texts. As P. David Pearson and Dale D. Johnson (1978) portray in their book *Teaching Reading Comprehension*, “Comprehension is building bridges between the new and the known . . . Comprehension is active, not passive; that is, the reader cannot help but interpret and alter what he reads in accordance with prior knowledge about the topic under discussion” (p. 24). While phonemic awareness and fluency are essential to comprehension, prior knowledge changes the text from letters and words to information with meaning.

How Comprehension Occurs

The mental process behind reading comprehension is an important aspect to teaching usable strategies to students because it allows the instructor to analyze which techniques will be most beneficial to learners. In the book *Reading for Meaning: Fostering Comprehension in the Middle Grades*, Paul van den Broek and Kathleen E. Kremer (2000) note in their chapter “The Mind in Action: What It Means to Comprehend During Reading” that:

At each point during reading, the comprehender attempts to make sense of the information explicitly stated in the current sentence by connecting it to two other sources of information: associated concepts in background knowledge and a subset of concepts from preceding sentences. When the reader is satisfied with the attained level of comprehension, he or she proceeds to the next sentence and the process repeats itself. (p. 7)

At its core, reading comprehension is “an interactive process involving the reader, the text, and the context” (Block et al., 2002, p. 5). When an individual reads text, he or she is actively involved with the information in a way that constructs meaning that is specific to the reader. Comprehension is a complex process that involves multiple factors and can succeed or break down based on the reader’s own literacy skills.

Reader Factors in Comprehension

In order to maximize a learner’s reading comprehension potential, teachers must understand the reader factors that influence comprehension ability. According to van den Broek and Kremer (2000), students have many characteristics that can limit or enhance their capacity to comprehend text. These qualities include the reader’s attention span,

short-term memory, ability to concentrate, motivation, knowledge of comprehension strategies, reasoning skills, decoding and grammar skills, and prior knowledge. An important factor in a student's reading success is his or her attention span in that "a reader can only identify a meaningful connection between two elements if he or she attends to both of them at the same time" (p. 7). Further, reading requires the student to "construct a mental 'picture' of the text" (p. 2), involving the learner's ability to decode words in order to understand the purpose of the information. With proficiency and perseverance in these skills, students can magnify their success with reading comprehension and reach their goals of learning and understanding.

Text Factors in Comprehension

In addition to learner factors, the text also plays an important role in a child's success with reading comprehension. van den Broek and Kremer (2000) point to two textual qualities that influence a reader's comprehension level: content and structure. A book's content refers to the subject matter and the amount of supplemental information provided. According to the authors, when a text's content is unclear or contains extraneous information, the reader becomes easily distracted and confused with the text. Similarly, a book's structure influences the reader's comprehension. Grammar and organization, when correct and concise, can easily expand a reader's comprehension ability. If mechanics is incorrect or disorganized, students will spend most of their energy on decoding the individual words instead of understanding the material as a cohesive whole. Overall, a book's content and structure equally cooperate to create the mental picture in the student's mind and can make or break the reader's comprehension abilities.

Instructional Factors in Comprehension

The context of reading instruction can also affect the student's comprehension abilities. In their chapter, van den Broek and Kremer (2000) list instructional factors in comprehension, including the presence of distracters, the teacher's explicit or implicit instructions, the teacher's expectations, and educational goals. Distractions can be highly detrimental to a student's attention span and ability to concentrate while reading. As students become more proficient in reading they may be able to ignore distractions, but early and struggling readers must read in environments that minimize disruption. Explicit instruction is another key to unlocking a student's reading potential. Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2003) explain, "In explicit instruction, teachers tell readers why and when they should use strategies, what strategies to use, and how to apply them" (p. 53). Clearly explaining and instructing reading comprehension strategies are critical teacher activities that prepare students for reading success. In her book *Make It Real: Strategies for Success with Informational Texts*, Hoyt (2002) notes that when teachers explicitly instruct students in comprehension strategies through "modeling, guided practice, and independent practice" (p. 9), learners can concretely apply tactics that increase comprehension of text. By explaining and modeling appropriate use of comprehension strategies, teachers can influence students to actively apply comprehension tactics in order to increase their understanding and retention of reading material.

Similarly, teacher expectations and goals can influence reading comprehension. If a teacher has too-low or too-high expectations for student achievement, learners may not take reading assignments seriously or be so overwhelmed by the task that they set themselves up for failure. According to van den Broek and Kremer (2000), "It is

therefore crucial that instructors be aware of how their actions affect student effort and set up a classroom environment that evokes the intended educational outcomes” (p. 15). Educators must maintain a balance of educational goals and expectations, realizing that students need to be challenged but must also be met at their current level of development.

Reading Comprehension Strategies

Undoubtedly, the most important factor that influences a student’s ability to comprehend text is his or her knowledge of reading comprehension strategies for the genre being read. Block, Gambrell, and Pressley (2002) emphasize that current research points to the fact that teachers must instruct students in valid and accurate comprehension strategies in order to enhance reading comprehension. Furthermore, the abundance of narrative text in the elementary classroom outshines the presence of expository text, with students unable to shift narrative comprehension strategies to nonfiction books (Block, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2002). Students need to learn specific strategies for expository reading so that they can be actively engaged in the text and put the pieces of the puzzle together to visualize the big picture. Among the many comprehension techniques, two categories surface: reader strategies and instructional strategies.

It is important to remember that proper modeling will enhance students’ comprehension success. In their book *Integrating Language Arts Through Literature and Thematic Units*, Betty D. Roe and Elinor P. Ross (2006) suggest teaching one or two strategies to students rather than many in order to reduce the risk of confusion. In addition, teachers should model the technique in a real-life reading situation to give students practice, make interdisciplinary connections between strategies and other curriculum areas, and ensure that collaboration occurs in practice between the teacher and

the student (Roe & Ross, 2006). Through appropriate, explicit, and direct teaching, students can learn both reader and instructional strategies to enhance their ability to comprehend text.

Reader Strategies

In reading comprehension instruction, reader strategies serve as a significant element in aiding students to individually increase their own comprehension of text. According to Roe and Ross (2006), reader strategies are adjustable approaches to reading that change depending on the textual context. This kind of strategy is dependent upon the student and requires him or her to think critically about how to approach the text in order to decode and retain information (Roe & Ross, 2006)). To interact with expository text and have success, students need specific instruction that demonstrates how they can read nonfiction books to facilitate comprehension.

Before Reading

Prior to reading, students should preview the text by predicting what will occur. Tompkins (2007) states that students will speculate about the book based on what they already know about the topic or type of text, thus designating a purpose for reading and becoming more involved and interested in reading the book. When previewing the text, Roe and Ross (2006) encourage students to examine diagrams, pictures, titles, and subtitles in order to become familiar with the purpose of the book and begin activating prior knowledge about the topic. Previewing and predicting the main point of a book can help students to begin comprehending the meaning of text even before they begin reading.

During Reading

Identifying words. While reading, students should attempt to identify words using a number of strategies. Roe and Ross (2006) explain that identifying words means “using context clues, reading to the end of the sentence to see what makes sense . . . looking for familiar word parts, [and] skipping the word if not needed for meaning” (p. 256). This comprehension strategy is critical to reading nonfiction because students will encounter unfamiliar words or phrases that are particular to the topic being studied. Through purposefully attempting to decode new words, students can increase their retention of information because they are interacting with and trying to decipher unfamiliar terminology.

Identifying main ideas. When identifying main ideas in expository text, students find the essential information in the book (Roe & Ross, 2006). According to Tompkins (2007), “children learn the difference between the big ideas and the details” through this strategy (p. 205). If children apply this method while reading, they learn to easily recognize and remember the most important information while not exerting energy over the details that are less important. After reading, the child can then summarize and explain the main points in the text without getting overwhelmed by the minor details.

Making inferences. Another approach to ensure comprehension success is making inferences while reading. In this context, drawing inferences means that students must engage prior experiences and their imagination in order to more fully understand the author’s meaning (Roe & Ross, 2006). Through inferring, students can conclude certain general ideas that the author may not have explicitly stated in the text. Tompkins (2007) notes that inferring is often a time-consuming task for students who are still developing

reading skills. However, with practice, students can learn to make inferences while they read instead of having to reread a passage multiple times (Tompkins, 2007). If children can understand enough information from the book to make inferences, then they will have more success in overall comprehension because they are actively engaged and interacting with the meaning of the text.

Monitoring. Through monitoring their own understanding of the text, students can judge when they need to use problem-solving strategies, seek outside help, or continue reading. Monitoring is a broad category that can include many strategies, and according to Roe and Ross (2006) may include “clarifying . . . knowing strategies for correcting problems, anticipating and overcoming difficulties . . . rereading (backtracking), skimming ahead, self-questioning . . . modifying predictions and making new ones, knowing when and how to seek help from outside sources, paraphrasing, focusing thinking, visualizing, adjusting rate, [and] seeing relationships” (p. 256). Essentially, monitoring involves “fix-up strategies” (Tompkins, 2007, p. 206) that allow children to self-regulate their reading experiences and gain maximum understanding of the text through their own efforts.

After Reading

Summarizing. After the student has read the text, it is critical for him or her to be able to accurately summarize the information to demonstrate understanding. Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2003) define a summary as a “synthesis of the important ideas in a text” (p. 53). Summarizing involves the reader deciding what the critical information is, shortening it, and then explaining it using his or her own words (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2003). Recognizing expository text structures can also aid children in

summarizing. According to Susan Dymock (2005) in her article “Teaching Expository Text Structure Awareness,” students who understand text structures have more success with comprehension and “[e]xplicit teaching of text structure awareness has a positive effect on comprehension” (p. 180). The five major structures of expository text are outlined by Tompkins (2007): description, sequence, comparison, cause and effect, and problem and solution. John D. McNeil (1987) notes in his book *Reading Comprehension: New Directions for Classroom Practice* that cause and effect structures show the relationship between two events, comparison and contrast books demonstrate the similarities and differences among concepts, and a problem and solution structure shows a question and how it is answered. Tompkins (2007) notes that when students can identify the expository text structure used in the book, they can use that type of relationship to discover the main ideas. Identifying the main ideas during reading directly correlates with a student’s ability to summarize the information after reading. These are two related strategies that affect one another in a reader’s ability to comprehend text.

Reflecting. After summarizing the information, the student should then reflect on the meaning of the main ideas. Roe and Ross (2006) explain that through reflection, the student is “making sense of what was read, reviewing predictions, meeting purposes, assimilating new information into schemata, assessing the significance of the material, looking back for clarification, [and] making connections to life outside school” (p. 256). By reflecting on what was read, the reader is evaluating what was learned and understanding his or her own thoughts about the information. Reflection is an important process in comprehension of nonfiction and a student’s ability to recall information later.

Recalling. Through recall, children remember the content and main ideas of a book. Roe and Ross (2006) define recall as “reading aloud to oneself or writing down important points, paraphrasing main ideas, relating to prior knowledge, [and] remembering important points” (p. 256). Recall is the end result of reading comprehension and usually demonstrates when comprehension has been successful. When students can remember what the book is about, they rely on their summary and reflection after reading the text. A student’s ability to recall information is what teachers normally assess when determining a student’s success with reading comprehension.

A component of recall that serves as a comprehension strategy is retelling. As defined by Hoyt (1999), retelling involves students relying on “their own understanding, merging their knowledge of the world with the meaning they derived from what they’ve read . . . [w]hen a learner retells the content of a reading selection, the reader takes total responsibility for understanding and then communicating that understanding” (p. xi). As students understand the text they have read, they can retell the information aloud, on paper, or visually in order to further their understanding and enhance their ability to communicate ideas (Hoyt, 1999). Retelling, when part of the recall process, can boost a child’s sense of understanding and further influence his or her construction of meaning from text.

Instructional Strategies

In contrast to reader strategies which can be used by students on an individual basis, instructional strategies involve specific techniques that are used by the teacher and student and include cooperative learning and collaborative efforts as a class. According to Roe and Ross (2006), instructional strategies are “integrated sets of practices” (p. 255)

used to aid in reading comprehension. There are many instructional strategies employed in contemporary classrooms, but the most common include reciprocal teaching, Question-Answer Relationships (QAR), Directed Reading-Thinking Activities (DR-TA), graphic and semantic organizers, and the K-W-L Method.

Reciprocal Teaching

Reciprocal teaching is one technique developed to strengthen reading comprehension. Hoyt (2002) notes that reciprocal teaching, originally designed by Annmarie Palincsar and Ann Brown, incorporates four steps that help learners read critically: predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing. Roe and Ross (2006) define the predicting stage as guessing or foretelling what will happen next. Clarifying is attempting to understand the author's intent in confusing passages, questioning involves inquiring about the information in the book, and the summarizing step requires the student to state the most important ideas from the text (Hoyt, 1999). In order to effectively use this technique, teachers should employ this process in small reading groups. According to Roe and Ross (2006), the teacher and students alternate acting as the teacher. After reading the first section of text, the individual playing the teacher asks a predicting question, such as, "What do you think the next part will be about?" (Hoyt, 2002, p. 229). To further question the content of the text, the teacher may ask, "Why is this important?" or "What is your opinion of this idea?" (p. 229). To demonstrate clarifying, the teacher may observe that he or she does not understand a certain part of the text and wishes to discover the meaning or significance (Roe & Ross, 2006). Finally, the teacher summarizes by identifying the most important information from what was already read (Roe & Ross, 2006). Reciprocal teaching is an effective tool for the classroom and

can enhance students' ability to think critically, work cooperatively with their peers, and engage reading comprehension skills.

Question-Answer Relationships (QAR)

A similar method of improving reading comprehension is the Question-Answer Relationships (QAR) technique. Roe and Ross (2006) note that QAR “allows children to use information stored in their heads along with information from the text when answering questions” (p. 255). This strategy is broken down into four types of questions that are categorized into two sections (Roe & Ross, 2006). The first section, “In the Book,” includes “Right There” questions which are explicitly stated in the book, and “Think and Search” questions which must be answered through synthesizing different pieces of information in the text (p. 259). In the second section known as “In My Head,” there are “Author and Me” questions which involve a reader’s prior knowledge and understanding of the author’s intent, and “On My Own” questions that are answered solely from the reader’s own knowledge of the topic without having read the book (p. 259). According to Tompkins (2007), this strategy helps readers “become engaged with the text and want to keep reading to find answers to their questions” (p. 205). The Question-Answer Relationships technique can be a helpful tool when attempting to engage students in the books they are reading as well as improving their overall ability to construct meaning from expository text.

Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA)

An instructional strategy for reading comprehension that involves predicting is the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA). In this technique, students predict what the reading will be about, verify the accuracy of their predictions as they read, and then

modify other predictions as they understand more about the book (Roe & Ross, 2006).

While there is disagreement about whether the DR-TA is appropriate for expository books (Tompkins, 2007), this technique remains useful to enhancing reading comprehension skills because it strengthens students' ability to predict and question during reading. In addition, DR-TA helps students engage skills that are part of the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. As a reading comprehension strategy, the DR-TA is a useful method for facilitating understanding and involves students in what they read, helping them to be constantly aware of new information as it is presented in the text.

Graphic and Semantic Organizers

Graphic organizers. As a comprehension strategy, graphic organizers can aid students in realizing the relationships among ideas in a book (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2003). Graphic organizers come in a variety of forms, including maps, webs, diagrams, charts, and graphs (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2003). A well-known example of a graphic organizer is the Venn diagram which illustrates the similarities and differences between two concepts. Tompkins (2007) notes that graphic organizers "enhance children's comprehension because they provide an instructional framework of the text and give them the tools for structuring and relating the big ideas" (p. 349). Beyond nonfiction books, graphic organizers can also be used when reading textbooks in other curricular areas in order to help students organize the information in a chapter. Graphic organizers are useful tools for students as they read because they help children to focus on the important information, summarize text, and can serve as study guides across the curriculum.

Semantic organizers. Another type of concept organization is the semantic organizer. Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2003) define a semantic organizer as a type of graphic organizer that depicts a web of information, connecting a central idea to other related concepts. Like graphic organizers, semantic maps can be used to help students visualize the relationships among various concepts and how these ideas interact within one main idea. These organizers help children to gain meaningful information and clarify the interrelated ideas in expository text.

The K-W-L Method

The K-W-L Method is a technique used in expository text reading. Amy S. Pattee (2008) outlines this method in her article “What Do You Know?” as a way for students to specifically note their prior knowledge, questions, and findings from reading a nonfiction book. The K-W-L Method was developed by Donna Ogle in 1986 and encourages students to “articulate ‘What Do I *Know*’ about a topic, ‘What Do I *Want to Know*’ about the topic and, following reading or research, ‘What I *Learned*’ about the topic” (p. 34). In order to use the K-W-L Method, students will create a chart with three columns in order to separate and organize the information for each category. In the “What Do I Know” category, students will make statements about what they already know regarding the topic. Under “What Do I Want to Know,” students will ask questions about the topic and identify what they want to learn from the reading. After reading the book, students will then list information they learned in the “What I Learned” category and possibly answer some of their questions from the second section.

Through teaching students to use the K-W-L Method, instructors can provide children with a concrete way of interacting with the text and recalling information

learned from reading. In her article “Confirming a K-W-L: Considering the Source,” Mary Beth Sampson (2002) affirms the success of the K-W-L Method because it activates “students’ prior knowledge and help[s] them set a purpose for reading and recording what they learned” (p. 528). Using the K-W-L chart as an instructional strategy can help students actively read expository text for information, as well as provoke interest and additional research about the topic. The K-W-L Method is an important comprehension strategy and can be accommodated for any learning level or grade in elementary schools.

Reading Comprehension Assessment

Assessing reading comprehension is the final step to ensuring students have successfully applied the instructed comprehension strategies. In their article “Introduction to This Special Issue: Reading Comprehension Assessment,” Tanya R. Shuy, Peggy McCardle, and Elizabeth Albro (2006) assert that the “[k]ey to the thorough and successful investigation of methods of instruction for various aspects of reading comprehension are measurement and assessment” (p. 221). Roe and Ross (2006) note that assessment involves gathering data about students’ strong and weak points in order to formally account for success or failure as well as guide instruction in the classroom. For these purposes there are two types of assessment: formal and informal. Each type of assessment has its own value and importance, but through examining assessment techniques teachers can easily distinguish what types of assessment will be most beneficial to improving student performance in the classroom.

Formal Assessment

Formal assessment serves the purpose of accountability for what students have

learned over the course of a school year. This type of assessment is aimed toward objectively measuring a student's skills and knowledge, the results of which are often reported for governmental reasons such as school accreditation or grade completion purposes (Roe & Ross, 2006). Rona F. Flippo, Dari-Ann D. Holland, Mary T. McCarthy, and Elizabeth A. Swinning (2009) observe some of the problems with formal assessment in their article "Asking the Right Questions: How to Select an Informal Reading Inventory" when they note that "schools today are caught up in an assessment frenzy without allowing sufficient time for the particular instruction each child needs . . . [i]n this climate, the individual needs and preferences of both teachers and students suffer" (p. 79). While formal assessment serves specific purposes that are crucial to the success of public schools, this type of assessment should not be relied upon for guiding instructional techniques in the classroom.

Standardized Tests

The most frequently used type of formal assessment is the standardized test. An obligatory component in the contemporary classroom, standardized tests are developed, administered, and assessed by experts (Roe & Ross, 2006). Their content usually consists of multiple-choice test questions that cover various aspects of the subject and are norm-referenced, or based on the results of other students in the same grade level (Roe & Ross, 2006). In assessing reading comprehension, standardized tests typically provide a reading selection followed by questions about the reading that require the student to recall, clarify, and infer. Once assessed, the test results often determine a student's success or failure in the skill area and whether a school will receive accreditation.

While this type of test is helpful in determining whether teachers are covering the crucial information throughout the school year, standardized tests can inaccurately label students' achievement or failure. According to Elfrieda H. Hiebert, Sheila W. Valencia, and Peter P. Afflerbach (1994) in their book *Authentic Reading Assessment: Practices and Possibilities*, standardized tests do not measure the literacy skills needed for success in adulthood, improperly dictate school curriculum, and influence teachers and students to negatively view other forms of assessment. Overall, while standardized tests are important for government and public assessment of education, this type of test is inappropriate for classroom use and should not directly influence how educators teach.

Informal Assessment

In contrast, informal assessment is used by teachers to evaluate students' progress and modify instructional techniques as necessary. Also known as authentic assessment, informal testing comes in a variety of forms and can be used on a daily basis to observe how students perform and interact with reading material. According to Scott G. Paris and James V. Hoffman (2004) in their article "Reading Assessments in Kindergarten through Third Grade: Findings from the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement," teachers should keep in mind that a "single assessment cannot adequately represent the complexity of a child's reading development" (p. 205). Instead, teachers should use multiple assessment strategies on a consistent basis in order to fully evaluate a child's progress over time. Many of the informal assessment techniques can be administered daily or weekly which can provide more feedback for the student and teacher rather than a cumulative test at the end of the school year.

Observation

An assessment technique that can be used at any time or in any situation in the classroom is observation. Essentially, observations are the teacher's personal awareness of what students are doing at any given point during the day and can include a student's facial expressions, behavior, concentration level, and responses to instruction or assignments. Cooper (2000) states, "Observations must be based on what you know about how children learn to read and write. Therefore, you need to understand what responses are expected and typical and what responses might indicate a need for more or different support" (p. 533). Teachers should look for how students respond to instruction and assignments, noting when they exhibit behaviors consistent with understanding as well as those that point to confusion or frustration. In addition, teachers should observe all of their students consistently; one or two random observations cannot depict the full spectrum of the student's understanding (Cooper, 2000). Roe and Ross (2006) provide several guidelines for observations that can help teachers obtain authentic information about their students as well as demonstrate a student's progress or problems. In order to assess students through observation, teachers should record observations systematically, noting the student's name, date, and specific observations. Also, collecting information that would indicate growth or signify a learning pattern can help in diagnosing where problems exist and how these can be corrected (Roe & Ross, 2006). Monitoring throughout the school year is the most important aspect of observation (Roe & Ross, 2006); when teachers collect many observations over time, patterns begin to surface that can lead to a student's problem being dealt with early rather than after a formal assessment. Overall, observation is one of the most critical aspects of informal

assessment and provides accurate and helpful information for both the teacher's and student's benefit.

Checklists

A similar method of informal assessment is the checklist. Checklists include observational strategies, but go one step further by requiring the teacher to record whether students have met specific criteria for the unit or lesson. Cooper (2000) notes that checklists "should contain the qualities or traits you are looking for and some procedure for recording what you observe" (p. 534). Checklists often include a rating scale for the various criteria so that the teacher can easily see whether a student is on target for the skills listed. An example of a rating scale from Roe and Ross (2006) is the + symbol for high achievement, 0 for satisfactory, and the – symbol for needing improvement. Like observation, checklists should be conducted regularly and included in a student's personal file each grading period (Roe & Ross, 2006). The checklist is a useful tool for authentically assessing students and can measure progress or problems in reading comprehension.

Retellings

Retellings are an additional way to assess students' comprehension of expository text. In a retelling, the student reports the main ideas, important details, text features (photographs, diagrams, or charts), and personal extensions of a reading and includes his or her own inferences, conclusions, and questions about the topic (Hoyt, 2002). According to Cooper (2000), retellings are crucial to informal assessment because they provide information about the student's thoughts, reactions, and understanding of the text, as well as help in identifying progress over time and developing supplemental

instruction that can assist with comprehension difficulties. Retellings serve as an appropriate way for teachers to assess student comprehension and can be used in both narrative and expository texts.

Retellings can be altered to accommodate any grade level or learner and can integrate multiple learning styles in order to differentiate instruction and assessment techniques. For example, after reading a selected text or passage, young students may draw pictures of what they learned from reading the book and then share their illustrations with a partner (Hoyt, 2002). This type of retelling includes visual and kinesthetic learning styles, cooperative learning strategies, and oral communication skills. Another type of retelling assignment may involve the student orally retelling the main ideas, details, and personal inferences to the teacher, while the teacher records the information on a scoring chart (Hoyt, 2002). There are multiple ways of using retellings in the classroom to assess a student's comprehension skills. Retellings are flexible assignments that can be accommodated for all students while still achieving authentic assessment and differentiated instruction.

Portfolios

Informal assessment also includes the use of portfolios to assess literacy skills and comprehension. A portfolio, according to Roe and Ross (2006), is a "carefully selected, organized collection of a student's work accumulated over a period of time" (p. 508). In *Reading Assessment in Practice*, Robert C. Calfee and Pam Perfumo (1993) illustrate the benefits of portfolios in their article "Student Portfolios: Opportunities for a Revolution in Assessment." Essentially, their idea is that "portfolios provide an opportunity for richer, more authentic, and more valid assessment of student achievement; educators will

learn what students can do when given adequate time and resources” (p. 20). Teachers can create a portfolio assignment that includes a student’s choice of personal work, including written responses to reading assignments, graphic organizers that depict the main ideas of a book, drafts and a final copy of a formal written assignment, collaborative work, retelling charts, and personal notes in order to display the full range of student involvement. A portfolio, through careful examination, can illustrate a student’s progress over time and ultimately point to what strategies a student uses in order to comprehend text and the type of inferences he or she makes in response to reading. The portfolio is an integral part of informal assessment and can serve multiple purposes while allowing the teacher to carefully examine a student’s progress in reading.

Assessment Conclusions

While students need explicit instruction in ways to read and comprehend expository text, the most important way for teachers to assist students with comprehension is through assessment. By using formal and informal assessment techniques, teachers can identify progress and problems proactively so that students can receive remediation and support prior to standardized tests. According to Linda Hoyt, Margaret Mooney, and Brenda Parkes (2003), editors of *Exploring Informational Texts: From Theory to Practice*, “It is responsive and responsible teaching, with the teacher in a monitoring and assessing mode from the moment she begins to plan the first lesson of the year through the last lesson” (p. 153). Assessment is an integral part of reading comprehension. Only through using multiple assessment strategies, keeping record of progress, and collaboration among students, parents, and colleagues can teachers fully meet the needs of all students and provide the most beneficial literacy environment.

Conclusion

Through researching the importance of comprehension skills in reading expository text and identifying the strategies and assessments that best accomplish comprehension, it is hoped that current teachers, as well as teacher candidates, will be better informed on the issues surrounding reading comprehension. By increasing teacher knowledge in these areas, students will have more opportunities to work not only with expository texts, but also have a wider variety of activities that build their reading comprehension skills, ultimately leading to independent application of concepts. The teacher's calling is to "help students acquire and enjoy the lifelong habit of reading . . . students need this to function successfully not only in school but everywhere else: It is their right and our responsibility" (Flippo et al., 2009, p. 82). Building a strong foundation in reading is essential to success in later grade levels, and it is the duty of the field of education and its representatives to best prepare students so that they will have the greatest opportunity to succeed in life. By understanding how reading comprehension works and the strategies that improve these skills, today's educators can foster a generation of students motivated in their purpose to learn, producing better readers and writers for years to come.

References

- Anderson, C.W., & Smith, E.L. (1984). Children's preconceptions and content-area textbooks. In Duffy, G.G., Roehler, L.R., & Mason, J. (Eds.), *Comprehension instruction: Perspectives and suggestions* (pp. 187-201). New York: Longman.
- Armbruster, B.B., Lehr, F., & Osborn, J. (2003). *Put reading first: The research building blocks for teaching children to read* (2nd ed.). Jessup, MD: Partnership for Reading.
- Block, C.C., Gambrell, L.B., & Pressley, M. (Eds.). (2002). *Improving comprehension instruction: Rethinking research, theory, and classroom practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Calfee, R.C., & Perfumo, P. (1993). Student portfolio: Opportunities for a revolution in assessment. In *Reading assessment in practice: Book of readings* (19-25). Newark: International Reading Association.
- Ciborowski, J. (1992). *Textbooks and the students who can't read them*. Cambridge: Brookline Books.
- Cooper, J.D. (2000). *Literacy: Helping children construct meaning* (4th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Dymock, S. (2005). Teaching expository text structure awareness. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(2), 177-181. Retrieved September 23, 2008, from Academic Search Complete database.

- Flippo, R., Holland, D., McCarthy, M., & Swinning, E. (2009, September). Asking the right questions: How to select an informal reading inventory. *Reading Teacher*, 63(1), 79-83. Retrieved September 15, 2009, from Academic Search Complete database.
- Hoyt, L. (1999). *Revisit, reflect, retell: Strategies for improving reading comprehension*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Hoyt, L. (2002). *Make it real! Strategies for success with informational texts*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Hoyt, L., Mooney, M., & Parkes, B. (Eds.). (2003). *Exploring informational texts: From theory to practice*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Johns, J.L. (2008). *Basic reading inventory: Pre-primer through grade twelve and early literacy assessments* (10th ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- McNeil, J.D. (1987). *Reading comprehension: New directions for classroom practice*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Opitz, M.F., & Eldridge, R.G. (2004). Remembering comprehension: Delving into the mysteries of teaching reading comprehension. *Reading Teacher*, 57(8), 772-773. Retrieved September 23, 2008, from Academic Search Complete database.
- Outsen, N., & Yulga, S. (2002). *Teaching comprehension strategies all readers need*. New York: Scholastic.
- Paris, S., & Hoffman, J. (2004, November). Reading assessments in kindergarten through third grade: Findings from the center for the improvement of early reading achievement. *Elementary School Journal*, 105(2), 199-217. Retrieved September 15, 2009, from Education Research Complete database.

- Pattee, A.S. (2008). What do you know? *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children*, 6(1), 30-39. Retrieved September 23, 2008, from Academic Search Complete database.
- Pearson, P.D., & Johnson, D.D. (1978). *Teaching reading comprehension*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Roe, B.D., & Ross, E.P. (2006). *Integrating language arts through literature and thematic units*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Sampson, M. (2002, March). Confirming a k-w-l: Considering the source. *Reading Teacher*, 55(6), 528-532. Retrieved September 15, 2009, from Academic Search Complete database.
- Shanker, J.L., & Cockrum, W.A. (2009). *Locating and correcting reading difficulties* (9th ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Shuy, T., McCardle, P., & Albro, E. (2006, July). Introduction to this special issue: Reading comprehension assessment. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 10(3), 221-224. Retrieved September 15, 2009, doi:10.1207/s1532799xssr1003_1
- Tompkins, G.E. (2007). *Literacy for the 21st century: Teaching reading and writing in prekindergarten through grade 4* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River: Pearson.
- Valencia, S.W., Hiebert, E.H., & Afflerbach, P.P. (Eds.). (1994). *Authentic reading assessment: Practices and possibilities*. Newark: International Reading Association.

van den Broek, P., & Kremer, K.E. (2000). The mind in action: What it means to comprehend during reading. In Taylor, B.M., Graves, M.F., & van den Broek, P. (Eds.), *Reading for meaning: Fostering comprehension in the middle grades* (pp. 1-31). New York: Teachers College Press.