

The Trip of Learning

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Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.

By Barack Obama

As a teacher, one should not only pass on textbook knowledge to the students, but also offer one's own experiences and thoughts. A static teacher will bore the students. That's why I always want to keep learning and absorbing new knowledge to enrich my professional capacity and make my teaching full of vitality.

This year in Taiwan, Taipei has begun to teach English from the first grade, but the students still learn piecemeal knowledge without full context. They often study English with situational and oral practice. Many students have learned English for several years, but they are still afraid of using English when they have the opportunities, let alone taking the initiative to read English story books.

In order to enhance the professional and international perspective of English teachers in Taipei County, the Taipei County Government provides funds each year for English teachers to participate in international short-term education and training in states of the U.S.A, such as California and Iowa. This fall, I was very lucky to have this precious opportunity.

Since it is very difficult for students to comprehend English readings, I took the opportunity to observe how American teachers guide the students to comprehend a story. During my visit, C. Horseman, the Principal of Graze Elementary School in Los Angeles, gave us an amazing warm reception. Due to his help, we could fully observe teachers' teaching methods and strategies. We also got detailed answers and a lot of information from many teachers and personnel there. Thanks to them, I have learned a lot and acquired many reading comprehension teaching methods which can help make teaching more effective for me.





I would like now to introduce the importance of reading comprehension and six main teaching strategies. I will explain how these strategies work in my own classroom after I came back from the tour.

Comprehension is the reason for reading. If readers can read the words but do not understand what they are reading, they are not reading. As they read, good readers are both purposeful and active. They may read to find out how to use a food processor; read a guidebook to gather information about national parks; read a textbook to satisfy the requirements of a course; and read a magazine for entertainment. They also think actively as they read. Using their experiences and knowledge of the world to make sense of the text and know how to get the most out of it. They know when they have problems with understanding and how to resolve these problems as they occur.



The following six strategies appear to have a firm scientific basis for improving text comprehension.

1. Monitoring Comprehension

Students who are good at monitoring their comprehension know when they understand what they read and when they do not. They have strategies to “fix up” problems in their understanding as the problems arise. Research shows that instruction, even in the early grades, can help students become better at monitoring their comprehension.

Comprehension monitoring instruction teaches students to:

- be aware of what they do understand;
- identify what they do not understand, and
- use appropriate “fix-up” strategies to resolve problems in comprehension.

Students may use several comprehension monitoring strategies to:

- identify where the difficulty occurs;
- restate the difficult sentences or passages in their own work;
- look back through the text;
- look forward in the text for information that might help them to resolve the difficulty.



2. Using Graphic and Semantic Organizers

Graphic or organizers illustrate concepts and interrelationships among concepts in a text, using diagrams or other pictorial devices. Graphic organizers are known by different names such as maps, webs, graphs, charts, frames, or clusters. Semantic organizers are graphic organizers that look somewhat like a spider web. In a semantic organizer, lines connect a central concept to a variety of related ideas and events.

Regardless of the label, graphic organizers can help readers focus on concepts and how they are related to other concepts. Graphic organizers help students read to learn from informational text in the content areas such as science and social studies textbooks and trade books. Used with informational text, graphic organizers can help students see how concepts fit common text structures. Graphic organizers are also used with narrative text, or stories, as story maps.

Graphic organizers can:

- help students focus on text structure as they read;
- provide students with tools they can use to examine and visually represent relationships in a text; and
- help students write well-organized summaries of a text.

3. Answering Questions

Teachers have used questions to guide and monitor students' learning for a long time. Research shows that teachers' questioning strongly supports and advances students' learning from reading.

Questions appear to be effective for improving learning from reading because they:

- give students a purpose for reading;
- focus students' attention on what they are to learn;
- help students think actively as they read;
- encourage students to monitor their comprehension; and
- help students review content and relate what they have learned to what they already know.



Question-answering instruction encourages students to learn to answer questions better and, therefore, to learn more as they read. One type of question-answering instruction simply teaches students to look back in the text to find answers to questions that they cannot answer after the initial reading. Another type helps students understand question-answer relationships—the relationships between questions and where the answers to those questions are found. In this instruction, readers learn to answer questions that require an understanding of information that is:

- text explicit (stated explicitly in a single sentence)
- text implicit (implied by information presented in two or more sentences); or
- scriptal (not found in the text at all, but part of the reader's prior knowledge or experience).

4. Generating Questions

Teaching students to ask their own questions improves their active processing of text and their comprehension. By generating questions, students become aware of whether they can answer the questions and if they understand what they are reading. Students learn to ask themselves questions that require them to integrate information from different segments of text. For example, students can be taught to ask main idea questions that relate to important information in a text.

Therefore, good readers ask themselves questions about important ideas as they read. Use this strategy during and after reading to ask questions about important ideas in the story. Here's how to use the question strategy:

- ask yourself questions about important ideas in the story;
- ask yourself if you can answer these questions.
- if you can't answer the questions, reread and look for answers in the text. Thinking about what you already know and what you've read in the story may help you.



5. Recognizing Story Structure

Story structure refers to the way the contents and events of a story are organized into a plot. Students who can recognize story structures have greater appreciation, understanding, and memory for stories. In story structure instruction, students learn to identify the categories of content (setting, initiating events, internal reactions, goals, attempts, and outcomes) and how this content is organized into a plot. Often, students learn to recognize story structure through the use of story maps. Story maps, a type of graphic organizer, show the sequence of events in simple stories. Instruction in the content and organization of stories improves students' comprehension and memory of stories.

6. Summarizing

Summarizing means telling the most important parts of a story in a quick way. Use this strategy after reading to summarize what you read.

Here's how to use the summarize strategy:

- think about the character.
- think about where the story takes place (setting).
- think about the problem in the story and how the characters solve it.
- think about what happens in the beginning, middle, and end of the story.

A summary is the synthesis of the important ideas in the text. Summarizing requires students to determine what is important in what they are reading, to condense this information, and to put it into their own words. Instruction in summarizing helps students:

- identify or generate main ideas;
- connect the main or central ideas;
- eliminate redundant and unnecessary information; and
- remember what they read.





My Classroom Experience

Students can be taught to use comprehension strategies. Effective comprehension strategy instruction should be explicit. The steps of explicit instruction typically include direct explanation, teacher modeling (“thinking aloud”), guided practice, and application.

I have practiced these strategies in my class. I followed the six strategies step by step and they have worked very well. The picture book I used was *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*.

1. Monitoring comprehension

In the beginning, I asked students to find the new words and the sentences they didn’t understand. They found 10 words in total. They were “overcoat”, “fair”, “worn”, “chorus”, “necktie”, “handkerchief”, “suspender”, “fasten”, “button” and “lost.”

And the sentences they chose were “So he made a ____ out of it...” and “You can always make something out of nothing.”

One student mentioned that she didn’t understand the paragraph on page 2. Another child asked: “The text says, ‘Joseph made a button out of it...and used it to fasten his suspenders.’ I don’t understand how people can do that...Oh, the next section, Joseph lost his button. I’ll read to see how the story goes.” Another student continued: “Oh, so the author means saving things is very important to Joseph?”

After my guidance (asking them to look back through the text and look forward in the text for information), a boy said: “The author talked about making the coat into a jacket, a vest, a scarf, a tie, a ..., but I don’t remember much about the things made from the coat. Maybe if I read that chapter again, I can figure out why he can make so many different things out of the coat.”



2. Using graphic and semantic organizers

Even though *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat* is a picture book, I still used a lot of drawings on the whiteboard while I was telling the story. I made a big matrix on the whiteboard and outlined an overcoat in the first box. Then I asked students what the coat could turn to be after it is worn out. Students had many different answers, such as “blanket”, “towel” or “cleaning cloth.” I asked them to draw what it might be on the whiteboard. Then, I drew a jacket, a vest, a scarf, a tie...in sequence of the story. The graphic organizer can help students to focus on the text structure as they read and to write well-organized summaries of a text.

3. Answering questions

I designed some questions based on this book. For example:

Question 1: Did Joseph’s coat get old and worn as time went by?

(stated explicitly in a single sentence)

Question 2: What did Joseph make after the coat worn out? What did Joseph make out of the coat in the end?

(implied by information presented in two or more sentences)

Question 3: Was Joseph upset because his coat got old and worn?

(not found in the text at all, but part of the reader’s prior knowledge or experience).

After the students answered all questions about the book, they also reviewed the whole story again and had much more understanding about the story.

4. Generating questions

The students not only answered the questions, but they also had to raise questions. I divided the whole class into several groups and asked them to write down their questions on their whiteboards. The questions from the students are as follows:

“How many things can Joseph make out of the coat?”

“Why is Joseph always able to make something out of nothing?”

“What kind of person is Joseph?”

“What should I do if I want to be someone like Joseph?”

The students generated those questions after thorough discussion. Those who can raise questions and express one’s own opinions are those who fully understand the whole story.



5. Recognizing story structure

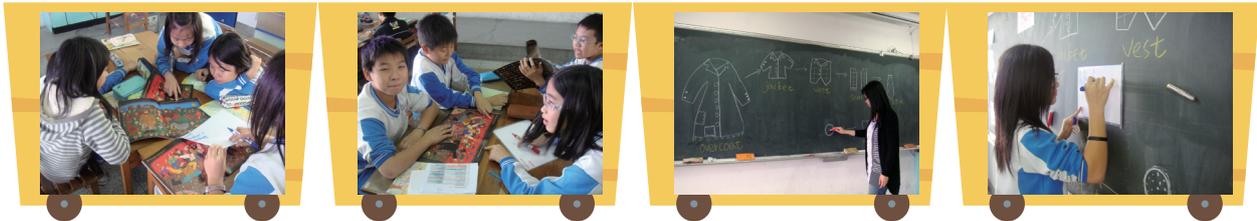
After the students read this book, I also asked them to use mind mapping to recognize the story structure. During this process, the students forgot some content (setting, initiating events, internal reactions, goals, attempts, and outcomes) and they had to reread the book. Once they finished the map, they knew how this content is organized into a plot. The students often learn to recognize story structure through the use of story maps.

6. Summarizing

One of the important missions of the group discussion is summarizing. I asked each group to think about the story and write down the important story parts. I also gave them some questions to help them to summarize the story. These questions are:

1. Who is the main character?
2. Where does the story take place (setting)?
3. What is the problem and how is it resolved?

After full discussion, each group finished the summarizing and most students remembered what they had read. They also connected the main idea to the last sentence in the story, "You can always make something out of nothing."



After experiencing these strategies, I know that comprehension strategies are not ends in themselves. They are means of helping students understand what they are reading. It's important to help your students learn to use comprehension strategies in natural learning situations, for example, as they read in the content areas. If your students are struggling to identify and remember the main points in a chapter they are reading in their social studies textbook, teach them how to write summaries. If students have read a chapter in their science textbook but are unable to answer questions about the chapter, teach them question-answering strategies. When your students find using comprehension strategies can help them learn, they are more likely to be motivated and involved actively in learning.

References

Bonnie B. Armbruster., & Jean Osborn, M. Ed. (2003). Put Reading First-The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read, (2nd), 48-56

