

Promoting Reading Comprehension in the Secondary English Classroom

Alexandria Altwies

Abstract: Reading comprehension, defined as the ability to process text and understand its meaning, has been identified as a problem among middle and high school students. Despite decades of research on reading comprehension, American adolescents' reading scores show stagnant growth. Reading comprehension is a vital part of instruction, specifically in secondary English classrooms as the texts students are asked to read become increasingly complex. According to researchers, reading strategies can play an important role in developing student comprehension. However, these strategies are often not taught because many teachers lack the foundation for teaching them. This paper will discuss frameworks, systems, and effective reading strategies that engage struggling readers in comprehending text.

Promoting Reading Comprehension in the Secondary English Classroom

Nico is the most talkative student in Miss Johnson's ninth-grade English class. He comes to class every day with something new to talk about – the basketball game he won at the park, or his favorite video game, or what happened at lunch that day. In spite of this, Nico shuts down whenever it comes time to discussing the novel currently being read in class. Nico struggles to pay attention during group reading, as his mind seems to wander to other things, so Miss Johnson decided to choose the next book especially for Nico. The book was about a high school student who becomes the star basketball player at his new school. Nico read the book aloud during group reading with no problems, stopping to comment on the main character a few times. Pleased with the choice of her book and Nico's positive response, Miss Johnson expected him to perform well on the reading check quiz for the first chapters of the book. Instead, Nico's scores reflected little to no understanding of what they had read. Miss Johnson was frustrated and did not know what next step to take. She did not believe the book to be too difficult for Nico or the rest of the class, and she knew the book interested him. So why, then, did Nico have such trouble recalling information from the text, and what could she have done differently to help better prepare Nico for his assessment?

An increasing number of Americans are falling behind in their reading skills. In 2019, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that only 32 percent of students in the United States are reading at or above a proficient level by the eighth grade—three percent lower than in 2017. When we think of struggling readers, we often imagine children who have trouble decoding letters in text and translating them into spoken language. It can be challenging for these students to decipher many words they encounter, as they have poor phonological skills. However, there are also many students who seem to read well but struggle with a variety of aspects including vocabulary, inferencing, and comprehension. Many assume that as children grow, if they are decoding text well, they are also reading well.

But in the secondary grade levels when reading comprehension becomes less about decoding and more about language comprehension and focus, teachers may observe students who are decoding text fluently but are not fully understanding what it means. Because these types of struggling readers are less obvious than those who have difficulty decoding, they can easily slip under the radar, resulting in middle and high schoolers who appear to be able to read but are unable to comprehend what they are reading.

Strong reading comprehension is one of the most valuable skills a student can learn, and despite the fact that reading comprehension is assessed in literacy classes from middle school through high school, teaching it may not be. In fact, research indicates that comprehension instruction does not occur in many classrooms past elementary school (Neufeld, 2005). As teachers, we must aid in and encourage students to actively work on improving their reading skills. Rather than focusing on individual remediation, this article centers on three strategies teachers can use with a whole class and that closely align with reading and language arts standards for middle and high school students: providing a purpose, collaborative learning, and SQ3R.

Strategies for Teaching: Providing a Purpose

There are a number of approaches to helping students organize their thinking and make the most out of reading. One strategy teachers can implement before reading even begins is to provide a purpose for reading. Reading can be made more enjoyable for students when teachers help them find a reason for reading and encourage their curiosity about a specific topic. Boardman et al. (2008) propose that when students read for a specific purpose, they are more likely to read carefully and employ strategies that will aid their comprehension. To address the extent to which combining motivation support and strategy instruction influenced reading outcomes, Guthrie et al. (2004) discuss the significance of content goals for instruction. As opposed to performance goals that measure the ability to complete a task or do well on a test, content goals emphasize conceptual understanding. Content objectives are usually given at the beginning of a text in the form of bullet points or an outline so students know what to look for when reading. In the study, when clear and concise content goals were present in reading, students' focus changed: they were less concerned about rewards or acquiring skills and concentrated more on gaining meaning, knowledge and deeper understanding (Guthrie et al., 2004). Additionally, students gained more conceptual knowledge when given content learning goals for reading than when they were given performance goals of scoring well on exams.

Strategies for Teaching: Collaborative Learning

A strategy that has been shown to increase student reading comprehension and improve overall literacy during reading is reciprocal teaching. Reciprocal teaching is a process involving four distinct activities (predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing) administered in a student-led, team approach to develop reading comprehension skills among students (Palincsar & Klenk, 1992). Through example passages, teachers must model each component of reciprocal teaching, guide students

in practice, and provide formative feedback. Once this sequence has been established, the teacher gradually releases the responsibility for predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing to the individual groups of students. The impact of reciprocal teaching can be assessed in several ways, including checklists that outline skills within each of the four activities or graphic organizers that require students to write brief responses for each role. To better understand how reciprocal teaching works in the classroom, consider this example, which focuses on *Romeo and Juliet*. First, have students read the Prologue. Based on its foreshadowing, ask students what they think the play will be about. Ask, “Will it be a happy ending, or a tragic ending?” Next, begin reading Act 1. Ask, “Who is there a feud between? Why are they fighting?” Pause throughout the act to make sure students understand what is happening, asking questions about language, characters, and conflict to clarify meaning. Upon finishing Act 1, guide students through the summarizing process and help them to identify key points. After modeling the previous steps, place students in mixed-ability small groups and have them lead the reading and discussion of the next scene while conducting the four-step process.

Another collaborative approach for improving comprehension during reading is through learning clubs. Research by Casey (2008) explored how learning clubs organized around student interests and needs can offer a sustained, supportive atmosphere to engage struggling adolescents. Similar to literature circles and book clubs, teachers facilitate the process by deciding which areas of inquiry students can select, how groups will be structured, the nature of student involvement, and the response format in which students will respond. The key difference is that the shared literacy event is not always tied to a piece of literature, thereby broadening the conceptions of reading and providing opportunities for working with various genres such as informational texts, videos, podcasts, and more. Casey (2018) analyzed the small-group literary experiences of 19 middle schoolers (six identified as struggling readers) from an inner-city school to determine if the small-group setting informed the struggling students’ literacy development. Their findings show that by placing students in control of their own work and giving them a choice, the students were more likely to think about their reading and offer their own feedback on their learning and the learning of others. Similarly, Boardman et al. (2008) agree adolescents are motivated by working together when completing reading-related tasks, and often continue working and learning even after the assignment or activity is complete. The collaborative learning of reciprocal teaching and learning clubs bolster motivation and increase the opportunity for struggling readers to respond within the group and gain increased comprehension of the text.

Strategies for Teaching: SQ3R

SQ3R is a strategy developed based on cognitive psychology research that promotes enhanced reading comprehension. Students can benefit from using SQ3R because it requires them to activate their thinking and review their understanding throughout their reading (Fisher & Frey, 2020). SQ3R is the acronym for Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review, which are the five steps that help teach students to read and think like an effective reader. It is expected that through this sequence, readers will be able to improve their understanding of the text by actively engaging in the

reading process before, during, and after. Initially, students review the text to gain initial meaning from any headings, bolded texts, and charts. Next, they will generate questions about the assigned reading from previewing it. The reading step requires students to look for answers to their questions, helping focus students' reading. As students progress through the text, they should recite or rehearse the answers to their questions and take notes for later review. Following reading, students should review the text to answer any remaining questions and recite the questions they previously answered. Just as with reciprocal teaching, SQ3R requires the teacher to model. During each step, it is important to explain what you are doing and why you are doing it. After the modeling session, invite students to independently read a selection and practice applying the five steps, as well as reflect on their notes and the process itself.

Conclusion

Pieces of literature and other forms of text are incorporated into every subject area's instruction in one way or another. Therefore, students must be able to comprehend the information and ideas being communicated to them. Reading comprehension is a vital part of instruction, specifically in secondary English classrooms as the texts students are asked to read become increasingly complex. Reading comprehension is a skill developed over time and one that will grow as the student engages with various texts for various purposes, not just in K-12 but for a lifetime. Experience and research show that there is no one strategy that works for every student but it is our job as educators to foster that growth by implementing frameworks, systems, and targeted strategies that align with student achievement when teaching reading comprehension.

References

- Boardman, A. G., Roberts, G., Vaughn, S., Wexler, J., Murray, C. S., & Kosanovich, M. (2008). Effective instruction for adolescent struggling readers: A practice brief. RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.
- Casey, H. K. (2008). Engaging the disengaged: Using learning clubs to motivate struggling adolescent readers and writers. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(4), 284–294.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2020). *Improving adolescent literacy: Content area strategies at work*. Pearson Education, Inc.
- Guthrie, J. T., Wigfield, A., Barbosa, P., Perencevich, K. C., Taboada, A., Davis, M. H., Scaffidi, N. T., & Tonks, S. (2004). Increasing reading comprehension and engagement through concept-oriented reading instruction. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 96(3), 403–423.
- Neufeld, P. (2005). Comprehension instruction in content area classes. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(4), 302–312.
- Palincsar, A. S., & Klenk, L. (1992). Fostering literacy learning in supportive contexts. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 25(4), 211–225, 229.



About the Author

Alexandria Altwies received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Media Communication from the University of Toledo in 2018. After working in marketing for two years, Alexandria returned to the University of Toledo to earn a Master of Education degree. She is now living in Columbus, Ohio and hoping to teach high school English Language Arts.