

Effective Comprehension Instruction

By

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What Does Effective Comprehension Instruction Look Like?

Thanks to a few decades of research and many excellent reading teachers, we now have a much better idea about what effective comprehension instruction looks like in the classroom. It is clear that the most effective instruction covers several critical areas. Effective comprehension instruction assists students in learning the language of books (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Teachers intuitively know the importance of reading aloud to their students. One of the most valuable aspects of reading aloud is that it shows students the ways in which written text is different from spoken language. Written text is much more formal. Written text has more complex and unknown vocabulary words and ideas. Sentences are longer and more complex. All of these things make text harder to understand than spoken language. Students need to understand the language of books. Reading aloud and explicit instruction in how text is different from speaking are ways to teach this concept.

Effective comprehension instruction builds and activates necessary background knowledge so that students gain the most from their reading



(Anderson, 1984). Sometimes texts are easy to read and understand, (e.g. a story selection written for young about someone's pet). However, students will always benefit from discussing the important ideas about a text before they read. Even discussing their own pets will help children understand a relatively easy text they are about to read on pets. Older students often require more building of background knowledge before they read.

Consider a text about going to the mountains for a camping trip. Students who have never been camping or who do not live near mountains will benefit from hearing about camping and what it means to be in the mountains.

Effective comprehension instruction builds vocabulary knowledge about important concepts and ideas in a text

(Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Sometimes special terms or vocabulary words need to be taught. Consider a second-grade selection I once read in a core reading program about a boy whose father was *laid off* from the *plant*. If teachers had not discussed the word *plant* before reading the selection, comprehension of the selection might be impaired. Think of the second-grader picturing a big, green "plant" that laid off his father. Interestingly, the second-

graders who read this selection knew what “laid off” meant, as they had parents who had been laid off from work. But, *plant* was clearly a different story for most of them.

Effective comprehension instruction teaches students a number of important strategies they can use to help them understand text on their own

(Dole, Brown, & Trathen, 1996). Students need to be taught a set of procedures, or *strategies*, that they can use on their own when they read text, especially when they encounter difficulties. Research has shown that proficient readers use a number of strategies when they read. Sometimes readers *predict* what is going to come next in a text; they *summarize* what they read, they *ask questions*, and they *visualize*, or make pictures in their minds. They constantly *monitor their comprehension*, looking out for when they do or do not understand text. Effective comprehension instruction teaches students *how* to use these strategies when they read and teaches *when* and *where* to use them.

Effective comprehension instruction shows students the differences between narrative and expository texts and helps them understand the different organizations of these texts (Duke, 2000). Students need to know the different structures of narrative and expository texts. Narratives are organized around a story structure, with characters, a setting, a problem, several attempts to solve the problem, and a solution. Expository texts are organized differently, sometimes as a description, sometimes as a sequence, sometimes as a cause and effect. Students need to learn and understand these differences early in their reading careers, so that they can use the structures to help them remember and learn from the different kinds of texts. Interestingly, these components of effective comprehension instruction appear to be necessary for all grade levels, not just for older

students. Even young children need to learn the differences between narrative and expository texts and older students need to learn the unique language of books. Thinking about these components of effective comprehension instruction will help teachers build the best reading program for their students.

Biography

Janice Dole is Associate Professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Utah. She has held positions at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Michigan State University, and the University of Denver. Her research interests include comprehension instruction, professional development, and school reform in reading. She has published widely in research and educational journals and has worked in educational reform in the Baltic states of Estonia and Lithuania. For the past ten years, Dr. Dole has served as a member of the reading development panel for the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). She also was a panel member of the recent RAND Reading Study Group. For the last few years, she has been co-evaluator of Utah’s Reading First project. Additionally, she is working on a national study examining the effects of four comprehension interventions on fifth-grade students’ reading comprehension.

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