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October 2005

RAND Summary: A Research Agenda for Improving Reading Comprehension

The RAND Reading Study Group was charged with proposing strategic guidelines for a long-term research and development program supporting the improvement of reading comprehension. Fourteen experts representing a wide range of disciplinary and methodological perspectives in the field of reading were convened to formulate the report. Funding for the research was provided under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). The report was published in 2002.

Chapter Four of the report describes what is known in each of the three specific domains of reading comprehension for future research: instruction, teacher preparation, and assessment. The complete report is available online

<http://www.rand.org/multi/achievementforall/reading/readreport.html>.

COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION

What We Already Know About Comprehension Instruction

1. Instruction that is designed to enhance reading fluency leads to fairly significant gains in word recognition and fluency, and to moderate gains in comprehension.
Repeated reading of text has been shown to improve students' word recognition ability and comprehension skills. This is especially true when texts used for instruction share common words. Studies that were examined by NRP looked at students' progress related to fluency instruction in grades K-4.
2. Instruction can be effective in providing students with a repertoire of strategies that promote comprehension monitoring and foster comprehension.
Good comprehenders use a variety of strategies to make sense of text. Some of the effective strategies noted include concept mapping, question generating, question answering, summarizing, story mapping. Students also need to be able to apply strategies effectively/appropriately when they have difficulty comprehending what they are reading.
3. The explicitness with which teachers teach comprehension strategies makes a difference in learner outcomes, especially for low-achieving students.
Explicit instruction provides a "clear explanation of the criterion task, encourages students to pay attention, activates prior knowledge, breaks the task into small steps, provides sufficient practice at every step, and incorporates teacher feedback."
4. There are a number of working hypotheses about the role of instruction in explaining and addressing the problems of poor comprehenders.
The actual strategy taught seems to have a less significant role in comprehending than how the activity engages the reader as they actively interacting with the text read. "Successful comprehension instruction for the poor comprehender is characterized by explicit modeling by the teacher, additional opportunities for practice with feedback, skillful adjustments to the learner's level, and the reader's mindful engagement with the purposes for reading."
5. The role of vocabulary instruction in enhancing comprehension is complex.
Vocabulary instruction is strongly linked to comprehension. Vocabulary instruction is complex, "confounded, as it is, by the complexity of relationships among vocabulary knowledge, conceptual and cultural knowledge, and instructional opportunities."

6. Teachers who provide comprehension strategy instruction that is deeply connected within the context of subject matter learning, such as history and science, foster comprehension development.

Strategies utilized for comprehension instruction must be closely linked with knowledge and understanding in a content area so that students learn the strategy, see it as a valuable tool, and learn to use them in new learning situations with new text.

7. Using various genres of text (i.e. narrative and informational text) diversifies instructional opportunities, as assessed by teacher and student discourse.

Students with knowledge of text structures expect texts to unfold in certain ways. Students who are aware of text structure organize the text as they read, and they recognize and retain the important information it contains.

8. Teachers who give students choices, challenging tasks, and collaborative learning structures increase their motivation to read and comprehend text.

Students that have a choice in the learning activity they are engaged in invest greater energy in learning than when the tasks are always prescribed by the teacher.

Engagement refers to a comprehension of the following: (a) the use of cognitive strategies; (b) the presence of an intrinsic motivation to read; (c) the use of background knowledge to understand text; and (d) the social interchanges in reading, such as discussing the meaning of a paragraph or the theme of a narrative.

9. Effective teachers enact a wide range of instructional practices that they use thoughtfully and dynamically.

The study discussed elements of effective instructional practice: effective management routines for increased time on task and time to teach; majority of time spent on instruction; an atmosphere of support and encouragement; and making sure students feel comfortable taking risks and feel expectations to achieve.

There was an interesting mention about the emphasis on teaching skills in isolation vs. using literature to teach reading. Although this is an on-going political battle, teachers know that they need both in an effective literacy program.

10. Despite the well-developed knowledge base supporting the value of instruction designed to enhance comprehension, comprehension instruction continues to receive inadequate time and attention in typical classroom instruction across the primary and upper elementary grades.

Teachers generally tend to spend little time teaching reading comprehension strategies. There is typically little use of expository text for teaching reading in primary classrooms, even after 4th grade, students spend the majority of time reading this type of text in school. This report found that only 16% of teachers sampled emphasized comprehension instruction in their classes.