



EVERY CHILD A READER

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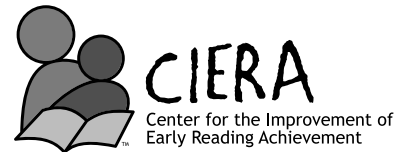


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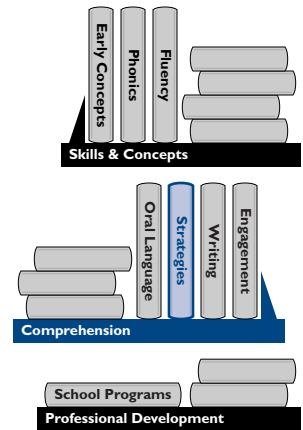


EVERY CHILD A READER

TOPIC 5

Strategic Comprehension

The basic comprehension strategies that children build out of oral language skills in kindergarten and first grade become more complex in second grade and beyond. As topics and text structures become less familiar and the goal of reading shifts from understanding familiar ideas to acquiring new information, students must develop strategies for texts that extend beyond their own knowledge base.



Jamal, a first-grader, was reading aloud from a story in which three characters sail the ocean. Jamal, who is an excellent decoder, read the first line of text smoothly and fluently: “The three friends went to sea.” However, he actually interpreted the text, “The three friends went to see.” As he proceeded to read the next sentence, “The boat began to splash,” he stopped, seemingly puzzled. He reread, this time more haltingly, “The three friends went to—oh, oh, sea—[they mean] water.” Satisfied, he continued to read the selection.¹

Comprehension monitoring (thinking about what one has read) is at the heart of successful reading for beginning readers.

As Jamal begins to read, it seems to make sense. But as he proceeds, the second sentence doesn’t fit with the first. Jamal demonstrates a strategic disposition by noticing the problem, then taking an action (rereading) that solves it. The problem stems from a misinterpretation of a word. It also could have resulted from difficulty with a letter-sound correspondence or an unfamiliar sentence structure. Knowing that the reading should make sense, Jamal takes an appropriate action to solve the problem. He is well on his way to becoming a strategic reader.

As the goal of reading shifts to learning from text, children need strategies for acquiring information from unfamiliar texts—texts for which they do not already have all of the relevant background knowledge. Comprehension monitoring is trickier with unfamiliar texts because readers must consider the possibility that they just don’t “know” enough about the ideas to clarify confusing parts. Even so, monitoring unfamiliar text requires readers to be alert to how their interpretations match with their experiences and predictions for the text.

Jamal demonstrates this kind of monitoring; even when he determines that the three friends could go somewhere to “see” something, Jamal is thinking about what he is reading. He realizes that his interpretation, while plausible, is not the appropriate one for the story context. Jamal has learned that reading is more than getting words and ideas off of the page. He has realized that

reading requires him to find a home for those ideas within his ever-growing store of concepts. Monitoring is the tool that guides readers as they search for these homes.

Accomplishments for Strategic Comprehension²

KINDERGARTEN	FIRST GRADE	SECOND GRADE	THIRD GRADE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notices when simple sentences fail to make sense • Demonstrates familiarity with different types of text (e.g., storybooks, informational texts, poems, newspapers, everyday print such as signs and labels) • Answers questions out loud • Makes predictions based upon illustrations or portions of stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-corrects when a word does not fit with the word or textual context • Notices when difficulties are encountered in understanding text • Predicts what will happen next in stories • Discusses how, why, and what-if questions for informational texts • Talks about new information from text in own words • Writes responses to questions after reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rereads sentences when meaning is not clear • Interprets information from diagrams, graphs, and charts • Recalls facts and details of text • Discusses similarities in events and characters across stories • Connects and compares information across informational texts • Asks how, why, and what-if questions about stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies specific words or word parts that are impeding comprehension • Summarizes major points from stories and informational texts • Discusses themes of texts • Asks how, why, and what-if questions with informational texts • Distinguishes cause/effect, fact/opinion, main ideas/details of informational texts • Examines hypotheses and perspectives of text

Even though both the readers' processes and the kinds of texts encountered become increasingly complex as children move through the grades, these accomplishments underscore the importance of comprehension even at the very earliest stages of reading. At the beginning of kindergarten, children's comprehension is focused on the texts that their teachers read aloud; by the time children reach third grade, they are thinking critically and responding personally to stories and informational pieces that they read on their own.

Instruction for Strategic Comprehension: Grades K–1

Strategic talk about strategic reading

In kindergarten and first grade, teachers promote a stance of “thinking while reading” through the questions they ask about books read aloud and together.

Reading Recovery³ provides a good model for strategic talk about reading. From the first day of instruction, Reading Recovery teachers use prompts such as those in the chart on page 3 to guide the children whom they are tutoring to apply fix-up strategies themselves. Whether children are in a tutoring, small group, or whole class context, teacher guidance with strategies such as these are appropriate. When the same set of strategies is used across settings, teachers find that children are referring to the strategies. As children become more familiar with the routine, they internalize the prompts, making

them part of their repertoires of strategies to use when things don't make sense.

Reading Recovery Prompts for Strategic Reading³

To encourage children's monitoring of their reading:

- "Check to see if what you read makes sense to you."

When children have made an error in their reading:

- The teacher rereads the sentence (including the error) and asks "What does that mean?" or
- "You made a mistake on that page. Can you find it?" This direction requires readers to revisit the page or sentence, rather than a single word (which happens when teachers ask children to reread words that have been misread).

When children self-correct, these responses encourage awareness of strategies:

- "I liked the way you found out what was wrong all by yourself. What did you do when your reading didn't make sense?"
- "How did you know that your reading didn't make sense?"

Experience-Text-Relationship (ETR)

ETR questions help students connect what they know to the texts they read.

ETR⁴ was developed by teachers working in low-income schools as a way to engage children in stimulating discussions about their reading. The interaction begins with an *Experience* question such as, "What can you tell us about how butterflies are born?" Then it moves to *Text* questions like, "How does the boy in this story try to help the butterflies hatch?" Finally, they use *Relationship* questions—questions that bridge experience and text—such as "What did you learn about butterflies from this story?" Teachers using ETR and similar techniques have found that children develop a good sense of how to juggle the text and their own experiences in generating answers. They also find that students begin to see that texts can be used as "evidence" to support their own conclusions about big ideas like themes and characters.

Instruction for Strategic Comprehension: Grades 2–3

A review of the research⁵ conducted over a 30-year period established three consistent features of instruction that promote comprehension: opportunity to read, explicit strategy instruction, and talk about text.

Just plain reading provides students with occasions to hone their comprehension strategies.

Exposure to lots of text, including children's independent reading and read-alouds by teachers, improves comprehension achievement, vocabulary growth, and learning English as a second language.⁶ Several independent reading structures are common in primary grades, including DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) and SSR (Sustained Silent Reading). A few simple guidelines increase children's learning from independent reading.

- Lengths of time should vary, depending on the age of children.
- A short period of time for students to exchange ideas after the silent reading period—with a peer or two, small groups, or even the whole class—increases children’s learning from independent reading.
- Books for independent reading should be easy enough for children to read rapidly and accurately while appealing to their natural interests. They have to want to read them and be able to read them. Some designation of the difficulty level of books within classroom and school libraries can be useful to guide beginning readers in choosing the right books.

Teacher-directed instruction in comprehension strategies improves children’s comprehension of new texts and topics.

Teachers support their students’ strategic reading through lessons that attend explicitly to how to think while reading. One program that illustrates such lessons is Informed Strategies for Learning (ISL)⁷ in which teachers use metaphors to stimulate discussions. For example, a colorful poster is a reminder to “Be a Reading Detective” and a stimulus to think about clues needed to discover meaning as you read. Metaphors such as this one and class discussions make the thinking strategies concrete and sensible, make children’s thinking “visible and public”, and give children vocabulary terms that can be used to discuss their own comprehension.

Several projects have provided teachers with **integrated routines** (activities that orchestrate various comprehension strategies with the texts children are reading). One of the earliest of these routines, Reciprocal Teaching,⁸ has been used successfully with students of all ages, consistently promoting better comprehension. In Reciprocal Teaching, children are taught to apply four strategies: (a) predicting before reading, (b) clarifying confusing parts of text, (c) asking questions about content during reading, and (d) summarizing key points after reading. Initially, the teacher manages the interactions but, over time, children assume responsibility for leading group discussions.

In another routine, dubbed Project SAIL⁹ (Students Achieving Independent Learning), teachers guide children in strategies similar to Reciprocal Teaching and encourage their personal and aesthetic (not just cognitive) responses to text. In a second-grade classroom discussion of “The Mitten” (a folk tale where animals of increasing size escape a winter storm in the same mitten), the teacher began by talking about fix-up strategies when reading does not make sense. Then the teacher asked the children to imagine what it would feel like to be one of the first animals in the mitten. One child connected the predicament of the characters with her personal experience: “I have a ton of stuffed animals and sometimes I pretend I’m a rabbit at night and I’m squashed by all my stuffed animals because I have about 17 of them.”

Children’s comprehension of texts and topics, as well as their repertoires of strategies, grow as a result of conversations about text.

Topic 1 of *Every Child a Reader* (Oral Language and Reading) focuses on the manner in which comprehension develops through oral discussions, such as book clubs, in which children share their responses to texts. These discussions are also the occasions for children to share strategies when a text is confusing or ambiguous and to be guided in new strategies by teachers and peers.

In Questioning the Author,¹⁰ discussions focus on queries that encourage children to grapple with their understandings of texts rather than questions that have a single, correct answer. The idea is to help students understand why authors do what they do and to give children license to be critical when they do not do it well. After this sentence was encountered in a text, “When the Polynesians settled on the Hawaiian Islands, they began to raise plants that they had brought with them,” a child, Alvis, raised this query: “Why do they need to plant things when they already brought things over?” The teacher and other students interacted with Alvis, leading to the understanding that “They could run out.”

Instruction for English Language Learners

English language learners can rely on their first language skills as bridges to understanding texts in their second language.

Instructional occasions can bridge English language learners’ existing concepts to learning to read and write English. Children who speak Spanish as their first language can build on **cognates**,¹¹ words that are similar in English and Spanish (usually because of a common Latin root). For example, the Spanish verb *escribir* (to write) is closer to the Latin root *scribere* than the English word *write*. If children are guided in connecting *escribir* with a cluster of English words that share the Latin root—*scribe*, *script*, *Scripture*, *prescribe*, *describe*, and *transcribe* (all words that denote writing)—their reading of English texts will be aided. When such knowledge is ignored, the vocabulary of English texts can seem insurmountable to English language learners.

An area of attention in English language learners’ strategic comprehension deals with interpretations of the figurative language often used in literature. Terms such as “crocodile tears” or “sweet tooth” are perplexing for many beginning readers but especially for English language learners, who may be working diligently to translate concepts literally. Discussions in which the literal and figurative meanings of the expressions are compared so that the logic of the figurative meaning is clear work well for English language learners.

Instruction for Children Who Continue to Struggle With Comprehension

With struggling readers, teachers may be tempted to postpone the advanced and independent aspects of comprehension until lower order skills and strategies, such as decoding and fluency, are fully in place. Nothing could be more damaging to the comprehension growth of struggling readers. Children who are struggling in reading can learn to use strategies such as self-questioning and summarizing. As a result, their comprehension performances improve.¹² All children, especially struggling readers, need good books to read.¹³ Some books should challenge students to think, learn new ideas, and encounter new language. Others should offer opportunities to consolidate skills and strategies

by offering material that is within their independent range. Discussions of text are even more important for struggling readers than for more facile readers. In those interactions with teachers and peers, they see comprehension at work.

**EVERY CHILD A READER:
COMPANION READINGS**

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NOTES

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