

A TEACHER DEVELOPMENT PROCESS FOR COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES
INSTRUCTION

by

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This case study examined two rural school teachers' change in instruction and understandings of comprehension strategies and instruction while participating in a teacher development process in reading comprehension strategies instruction. The teachers participated in a five-month teacher development process that included training, teacher discussion groups and videotape reflection. Based on data from a teacher explicitness rating scale and qualitative data from discussion group, training session and exit interview transcriptions, both teachers increased their instructional performance and changed their understandings about comprehension strategies and comprehension strategies instruction.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

With current pushes from state and federal agencies to see reading skills for children increase, researchers have spent a great deal of time discovering the elements of reading that can be taught and developed in young people in order for them to be successful readers. Research suggests that along with the knowledge needed to decode words, comprehension is critical to successful reading (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris 2008; Durkin, 1979; Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson 1991; Pressley, Johnson, Symons, McGoldrick, Kurite 1989). Comprehension can be described as understanding text that is read, or the end product of constructing meaning from text (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Janice, a first grade reader, is reading a nonfiction picture book about tree frogs. As she reads, she thinks about the words and what they mean in this book. After reading the title and at different points in the text, Janice thinks about some things she knows about the frogs by the pond close to her house and wonders why the tree frogs she read about are so brightly colored when the ones in her area are just brownish-green. She thinks about the question a bit further and continues reading to see if the text will have an answer to her question.

In this brief scenario, it is evident that the process of reading and making meaning is active. Janice not only read the words but thought about what she was reading. She made connections using her prior knowledge and experiences between what she read and what she knew to be true, i.e. the frogs near her home. This thinking generated a

discrepancy between what she knew about the color of the frogs and what was read, i.e. the color of the frogs. She tried to make sense of the problem, but decided that reading further might give her the information needed to clarify the discrepancy.

For good readers, the processes, or *skills*, used to help make meaning have become automatic. Like Janice, good readers do not have to consciously think about which strategies will assist them with specific reading problems, they have acquired those skills to proficiency (Afflerbach, Pearson & Paris, 2008; Dole et al., 1991; Pressley, Johnson, et al., 1989). However, for readers that struggle to understand, the skills have not become automatic. The processes, in this case reading processes, that have not been developed to proficiency and still require planning are considered *strategies*. To be able to read and understand effectively and efficiently it is important to develop strategies to the point where they become automatic. Said another way, the strategies must be developed into automatic skills. Because some readers continue to struggle with this automaticity, the teaching of comprehension skills and strategies must continue to be a focus of research.

For something to become automatic, the activity must be practiced repeatedly, correctly and thoughtfully, sometimes with the assistance of others, until it becomes habit (Afflerbach, Pearson & Paris, 2008). The processes of comprehension occur in the mind, making it more difficult to offer guidance, support and practice, because it is not easy to see what the reader is thinking. Even though this is the case, research has suggested that comprehension strategies can be taught, and when taught, can develop better processing systems that increase comprehension (Baumann, 1984; Center, Freeman, Robertson &

Outhred 1999; Gambrell & Jawitz, 1993; McCormick & Levin, 1984; Peters & Levin, 1986; Raphael & Pearson, 1985; Raphael & Wonnacott, 1985; Richgels, McGee, Lomax, Sheard 1987; Whaley, 1981). However, researchers found that teaching comprehension is complex and a time consuming process (Duffy & Roehler, 1989; El-Dinary & Schuder, 1993; Pressley, Goodchild, Fleet, & Zajchowski 1989; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994).

Comprehension Research – A Historical Accounting

Up to the early 1980's, teaching reading had centered on the development of individual skills like decoding words and word meanings (Durkin, 1979). Comprehension activities centered on the *assessment* of comprehension through worksheets or activities that involved answering questions about a reading passage (Dole et al., 1991). Those assessment activities checked for comprehension of the story but did not emphasize the *processes* that good readers used to make meaning from the text.

Starting in the mid-1980's, a growing body of research began to show the positive impact that explicit teaching of text comprehension strategies could have on the comprehension of text for readers (Anderson, 1992; Block, 1993; Brown, Pressley, VanMeter & Schuder 1996; Duffy, Roehler, & Rackliffe 1986; El-Dinary & Schuder, 1993; Greenleaf & Schoenbach, 2004; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Pressley, Johnson, et al., 1989). Examples of the strategies that were found to be effective include summarization (Armbruster, Anderson & Ostertag 1987; Rinehart et al., 1986), visualization (Center et al., 1999; Gambrell & Jawitz, 1993), prior knowledge activation (Anderson, 1981; Schustack & Anderson, 1979), question generation (Rosenhine,

Meister & Chapman, 1996), and question answering (Raphael & Pearson, 1985; Raphael & Wonnacott, 1985).

The National Reading Panel (2000) included comprehension strategies, comprehension strategies instruction and teacher development in the area of comprehension strategies, as critically important to building strong readers. The research suggested that good teaching of strategy use includes the gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student use (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Teachers demonstrate/model the usage of strategies through explanation. Teachers gradually release the responsibility of strategy usage to students by offering guidance and support while student practice the strategies. With guidance, support and practice, students begin to use the strategies automatically.

Said another way, expert teachers of comprehension strategies explain strategies in ways that students can understand. They model or demonstrate their own usage of strategies so students are able to “see” how strategies are used and applied in reading situations. Expert teachers offer students many opportunities to practice strategy use in the context of real reading situations with guidance and support. As students read text, teachers elicit student verbalization of strategy usage and offer guidance to students as they read and practice the strategies. Expert teachers continue to support their students as they use the strategies independently, carefully monitoring student progress and adjusting instruction as needed to support the continued learning of their students (Duke & Pearson, 2002; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

Difficulties Implementing Comprehension Strategies Instruction

Even though this substantial body of evidence supports text comprehension instruction, there is still a limited amount of explicit instruction available to students (Dole et al., 1991). Researchers suggest several reasons for the difficulty teachers have in implementing comprehension strategies instruction into their classrooms. First, teachers felt they needed a great deal of support to learn how to implement comprehension strategies instruction into their classroom. The teachers verbalized their need for help in the form of videotapes, live models in the classroom, coaching, conferences with colleagues, and scripted lessons, among other needs (Duffy & Roehler, 1989; El-Dinary & Schuder, 1993; Hilden & Pressley, 2007; Pressley, Goodchild, et al., 1989; Pressley & El-Dinary, 1997; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2004).

A second reason for difficulty in implementation deals with several time concerns. First, teaching and developing processes for using strategies to comprehend text takes classroom time and is, therefore, a longitudinal process (Duffy & Roehler, 1989; Pressley & El-Dinary, 1997; Taylor et al., 2004). To fully develop comprehension strategy use, readers must spend a great deal of time learning about strategies and their usage, practicing with teacher guidance and independent practice. The teacher must devote consistent time to this type of instruction if they want their students to be able to comprehend well.

The other time consideration deals with the time it takes for teachers to develop expert skills in teaching students how to use strategic processing systems. In studies of teacher development programs involving comprehension strategy instruction, time was

again a concern for researchers (Anderson, 1992; Brown et al., 1996; El-Dinary & Schuder, 1993; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994). The difficulties concerned the amount of teacher development and practice time that was needed for teachers to feel comfortable enough to implement comprehension strategies instruction into their regular classroom routines. Critical to success was ongoing training and discussion time that was available to teachers during implementation.

In all cases, first year implementers were not as successful using strategies instruction as veteran strategies instruction teachers. Veteran teachers explained that it took at least two years of training to feel comfortable with the approach (El-Dinary & Schuder, 1993). In the case of one teacher, (Brown & Coy-Ogan, 1993), it took three years to internalize the instruction approach and make changes in instruction to enhance student strategy use.

A third difficulty with the implementation of comprehension strategy instruction deals with the ability or willingness of teachers to give up control of the strategies to the students (Pressley & El-Dinary, 1997; Pressley, Johnson, et al., 1989; Taylor et al., 2004). As discussed previously, expert comprehension teachers release responsibility of strategy use (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The teacher begins instruction demonstrating their strategy usage and gradually allows student practice of strategies with teacher guidance, finally giving all responsibility of strategy use to students in order for comprehension to become automatic. This type of instruction involves incorporating supported reading time for students. However, research suggests that many teachers still use worksheet materials and activities that ask for answers that

can be found in the text and little about how comprehension works within the mind (Dole et al., 1991). It is difficult for teachers to change from traditional instructional methods of using worksheets to real reading situations. As one teacher in Duffy's (1993) research said, "I can't have 20 kids all going in different directions. I don't feel like I am doing any kind of guiding them" (p. 115). Teachers do not feel like they are in control of the instruction when students are doing their own reading.

A final difficulty with implementation of comprehension strategy instruction that all of the researchers pointed out, dealt with the knowledge that teachers had about the underlying principles of comprehension as a strategic-processing system (Duffy & Roehler, 1989; Dole et al., 1991; Pressley, Goodchild, et al., 1989). When there was a lack of knowledge about how processing occurs, it was more difficult for teachers to understand the intricacies of teaching comprehension strategies instruction.

Difficulties in comprehension strategy instruction are many. However, it is clear that good instruction will increase comprehension for students that struggle to understand what they read. It is also clear that teachers can be taught how to improve their instruction to increase their students' abilities, but this type of instruction is not being implemented in many classrooms (Dole et al, 1991). We need to continue to search for effective teacher development processes that can be implemented so students can benefit from the best instruction available. Although the body of evidence is growing in the area of teacher development, there continue to be gaps that when filled, can increase the skills of teachers.

Gaps in the Research

There are two gaps to the body of evidence this research project will address. First, there continues to be strong evidence supporting teacher development in the area of comprehension instruction. Although this is the case, there is still little guidance as to specific teacher development processes that can be implemented effectively.

Second, the research on teacher development focusing on comprehension strategies instruction has been limited to mainly large school districts involved in district-wide change projects. Many of the studies involving teacher development programs that had some level of success in implementation of comprehension strategies instruction were part of a large, district-wide project to increase reading achievement (Duffy, 1993; El-Dinary & Schuder, 1993; Pressley et al., 1991; Pressley et al., 1992). The researchers in these studies were able to use research assistants and coaches to assist them in teacher development activities, data gathering and analysis. Although some school districts are able to fund teaching assistants and/or coaches, some are not. The research that involved the addition of staff to be successful limits the amount of generalization that can occur in schools of varying sizes.

The Current Study

We know that good readers use comprehension strategies to comprehend what they read. We know that teachers can teach comprehension strategies explicitly to develop more strategic comprehension processes in readers. We know that training teachers to teach comprehension strategies takes time and a great deal of support for teachers. Most of the research on teacher development in the area of comprehension

strategies instruction focuses on large-scale reform in urban school districts with funding sources and training resources available mostly to districts of considerable size. We know that specific processes of teacher development have not been developed as of yet that can be easily implemented into smaller school districts.

The purpose of this research study is to determine the effect of one teacher development process implemented with teachers as they learn how to teach comprehension explicitly in a rural setting. This research will add detail to the body of evidence that supports the implementation of teacher development in the area of comprehension strategies instruction that has largely been ignored – rural schools. The more information we can gather about how teacher development effects teacher performance in *all* sizes of schools, the more widely the approaches can be implemented.

In the following chapter, I will review the literature on comprehension strategies, comprehension strategies instruction and teacher development processes for comprehension instruction. The review will begin with a definition of text comprehension and include descriptions of text comprehension strategies. I will review studies that support the usefulness of strategy instruction for helping readers comprehend. Next, the review will focus on instructional methods used by teachers, and tested by researchers, to increase readers' comprehension of text. Finally, the chapter will end with the description of research on teacher development programs, focusing on the implementation of strategies instruction.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review begins with definitions of text comprehension and text comprehension strategies, including examples of strategies that researchers found to be successful in helping readers understand what is read and how self-regulation theory relates to thinking and using reading comprehension strategies. The next section builds upon the definitions set forth in the first section by including teaching methods that have increased the abilities of students to use comprehension strategies.

The final sections of the literature review explain the difficulties inherent in teaching comprehension strategies and how teacher change and teacher development processes impact and assist teachers to overcome some of those difficulties. Because much of the research on teacher change and development in the area of reading comprehension instruction has been conducted mainly in large, urban schools, the concluding sections will explain the limits to the current body of evidence that exists for teacher change and development in rural school settings. The current study's purpose and guiding questions will complete this chapter.

Text Comprehension

This section of the literature review begins with definitions of text comprehension and text comprehension strategies, followed by a description of five individual strategies that were found to be successful in helping students understand their reading. The strategies are summarization, representational imagery (or visualization), story grammar/structures, prior knowledge activation and question generation.

Although there are many definitions of comprehension that appear in the literature in this review comprehension is defined as, “acquiring meaning from written text through processes that are directed by the coordinated and flexible use of several different kinds of strategies,” (NICHHD, 2000, Chapter 4, p. 47). In this definition, text includes a range of material from textbooks, to novels, to technology devices that involve text. The definition also includes the active processes involved in making meaning.

Text Comprehension Strategies

Researchers spent much of the 1970's, 1980's, and 1990's learning about comprehension strategies and how they can be taught to increase comprehension. Strategies are thought of as the conscious, deliberate plans readers use to understand what they are reading (Dole et al., 1991; Duffy, 2003). For example, making predictions about future happenings in the text, generating questions while reading, and developing mental pictures of the story in the mind are strategies that good readers use when constructing meaning. Good readers are flexible with their use of strategies, and their strategy use changes depending on the problems they encounter as they read. In other words, good readers use strategies in a variety of ways to solve different reading problems or situations.

When researchers began studying comprehension, they started by discovering what good readers did as they constructed meaning (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). They found that good readers were actively engaged in meaning making through the use of various strategies from the time they began looking for a book until after they had finished reading it. As Harvey and Goudvis (2007) put it, “Meaning doesn't arrive fully