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Reading Comprehension Strategies

by Dr. David W. Moore

IF YOU ASK PROFICIENT READERS how they make sense of print, you might get replies such as:

- “Sometimes I make movies in my mind. I use my imagination to make what I’m reading come to life.”
- “I figure out what the author doesn’t just come right out and say. This way I can get what’s happening behind the scene.”
- “When I need to learn what I’m reading about, I take notes.”
- “How is this like what I already know? That’s the question I ask when I want to stay really focused on what I’m reading.”

As these statements suggest, proficient readers use their minds actively to build meaning. They read purposefully and selectively. Whether they are reading for pleasure, to acquire new knowledge, or to perform a task, proficient readers use strategies to achieve their goals (Kintsch, 1998; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995).

In high school, adolescents might be reading short stories like “Amigo Brothers” or lengthier nonfiction like *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman*. To get a head start in understanding such works, proficient readers preview the text then approach it with an appropriate mindset. They continually connect what they already know with what they are reading. When all is going well, these youths’ mental

processes are functioning skillfully and automatically, with little conscious attention.

Robust Reading Strategies: The Big 7

When proficient readers get confused or off track, they realize this right away then consciously shift mental gears and apply appropriate strategies. They might identify the source of the confusion, reread it, and then explain it to themselves. They might knowingly make connections to fill in what the author leaves unsaid. And they might record important ideas and information, form sensory images, or ask themselves questions. Adolescent readers benefit from robust, general strategies that can be applied to a range of situations (Alexander & Jetton, 2000).

Along with having a repertoire of general strategies, proficient readers know how to adjust these strategies according to the particular texts and tasks at hand. For instance, readers continually make inferences to comprehend texts, but the specific types of inference vary (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). When reading imaginative fiction, readers make inferences to interpret characters’ motivations; when reading scientific exposition, readers make inferences to link technical details.

Edge presents seven general strategies known to promote adolescents’ reading comprehension. The strategies are ones that proficient readers use regularly and across a wide variety of texts:

“Low-achieving adolescent readers improve their comprehension performance when they learn to apply strategies.”

- **Plan and Monitor:** controlling one’s mental activities; it is metacognitive in nature, centering about readers’ awareness and control of their comprehension. When engaged with this strategy, youth are taught planning skills—how to preview texts and how to set a purpose for reading and make predictions. They are also taught how to clarify ideas by using fix-up strategies and how to clarify vocabulary by using context clues and other word-level fix-up strategies.
- **Determine Importance:** identifying essential ideas and information. This is the ability to separate the wheat from the chaff in text. Youth are taught how to identify stated and implied main ideas, how to summarize texts, and how to note the personal relevance of ideas and information.
- **Ask Questions:** interrogating texts for a variety of purposes, such as checking one’s understanding, querying the author about his or her writing, and discerning relationships among ideas and information within a text
- **Make Inferences:** linking parts of texts that authors did not link explicitly. Using what one already knows to form links across sentences and paragraphs. Often known as “reading between the lines.”
- **Make Connections:** using what is known to enrich authors’ meanings; taking what has been learned from one’s own life experiences, other texts, and cultural and global matters to deepen understandings of what the author presents. Otherwise known as “reading beyond the lines.”
- **Synthesize:** putting together ideas from multiple sources; deciding how ideas go together in a way that is new; figuring out how what one is reading and learning fits together in a way not thought of before. Youth are taught how to draw conclusions, form generalizations, and make comparisons across texts.
- **Visualize:** forming sensory and emotional images of textual contents, especially visual images. This strategy also includes an aspect specifically for teens who don’t consider themselves to be readers: the strategy of recognizing that one is having an emotional response while reading and to identify what the author did to invoke that response.

This set of seven is based on the reading comprehension strategy research that has been reviewed at length since the early 1990s (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams & Baker, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992) and especially the research that

embraces adolescents (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Alvermann, Fitzgerald, & Simpson, 2006). There is striking agreement that low-achieving adolescent readers improve their comprehension performance when they learn to apply strategies. This improvement has been demonstrated among adolescent native English speakers as well as adolescent English language learners who struggle with reading (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

Best Practices for Teaching Strategic Reading

The International Reading Association’s Commission on Adolescent Literacy stated succinctly, “Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed” (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 3). Getting readers off to a good start certainly is crucial in the early grades, but ongoing instruction in the later grades is necessary for maintaining and, in many cases, accelerating readers’ growth. Comprehension strategies are vital components of adolescent literacy instruction. The comprehension strategy instruction in *Edge* was designed with the following principles and practices in mind.

1. Direct, Explicit Instruction

Effective comprehension strategy instruction for adolescents includes direct, explicit teaching (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Such instruction calls for teachers to scaffold students’ learning by guiding them to a particular strategy then openly and plainly describing it. Teachers model, or demonstrate, the strategy—frequently thinking through the process aloud—to show it in action.

On every Before Reading page in *Edge*, the “how to” of each reading strategy is explicitly modeled, using the actual text to be read. Strategy questions during and after reading provide additional scaffolds, allowing teachers to gradually release responsibility for the use of the strategy to students, so that they can make it their own.

2. Show, Don’t Tell

An important part of direct, explicit instruction calls for teachers to demonstrate and explain why particular strategies are useful as well as how and when to use them (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

In *Edge*, every strategy has explicit step-by-step explanations of how to perform the strategy. The explanations are tailored to fit youths’ funds of

general knowledge and facility with everyday strategic thinking. In every instance the explanatory steps contain model responses so youth actually see an example of what is being emphasized; no step is merely mentioned.

3. Connect Reading to Students' Lives and Their Out-of-School Literacies

We know that youth come to school with substantial funds of everyday knowledge acquired from their families, communities, peers, and popular culture (Moje, et al., 2004). In effective secondary schools, teachers regularly form webs of connections between this knowledge and the lesson being taught (Langer, 2002). Teachers overtly point out these connections and invite students to make their own.

Every strategy introduction in *Edge* (“How to Read Short Stories”, for example) begins with an inductive learning experience, in which students are able to connect the skills and processes involved in the reading strategy to something they already know how to do in their everyday lives. “Connect Reading to Your Life” shows students who may have negative opinions about their abilities as readers that they really do have valuable cognitive abilities that they can bring to bear on texts.

4. Focused Instruction

Focusing comprehension strategy instruction—one strategy at a time—guards against overwhelming students (Nokes & Dole, 2004).

A noteworthy feature of *Edge* is its focus on a single reading strategy in each unit. Throughout each unit students have multiple, varied opportunities to develop expertise with a particular strategy.

5. Promote Transfer Across Genres

A time-honored finding among researchers is that the characteristics of various genres present readers varying challenges (Jetton & Alexander, 2004; Moore, Readence, & Rickelman, 1983; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Strategies for reading fiction in an English/language arts class do not travel well to reading algebra in a mathematics class.

In *Edge* students meet recurring commentaries on one particular strategy along with multiple opportunities to perform it with different genres and passages. Every main reading selection in *Edge* is paired with a secondary, or adjunct, selection with which the targeted reading strategy is also taught.

This pairing helps students understand, for example, that the way that they relate main ideas and details in expository nonfiction is both similar and different than the way that they do it with poetry. Explicitly teaching how the same reading strategy works across genres helps students truly own the strategy and apply it independently to whatever reading they do in the future.

6. Encourage Cognitive Collaboration

Bringing students together to work through comprehension tasks is another effective practice (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001). Youth team with others, mixing perspectives and insights to solve problems. They converse in the form of a dialogue, with speakers responding to what one another said. Thinking is aloud/allowed. Among other things, youth think and talk about the ways they apply comprehension strategies to particular texts.

Edge intersperses prompts throughout the reading selections for students to voice their applications of the targeted reading strategy. This scaffold provides a forum for publicly exploring what was just presented, for demystifying ways to comprehend texts.

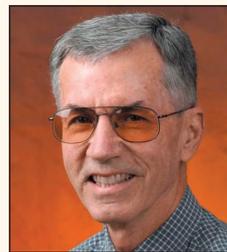
Additionally, each literature cluster and unit in *Edge* ends with opportunities for learners to jointly review and refine their applications of the strategy. This practice positions students as members of a learning community, a place where they can interact and improve their understandings of comprehension strategies.

Conclusion

The reading comprehension strategy instruction found in *Edge* provides adolescents rich and meaningful opportunities to take control of their reading. It shows youth that reading proficiently is not a matter of being innately smart but, in part, a matter of applying appropriate strategies. ❖

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