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Reading Comprehension Strategies for Content Learning

By: Colorín Colorado (2007)

Explicit teaching of reading comprehension skills will help students apply these strategies to all subject matter. Examples of comprehension skills that can be taught and applied to all reading situations include:

- Summarizing
- Sequencing
- Inferencing
- Comparing and contrasting
- Drawing conclusions
- Self-questioning
- Problem-solving
- Relating background knowledge
- Distinguishing between fact and opinion
- Finding the main idea, important facts, and supporting details

These skills are particularly important for comprehending what is generally known as information reading or expository reading.

Why reading comprehension skills are particularly important for ELLs

English language learners (ELLs) often have problems mastering science, math, or social studies concepts because they cannot comprehend the textbooks for these subjects. ELLs at all levels of English proficiency, and literacy, will benefit from explicit instruction of comprehension skills along with other skills. Here is a way of thinking about the support your ELLs will need:

	Phonemic awareness, basic decoding skills	Vocabulary development	Comprehension strategies and skills
Beginning ELL	✓	✓	✓
Intermediate ELL	Some sounds that are different from their primary language	✓	✓
Advanced ELL		✓	✓
Mainstreamed		✓	✓

ELL students will still need a lot of vocabulary development and teaching of comprehension strategies even if they:

- have been mainstreamed after some bilingual instruction;
- are being pulled out for English as a Second Language or Sheltered English instruction; and/or
- have been assessed as English proficient but you know that they still need additional help with language, reading, and writing.

Classroom strategies: Steps for explicitly teaching comprehension skills

The following steps are useful for all students. However, these need to be complemented with the additional steps below to ensure comprehension for ELLs.

- Introduce the comprehension strategy or skill (see above list) through examples. Discuss how, when, where, and why the strategy or skills are used. For example: contrast main idea with details, fact with opinion, good summaries with poor summaries.
- Have students volunteer additional examples to contrast and discuss.
- Label, define, model, and explain the strategy or skill. For example, after listing four facts about a healthy diet and four opinions about what is good to eat, label one list as facts and the other list as opinions.
- Give students opportunities to practice using the strategy with a peer as they apply it to a short, simple paragraph from a science text or any expository text.
- Debrief with the whole class to ask students to share how they applied the strategy or skill.

Additional steps for ELLs

- Identify vocabulary words that you think might be difficult for students to understand when they

read the text. Write ELL-friendly definitions for each - that is, simple, brief definitions ELLs can easily understand.

- Model think-alouds. For example: verbalize a confusing point or show how you use a strategy to comprehend something. "This sounds very confusing to me. I better read this sentence again."
- Demonstrate fix-up strategies. For example: I need to think about this. Let me rethink what was happening. Maybe I'll reread this. I'll read ahead for a moment.
- Partner ELLs with more dominant English speakers and ask each student to take a turn reading and thinking aloud with short passages.
- After working with partners successfully, ask ELLs to practice independently by using a checklist such as the following. Be sure to explain all the terms and model each.

While I was reading, how did I do?

Skill I used	Not very much	A little bit	Much of the time	All of the time
Blending				
Chunking				
Finding meaning of new word				
Making mind movies as I read				
Rereading				
Reading ahead				

- Celebrate each ELLs' progress with recognition notes, praise, and/or class applause.

For advanced ELLs

When students' English proficiency and basic reading skills have increased, you can teach the following steps not just to ELLs, but to all students – because everyone will benefit.

- In pairs, have students survey the text and use an idea map to record the main idea and details.
- Ask partners to read the text.
- Have partners restate the main idea and supporting details. At this point, they can add to their idea map or make necessary corrections.
- Then ask students to reread the text and either develop their own questions (pretending to prepare a test for their partner) or write a short summary of what they just read.
- After that, have partners check each other's work.
- Finally, partners can share their questions or summaries with other teams.

Other ideas

For building ELL comprehension

Teach students how to use these tools for informational or expository reading:

- Titles
- Headings
- Bold print
- Captions
- Side bars
- Maps
- Graphs
- Pictures
- Bullets

Ask students to use the following strategies to summarize (orally or in writing):

- Retell what you read, but keep it short.
- Include only important information.
- Leave out less important details.
- Use key words from the text.

Questioning ELLs after reading

After the ELLs and/or whole class have completed the reading comprehension activities above, you can anchor or test their comprehension with carefully crafted questions, taking care to use simple sentences and key vocabulary from the text they just read.

These questions can be at the:

- Literal level (Why do the leaves turn red and yellow in the fall?)
- Interpretive level (Why do you think it needs water?)
- Applied level (How much water are you going to give it? Why?)

References

References

Click the "References" link above to hide these references.

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