

Some questions to consider when Supporting teachers' comprehension instruction

With what definition of comprehension is the teacher operating?

Is he/she providing an appropriate balance of instruction between surface and deep structure instruction - word learning and comprehension?

Is he/she utilizing the key instructional strategies - thinking aloud, modeling, demonstration, conferring and sharing?

Is comprehension strategy instruction focused on a few strategies, taught over a long period of time, in a variety of texts?

Is the classroom environment conducive to in-depth study of comprehension strategies and books?

Do students have adequate opportunity to read independently in text that is challenging?

Do teachers focus some of their conferences on the comprehension strategy being taught?

Do students use a variety of means to share their thinking, their use of comprehension strategies?

Do teachers convene small groups to focus further on comprehension strategies?

Do teachers include instruction on expository text structures and hurdles several times a year?

Does the teacher emphasize that strategies are useful only when they help the reader comprehend more deeply?

The Subtleties of Instruction: What Matters Most? Content

Observe:

Appropriately balanced ongoing instruction on all six language systems and the strategies that enhance them - ensuring proper proportion of instruction in surface and deep structure systems

Short, focused **phonics** instruction, no more than 15 minutes a day in primary grades as needed by students - Using literature and other interesting texts, instruction emphasizes word play, phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, spelling patterns, decoding strategies - application of grapho-phonetic system is assessed through children's original writing and in their decoding of words in literature and other interesting texts - phonics instruction is fast, active, focused

Materials -- songs, nursery rhymes, familiar lyrics, letters to manipulate, sentence strips and pocket charts, predictable books, big books, children's original writing, poetry, short texts that are read repeatedly - texts used should be at the child's instructional or independent level

Ongoing emphasis on **visual word recognition** - collecting words, creating and using word walls, abundant environmental print, learning and using word analysis strategies such as affixes, root words, compound words - using texts they read to point out known words, using recognized words in original writing

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Abundant opportunities to express understandings across the curriculum through oral language - the teacher may use turn and talk, book clubs and other activities that allow students to express themselves in conversation - teachers should emphasize examples and non-examples of correct **syntax** - at the word, sentence and whole text level - teachers who help children understand the underlying structures of text including text elements and text structures - students who study texts they read for evidence of syntax, use increasingly sophisticated syntax in original writing and in spoken interactions with others

Materials - children's original writing, short text with increasing elaboration of sentences and varying text structures, transcripts of speeches and children's oral language

Teaching children to **understand and remember the meanings of new words** by increasing the amount of time children spend reading and speaking - emphasizing children's understanding of a wide variety of associations with words - new words taught explicitly come from content area study and students' interests - teachers use very sophisticated vocabulary, defining words briefly as they use them in instruction and informal interactions with children - Children collect words that fascinate them and interact with others about a wide range of possible meanings and uses in writing - students study features of words and speculate about uses for them in writing - students study authors' word usage and speculate about purposes and effects of word choice

Materials - books that are of great interest and some challenge to children - may be instructional level or more difficult -- transcripts of speeches and quotes are displayed and discussed - teachers reinforce use of increasingly sophisticated vocabulary in writing and spoken language

Teachers emphasize **connections between the new and the known** - teachers ask children to recall and discuss or write about familiar concepts and experiences that are related to content being taught or read about - teachers provide explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, usually one at a time and ask students to use them independently in their reading - teachers model and think aloud several times a week, demonstrating their own use of comprehension strategies and emphasize the importance of understanding how comprehension strategies help readers understand more deeply - children apply comprehension strategies in a wide variety of texts and teach peers to use the strategies to enhance understanding

Materials - books representing a wide variety of genres and levels of difficulty, texts that represent content topics and areas of passionate interest for children -

Teachers create regular and interesting ways for students to **interact with others** about text and their writing in order to understand more deeply - teachers model oral, written, artistic and dramatic means for children to respond to literature, make their thinking about text public and teach other children what they have learned -- Children participate in book clubs, writing in literature response logs and other means to deepen understanding of texts and newly learned concepts - teachers emphasize using these strategies in order to remember and reapply newly learned concepts

Regular instruction in text structures - poetry, narrative and expository

Teachers use a wide variety of texts including poetry, narrative and expository - Teachers show students examples of different text structures in each genre category (poetry, narrative, expository) and explicitly teach text elements in fiction (character, setting, conflict, sequence of events - plot structure and resolution) and text structures in expository text (compare/contrast, chronological, descriptive, enumerative, problem/solution, cause/effect); Teachers point out particular hurdles students are likely to face in each genre category - students are taught specific vocabulary relating to these hurdles so they can tackle them independently -- students scrutinize texts searching for text elements and structures using transparency text technique or text lifting
Students teach each other what they have learned about text structures and hurdles -Teachers revisit text structure conversations every eight to ten weeks for short reviews

Connecting comprehension strategy instruction across the curriculum

Students speculate about ways in which learners and scholars in other disciplines think more effectively using comprehension strategies - teachers purposefully use comprehension strategy language throughout the day and in a variety of disciplines

Focus on the characteristics of a variety of genres and levels of text

Children are engaged in the study of a genre at any given time - they focus on qualities and characteristics of the genre and direct original writing to that genre -- the school faculty plans for specific grades to address particular genres so that children have had in-depth exposure to a wide variety of genres before they leave the school

Teachers understand that, when identifying an appropriate text level, they must consider multiple factors for each child including word reading level, interests and passions, variety in genres and text lengths, and especially ensuring that the child is engaged in text that is challenging with respect to the ideas and concepts presented even if the child cannot read all the words - this can be accomplished through read alouds and/or experiences in which a child reads challenging text independently after it has been read aloud several times to the class or in a small group instructional setting

Instruction in the rituals, routines and processes of a classroom community - achieving a balance between rigor and intimacy in the classroom

Recognizing the distinction between an attractive environment and an authentic learning environment

Teachers are vigilant about the type of **classroom environment** they create - it is conducive to in-depth study and increasing independence for students - there is a rug for a large group meeting area, desks are grouped to permit student interaction, cordoned areas for small group meetings and book clubs, cozy areas for students to read and write independently, materials are well organized, labeled and easily accessible to all, low shelves with books categorized by the children, clear evidence of ritual around literacy learning, charts hanging around the room on which recent learnings and children's thinking has been recorded, evidence of children's work and public records of their thinking as well as photographs of the children, quotes from authors including the children and anecdotal evidence of their learning throughout the room

Students are apprentices to readers and writers - they study more proficient models, immerse themselves in a reader's and writer's life in the classroom - they learn the mores of those living in a literate community and work hard to follow them, they learn to accept challenges and struggle for insight - they learn to interact with others in an environment rich in literary references and artifacts

Instruction

*Ask teachers about and
Observe:*

A large and growing number of minutes each day devoted to independent reading and independent writing - these are times (no shorter than 30 minutes) when students work independently to apply what they have learned in large and/or small group settings

Balance between large, small group and individual instruction - the art of using instruction time judiciously

Teachers have a long and short term plan that encompasses deep and surface structure goals (teaching intentions) - they use **large and small group venues** to introduce and provide more in-depth follow up instruction on each of the deep and surface structure intentions

Most deep structure intentions are introduced in a large group setting using excellent literature, poetry and expository text - more in-depth instruction is provided in small groups and/or individual conferences

Some surface structure intentions are introduced in large group, but only when there is evidence that all children need the skill; many surface structure intentions are introduced in small groups (invitational groups) to students that have demonstrated a need for the skill
Follow up instruction is provided in individual conferences

Teachers have time to **confer with individual children every day** - they use independent reading time to circulate and observe children and to familiarize themselves with individual students' application of recently taught strategies and skills

Understanding the degree to which surface and deep structure strategies are taught differently based on the needs of different children

Teachers have a wide variety of teaching tactics to introduce and **provide more focused instruction as needed** - they use a range of formal and informal assessment strategies to identify children's needs and show a facility in matching teaching strategies to children's needs -- topics on which only a few children need instruction are only introduced to small groups - groups are not fixed, they are dynamic and focused on a particular learning need - they disband after that need has been addressed and the children have shown evidence of understanding

Daily emphasis on thinking aloud/modeling in reading, writing, speaking and listening

Teachers use **modeling and thinking aloud daily** - he or she presents him/herself as a learner, bringing books he/she is reading to class, describing challenges he/she faces as reader and writer - the teacher is effusive in describing a love of language, books, writing, oral communication, motivation is developed intrinsically rather than extrinsically, students are praised for tackling tough writing topics or choosing challenging books - there is an emphasis in the classroom on

Daily opportunities to confer with individuals

The teacher creates time **every day**, while students are reading and writing independently, to **confer** with individuals - these conferences are in-depth, focused opportunities for needs-based instruction based on the deep structure intention on which the class is currently working and/or surface structure intentions recently taught in a small group - rather than just providing an opportunity to chat about the books children are reading and the topics on which they are writing, teachers regard conferring as **the most central element in their plan to meet the individual learning needs for each student** - Teachers keep careful records of topics discussed during each conference and note specific charges teacher and student have agreed upon when the conference ends

Creating artifacts (including charts and student products) that represent thinking and learning

Teachers and students work together to create a wide variety of representations of their thinking - these artifacts can be in **written, oral, artistic or dramatic form**, but are designed by students to reflect their application of surface and deep structure learning - teachers are vigilant to ensure that these products don't become repetitive or formulaic - there is no evidence in the classroom of worksheet type exercises, except for test preparation - emphasis is placed on the representation of children's thought rather than strict reporting of facts

Precision in language when speaking with children

Teachers have clarity with respect to teaching intentions and do not "talk around" the intention - **they choose words carefully for the greatest effect** - they moderate their voices to reveal moments of greatest import, they emphasize and try to use precise and aesthetically pleasing language - in large group instruction, teachers use more formal and elegant language - there is a sense of the significance of what is being taught to the children's lives

Assessment

Observe:

A repertoire of assessment strategies that examine thinking as well as products and behavior

Teachers capitalize on a **wide range of assessment strategies** - they use formal and informal, summative and formative methods to assess students' application of deep and surface structure intentions recently taught - students are frequently asked to assess the quality of their work according to rubrics they design

The difference between assessing understanding of a given piece of text and . . .
assessing the thinking strategies that make comprehension possible

Teachers understand the difference between assessing understanding of a given piece of text or sample of student writing and application of a deep or surface structure intention recently taught - both are important, but the latter is emphasized - teachers scrutinize students' writing and products related to their reading for **evidence of increasing independent, flexible and adaptive use of surface and deep structure strategies recently taught** - students are responsible for pointing out, in their own books and writing, how and when they applied deep and surface structure strategies and skills recently learned

The degree to which students can describe how and why use of a comprehension strategy helps him/her understand more completely

Teachers understand that students must be meta-cognitive in order to retain and reapply what they learn - they must be aware of their thinking and learning and should be asked to **articulate their thinking and describe how being aware of their thinking helped them understand more deeply**

There are a variety of ways to assess thinking - they include written, oral, artistic and dramatic means

Teachers understand that written, oral, artistic and dramatic representations of strategies and skills recently taught provide **the most effective and immediate assessment of students' thinking** - they regard these products not only as a means to make student learning more visible but as a key opportunity to assess students' understanding and application of skills and strategies most recently taught

Appropriate responses to accountability pressure

Teachers understand that students who think well test well - they ensure that students are adequately prepared for high-stakes assessments in the **two to three weeks prior to the test** for approximately 15 minutes each day for each subject area tested - they emphasize test format, they introduce tests as a new genre, they point out terminology differences between the test and every day conversations in class - they do not revert to meaningless, context-free drilling on skills in the mistaken hope that such practices will lead to improved test scores

Keene, 2008