W. Dorsey Hammond Answers Common Questions on Reading Comprehension

These questions and answers are as relevant now as when they were published more than 35 years ago in the January 1986 edition of *Learning* magazine on pages 96-98.

We're worried more about non readers and nonthinkers these days. That's why the venerable idea of reading comprehension has returned to the limelight. In recent years, reading for meaning has gotten lost at times in the mishmash of reading systems and testing for specific skills and subskills.

But the latest thinking and research has produced new teaching strategies and reinforced some of the old ones. Professor W. Dorsey Hammond shares his insights on these techniques with you here. And he offers practical advice you can use in your classroom to help your students understand what they read.

I've been hearing a lot about new research on prior knowledge. Can I apply the research in my classroom?

Yes, you can. Young students have a great deal of prior knowledge and experience to bring to their reading, but they aren't always able to make the connections. You can help them.

Let's say your fourth graders are going to read an article on sea turtles. A standard approach might be to tell them what they'll be reading about and then assign it. Instead, begin by asking: *What do you children know about sea turtles?* As they tell what they know, you can guide their thinking by asking selected questions: *How large do you think sea turtles are? Do they have lungs or gills? What do they eat? How are the young born?* and so on.

As the children tell what they know and speculate on possible answers to your questions, they're recalling their experiences. After the discussion, children can't wait to read to find answers and check their knowledge. You have given them reasons for reading.

You can find lots of other ways of getting students to use their background knowledge if you check good reading methodology textbooks. P. David Pearson and Dale D. Johnson's *Teaching Reading Comprehension* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978) and Russell G . Stauffer's *Teaching Reading As a Thinking Process* (Harper and Row, 1969) are good ones to start with.

Some students In my class have had very limited experiences. What can I do when they don't have much meaningful prior knowledge to work with?

First, be aware of two kinds of experiences. One is subject specific; the other, general. Both are important for comprehension.

For example, a child may have very limited knowledge about building the first transcontinental railroad, but he probably knows something about building things. He knows there must have been a reason for building the railroad; that someone had to finance it; and that workers needed supplies such as rails, ties, food, and shelter. Question and probe to raise awareness of both general and specific prior knowledge.

Working with children in groups can also help those with limited experiences. Collectively, they'll know a great deal. The one child who knows about sea turtles, for example, will enhance the knowledge of classmates who don't.

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One specific strategy to use for students with limited background knowledge about a topic is categorization through a prediction guide. Let's assume your fifth graders are about to read a chapter on the Revolutionary War. When they're finished, you want them to know the advantages and disadvantages of each side. You can help them read with a purpose by setting up a prediction guide like the following. Before they read, ask them to put checks in the appropriate columns and give reasons for their selection.

REVOLUTIONARY WAR ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES		
	U.S.	Great Britain
Best generals		
Better trained soldiers		
Long way from home		
Very little money to support the war		
Best navy		
Lots of sick soldiers		

The other hot research topic is metacognition. How can I apply that?

Metacognition is taking place when children are aware of the strategies they're using in their own learning and thinking. According to the research, children read and understand more when they have this awareness.

Talk to students about how they used a story's early ideas to anticipate what was going to happen later. Ask them how they constructed hypotheses about what they were reading and how they used their own prior knowledge. And ask them how they solved problems through reading.

Another way to develop students' metacognitive skills is to talk with them about the techniques the writer used to affect their thinking. Ask them such questions as:

- *What were you thinking when you read this part of the story?*
- *What made you change your mind?*
- *What words did the author use to make you feel that way?*
- *What did you learn from this story?*

Talk to them about what they do when something doesn't make sense or when they come to a word they don't know.

Sometimes I think I spend too much time on vocabulary dills getting my students ready to read. How important is word meaning to reading comprehension?

Basal reader programs commonly introduce vocabulary prior to reading. But this practice is questionable. Many of the words taught before students read are either unnecessary for understanding the story or are defined in the text. Besides, knowing vocabulary doesn't guarantee comprehension. A child may know the meanings of every word in a story and still not comprehend the story. Conversely, the child may understand what's happening in a story without knowing what all the words mean. Remember the scene in Peter Rabbit when Peter is caught in the gooseberry net? Mr. McGregor is coming to capture Peter, the sparrows are flying around, and Beatrix Potter writes of the sparrows: "They implored Peter to exert himself. " Few 5- and 6-ycar-olds know the definition of *implored* or *exert*, and yet they understand that the sparrows want Peter to try harder to escape.

Or look at this example: “Imagine a line of a thousand camels, one after the other, crossing the desert with silk, salt, and tea: Such caravans. ... ” The text has defined the word.

If you review vocabulary after students read, they’ll have the context of the story to help them learn new words, and they’ll see how they can learn words on their own. You’ll be able to decide which words to teach and which the text has already taught.

What should I do about students who stumble over words? How can they comprehend when they can’t even recognize the words?

As with vocabulary, don’t concentrate on word recognition at the expense of comprehension. If young students are too uptight about not knowing a word, they tend to become “word bound.” When they come to a word they don’t know, they don’t want to go on. Encourage your students to read on and try to make sense of it. Reading for meaning will itself help them recognize words.

By reading ahead and going back, your students will learn words through context—probably many more than if you give drills on isolated words. They’ll begin to act like mature, natural readers.

However, if some students are having difficulty with many words in a selection, have them follow along as you read the first page to them, then discuss the meaning and have them reread on their own.

I’m a first-grade teacher. Shouldn’t I be more concerned about decoding than about comprehension?

No. Too many young children see reading merely as sounding out words. This habit-forming phenomenon is a product of our curriculum—particularly of those programs that overemphasize phonics. We shouldn’t be surprised that our students develop comprehension problems as they move through the grades. Certainly decoding instruction is important, but decoding makes sense only in the context of comprehension. As children read for meaning in first grade, the decoding process becomes easier.

Recently, one of my colleagues overheard her first-grade granddaughter reading to her younger sister. The young reader paused and said, “Hey, wait a minute, that doesn’t make sense.” And then she went back and reread until she was satisfied that it did make sense. Primary-grade students are perfectly capable of reading for meaning, so comprehension instruction should begin in kindergarten the first day of school and continue right through the primary grades.

Begin by reading stories to kindergartners and asking them to think about and predict what will happen next in the story. Have students “read” wordless picture books and construct a story about what’s happening. Talk about stories that you’ve read and have students role-play and act out their favorites. Write experience stories with children. As they begin in kindergarten and first grade to read, remind children to “make it make sense" rather than always saying “sound it out. ”

With only slight modification, comprehension strategies used in the intermediate through high-school grades can—and should—be used in first and second grades as well.

Many of the questions I ask my students when they're reading don't seem to accomplish anything. How can I ask better questions?

One kind of question tests comprehension. Another guides the reading-thinking process. Here are four basic rules for asking good questions:

- Ask questions about what you are going to read, as I've already mentioned. This enhances higher-level thinking.
- Ask important questions. For example, if the text says, "The Packers had just lost their sixth football game in a row. Louis Williams, the quarterback....," don't ask: *What was the name of the team?* Instead ask: *What was the Packers' problem?* With this question, you identify a significant point—the initial story problem.
- Avoid diversionary questions. In the middle of reading a story, don't ask: *What would you do in this situation?* or *Have you ever had this problem?* Though many teacher's editions of basal readers include such questions, they usually just distract from interest in the story. Good questions keep the focus on the story and develop a reason for wanting to read on.
- Ask questions that encourage students to use what they've already read. For example: *What do we already know about..., based on what we've read so far? What might happen? What makes you think so?*

I'm unsure about what to do after my students read a story. They don't seem to learn much from writing answers to the textbook questions.

Have an oral discussion. Writing answers to questions about stories usually inhibits students' thinking. Good literature will provide ideas and raise issues that children will want to write about later. You can use oral discussion as a way to develop comprehension and as a prewriting activity. Read, reflect, talk, and then write.

I have more and more students who just don't seem interested in reading. How can I get them started?

You can arouse interest by asking children questions about what they're going to read. Prediction is a powerful motivator. In fiction, ask: *What's this story going to be about? What's going to happen next? How is this or that character going to solve the problem?*

For example, in Bernard Waber's *Ira Sleeps Over*, lra has to decide whether to take his teddy bear along when he sleeps at his friend Reggie's house. Ira's sister teases him and says Reggie will laugh at him. But Ira's afraid of being without his teddy bear. He asks himself, "Should I take him?" At this point, you can ask the children: *Will he take the bear? And if he does, what will happen?* Once they've predicted, the children will be much more eager to find out.

Almost all fiction has problems to be solved or decisions to be made. As your students involve themselves in "what will happen next," their interest increases. Resist diverting your students' attention in the middle of reading by asking *What would you have done?* You can do this later if you want.

For nonfiction, you can arouse interest by asking students what they already know about a topic and then posing questions that get them to predict about what they don't know. For example, in the fifth-grade social studies unit on building the first transcontinental railroad, ask students to volunteer what they already know. Then have them speculate about when the railroad was built, where it went, who built it, what kind of problems they encountered, and so on. Any reasonable answers are acceptable.

As your students begin to speculate and hear different ideas from their classmates, they'll get interested. Then they'll read because they want to find out. Any strategy that uses predicting or hypothesizing generates interest.

I want to teach comprehension as you've described, but my students are tested on isolated subskills. How can I manage to teach for both purposes? I'm already overloaded.

Discussing stories and informational articles and asking effective questions will prepare your students for those subskill tests. The comprehension subskills that reading specialists talk about usually include identifying main idea, theme, supporting details, and causes and effects; sequencing; drawing conclusions; predicting outcomes; recognizing mood or tone, and summarizing. But teaching these subskills in isolated exercises is unlikely to significantly affect comprehension.

When you ask: *What's going to happen next in our story?* or *Will Jill get her sunglasses?* the students are predicting outcomes. When you ask: *Why do you think so?* you're asking students to use details to support their predictions. When you ask why a character decides on a certain course of action, you're probably getting the student to think about cause-effect relationships. When you ask: *What did you read that makes you think... ?* you may be asking the students to draw a conclusion. When you ask students to tell briefly what they just read, you're asking them to summarize.

When you ask students what a fictional story's about, you're asking them to identify the theme. When you ask a similar question about a nonfiction passage or article, you're asking about the main idea. In effect, when you discuss stories or articles with your students and ask questions that get them thinking about what they've read, you're addressing subskills in a meaningful and natural way.

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