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ABSTRACT

Children need to learn early that reading can give them new ideas and change old ideas. Pupils are all too often evaluated in terms of their ability to express what they know rather than what they think. Thoughtful reading can be done from the very beginning of reading instruction. Effective questioning practices will develop this ability. The ability to know what the author says is generally referred to as the literal level of comprehension. This level tends to be overemphasized because literal comprehension is fundamental and can be more clearly defined and taught. Determining what the author means is often referred to as the inferential level of comprehension. Comprehension at this level requires the students to read between the lines, analyzing and interpreting the information presented. Evaluative reading means that an interaction between the author and the reader takes place; the reader makes a personal judgment about what the author says or means, not only analyzing and synthesizing the information but also evaluating it in terms of its quality, value, accuracy, and truthfulness. Creative reading overlaps with critical reading in that it also implies application and internalization of the written message, rearranging the ideas into new thoughts and ideas. (WR)

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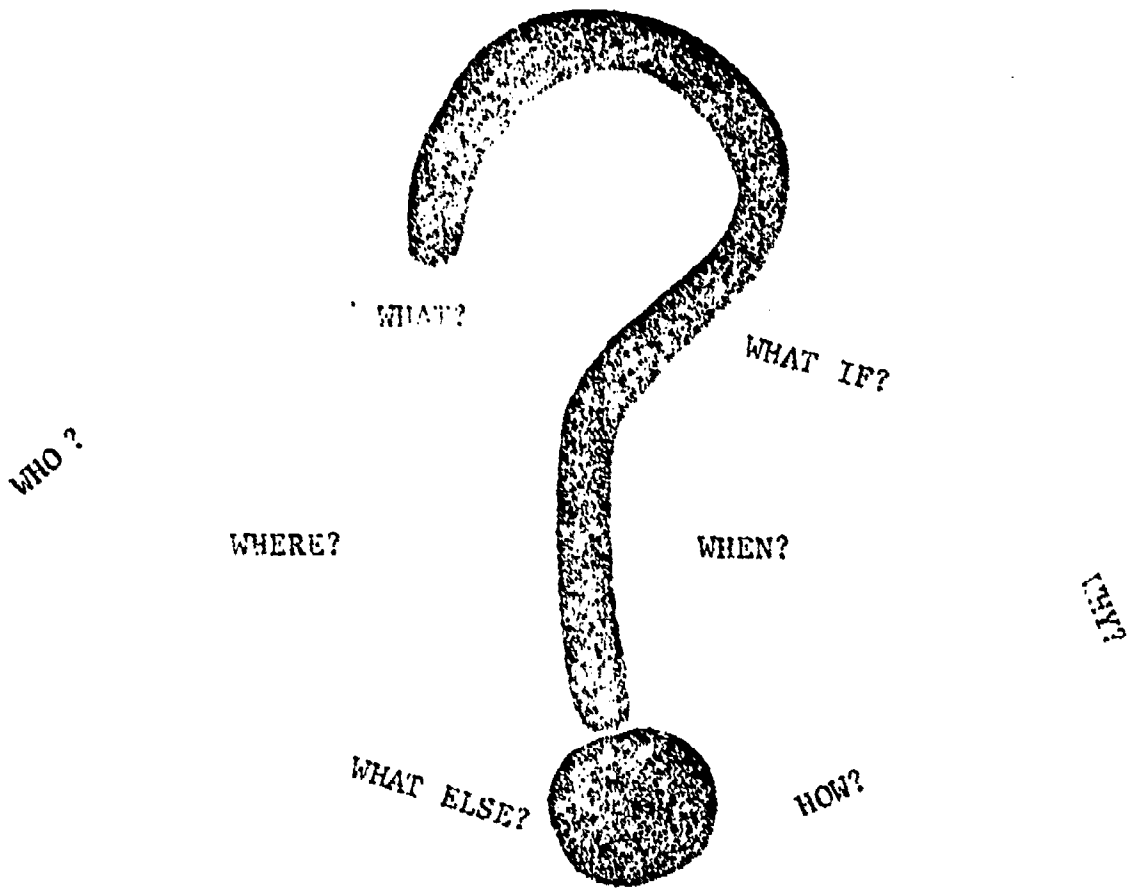
Department of Instruction
Instructional Services Section

BEYOND LITERAL COMPREHENSION



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Reading comprehension is generally defined as the ability to derive meaning from the printed word. It is a complex process, affected by several interdependent variables, such as thinking skills, background experiences, intelligence, and language skills, as well as the physical well-being of the reader and the difficulty of the material.

Because of this complexity, the literature and research on comprehension is confused. Presently, it is discussed primarily in terms of the mental processes involved. Numerous classification systems, using different terminology, have been devised. Although at this time most reading authorities do not agree on any one classification system or set of terminology, they do generally agree that a student needs to develop at least three levels of comprehension abilities. He must be able to determine what the author says, and he must be able to determine what the author means. In addition, he should be able to react, both evaluatively and creatively, to what he has read.

These general abilities are more global than the comprehension skills which fall under them. The skills listed under one ability designate examples of learning activities that contribute to the achievement of that ability. For example, recall of details is a skill that helps develop ability to determine what the author says, while grasping cause and effect relationships develops ability to determine what the author means.

Many linguists are beginning to focus on reading instruction although they do not yet agree on any method of incorporating principles of linguistics into the reading program. The future will certainly bring forth new definitions of how thought processes operate on specific features of language.

Asking the student questions about what he has read is the primary instructional technique used by teachers in developing comprehension. Little research of any value, however, has been done in the area of questioning strategies, question sequence, and the use of follow-up questions. Until more research is done in relation to how language skills affect comprehension development and the way in which specific questioning procedures promote reading growth, teachers must provide instruction with the most logical and reasonable methods available.

Undoubtedly, the questions asked should have an impact on learning. Although teachers do not usually notice the type of questions they ask, the type of question does determine the level of thought in which the pupil will engage. Unfortunately, a high percentage of the questions provided in teachers' guides and student texts are factual in nature. Recent studies related to teachers' questioning practices indicate that approximately 60 percent of the questions require recall of fact, while only 20 percent require the student to think. (The other 20 percent are generally related to procedures.) Certainly, the need exists to provide a better balance in the type of questions asked about a reading selection.

Justification: In society today the citizen is constantly bombarded by attempts to mold public opinion, be it from advertisement, high pressure salesmanship, newspaper editorials, politics, or the increasing volume of printed material. If he has not become accustomed to do much thinking about what he reads, he tends to accept it. On the other hand, if he has learned to read with care, he knows that not everything is true simply because someone says it is. The mature reader questions, compares, generalizes, draws inferences and conclusions, interacts the ideas with ones previously held, and interjects original ideas.

In real life situations, the reader is generally not interested in committing to memory minute facts; rather, he is more interested in gaining broad understandings of the material or in learning about something in which he has an interest or feels a need. In order for the student to become an intelligent citizen and mature reader, he must learn how to apply various thinking processes when reading. Trivial fact questions may well cause the student to miss broad understandings and concepts. The student must learn to draw out significant meanings and to express what he thinks, rather than to simply parrot back what the text says.

In essence, the major goal of instruction in comprehension should be to help the student grow in ability to think about what he has read and to react to it. Every comprehension lesson should, therefore, include questions that require the student to go beyond determining what the author says.

In order to help the teacher provide a better balance in comprehension development, let us consider in greater depth each of the levels of comprehension and the types of questions that would seem to be most effective.

What does the author say? The ability to know what the author says is generally referred to as the literal level of comprehension. It involves the task of "reading the lines"; i.e., locating and/or recalling the information explicitly stated in the selection. It further involves the ability to state in the reader's own words an accurate reconstruction of that information. The difficulty of literal comprehension varies according to the nature of the item called for and its prominence in the text.

This level tends to be overemphasized because literal comprehension is fundamental and can be more clearly defined and taught. Since they do not require much mental activity on the part of the teacher or pupil, these questions are relatively easy to ask. To elicit what the author says, ask questions about the selection which have only one correct answer, similar to the following: "Who...?" "What..?" "When...?" "Where...?" "Is...?" "How many ...?" "Did ...?" "What happened after...?" "What was the story about?"

What does the author mean? Determining what the author means (often termed the interpretive or inferential level) requires that the students "read between the lines," analyzing and interpreting the information presented. Although the answers are not explicitly stated in the text, they can be supported by it. They are dependent upon reader interpretation and, hence, often have more than one correct answer. Among the skills involved are discovering relationships among the facts or ideas stated, interpreting figurative language, perceiving implication, drawing conclusions, finding subtle meanings, predicting outcomes based on the evidence available, and sensing the author's mood and purpose.

Since more thought is stimulated, presenting these questions for group discussion is an effective technique. A relaxed classroom atmosphere in which each student feels free to express his opinion and to be heard is best.

Rather than have the student read part or all of the story before asking questions, the teacher can ask the student to read the title and perhaps look at the pictures and then to tell what he thinks the story might be about. After reading a portion of the story, the student can compare his original answer to what he thinks at that point. Rather than asking the factual question, "How did the story end?" the teacher can stimulate thought before the conclusion is read by asking, "How do you think the story might end and why?" After reading, the student can be asked to tell if and how his ending differed from that of the author.

Other examples of questions which prod the student into determining what the author means are as follows:

"What is the author trying to tell us about?"

"What kind of a person do you think _____was?" "What words led you to that answer?"

"In what season of the year might this story have taken place?" "Why?"

"How do you know that...?"

"In what way does ...?"

"Prove that...?"

In other words, questions that require the reader to explain, elaborate, describe, relate, compare, or contrast any information not directly stated in the text can be used to develop ability to interpret what the author is trying to say.

To begin to develop this ability the teacher might find it useful to initially make an inference himself and let the student justify it in the text. Next, the pupil himself can make an inference; finally, the student can be encouraged to both make the inference and to automatically justify it.

<u>What is my reaction?</u> Reacting to what has been read involves "going beyond the lines." Reaction is a highly personal process which can take place only after the facts have been ascertained and the deeper meanings interpreted. Reaction may be evaluative (also termed critical) or creative.

EVALUATIVE READING means that an interaction between the author and the reader takes place; the reader makes a personal judgment about what the author says or means on the basis of his own experiences, beliefs, likes, or dislikes. In other words, the reader not only analyzes and synthesizes the information but also evaluates it in terms of its quality, value, accuracy, and truthfulness.

The best technique for teaching evaluative reading is, again, centered around discussion. Usually a group of from five to eight students brings the best interaction. Since there are very often no precise answers, the teacher must be receptive to various viewpoints.

In addition to judging the author's competence, other skills which help develop this ability are distinguishing between fact and opinion, reality and fantasy, objective writing and biased writing, and logical generalizations and unwarranted generalizations.

Questions of the following nature might be used:

"Does this account seem accurate?"

"Did the author sufficiently support his premise?"

"Could this really happen?"

"Do you agree with the author?"

"In your opinion, ...?"

"Would you ...?"

"Should you believe the author?"

"Did the ending seem appropriate?"

Special activities might include debating controversial issues, comparing biographies or similar stories, detecting "loaded words" in advertisements, noting biased statements in editorials, etc.

CREATIVE READING overlaps with critical reading in that it also implies application and internalization of the written message, but in this case the reader makes some original or unusual use of what he has read. In other words, he rearranges the ideas into new thoughts and ideas.

Examples of questions which can be used to stimulate creative reaction are as follows:

"What possible problems could you have if ...?" "How many solutions to each problem can you offer?"

"What do you think of when ...?"

"How many ways can you think of to ....?"

"How would _____ feel (taste, smell, sound)?"

Activities might include dramatic oral interpretation, pantomiming, dramatizing, role playing, puppetry, or arts and crafts. They might also include writing a different ending, a parallel story, a play, a poem, or a song.

Additional considerations. Material for any comprehension activity must be written in understandable language and sentence patterns. If every pupil is given material written at his instructional level and of interest to him, the teacher need not limit higher level questions to any particular age or ability level. Thought-provoking questions can and should be asked of every student. A young child who reacts to a story by saying, "Oh, that couldn't really happen," is reading evaluatively.

In the primary grades, skillful questioning and class discussion are the primary means for developing ability to determine what the author means and ability to react to the selection. In the higher grades, more work can be done to encourage students themselves to accept responsibility for careful reading. Newspapers, magazine articles, advertisements, and excerpts from speeches are useful tools with which to work. It is important that once thought-provoking questions are asked, the student be allowed time to think before answering. Too often teachers either repeat the question or supply the answer before the student has a chance to think. Logical answers given for open-ended questions should be followed by receptiveness and praise on the part of the teacher.

It should also be noted that students differ in their mastery of different types of comprehension skills and should be instructed in the skills in which they are deficient. Since skills have different emphases in different content areas, they should be studied as the need arises.

Setting purposes prior to reading, whether determined by teacher or pupil, seem appropriate since purposes direct the reader's attention to specific aspects of the selection.

The types of questions discussed above are not the only alternatives to questions supplied in teacher's manuals. Two other strategies that encourage going beyond the literal level are the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity advocated by Stauffer and the Reflective Reading-Thinking Activity incorporated into the Junior Great Books program.

Summary. Children need to learn early that reading can give them new ideas and change old ideas. Pupils are all too often evaluated in terms of their ability to express what they know rather than what they think. Thoughtful reading can be done from the very beginning of reading instruction. Effective questioning practices will help to develop this ability.

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