

Targeted Intervention Strategies and Their Impact on Below Level Readers Comprehension

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Introduction

Elementary aged students learn countless strategies and concepts throughout their schooling. Students learn how to add and subtract, history, the states of matter, and arguably the most important, which is how to read independently. Even in early elementary, students are expected to be able to read a passage or story and comprehend what they read. For many students this is a skill that comes easy and are able to adapt to harder questions as they get older. However, for students who are below grade level, comprehending stories and passages becomes increasingly difficult. There are many factors that hinder a students' ability to adequately comprehend passages, but implementing a variety of strategies can greatly change the students' course. Comprehension is important for students because it exposes them to really think deep about what they are reading. Not only are they learning from what they are reading, but they are also diving into the text and analyzing different aspects of it. As Roberts, Norman, and Cocco (2015) state, "a focus on children's comprehension...is warranted for other reasons beyond, and arguably more important than, test scores (pg. 390)

What is comprehension

Reading comprehension is a skill students learn at every age. They read a passage, book, or even a sentence and then are asked to answer questions about it. How they answer determines if they were able to comprehend what they read and adequately form a response. According to Qian and Liping (2016), "Current research...views reading comprehension as the activity of reconstructing a reasonable spoken message from written symbols to a form of language, which the person can understand" (1175). The readers should produce a clear understanding of patterns like question-answer, problem-solution, claim-counterclaim, and general-specific when reading (Qian & Liping, 2016, 1178). Mrs. Tingelhoff, a third grade teacher, mentions a few

comprehension strategies she uses in her classroom, “We teach them to use checking for understanding what they read through visualizing, making connections to selves/world/other texts, finding the main idea, summarizing, and asking questions. We also focus on genre and author's purpose and what they tell us about each story...like headings and captions and fiction texts have characters and plot” (personal communication, January 3, 2017). Many of these strategies continue as students go through schooling, and will only become more difficult as students age. Reading comprehension is a crucial skill students need not only as a student, but also a skill needed in higher education and careers.

Importance of differentiation

Differentiating students by their reading ability allows teachers to better meet the needs of their students. Teachers are able to focus on the specific needs that each reading ability group has. When asked about the importance of differentiation, Mrs. Tingelhoff, responded, “It allows me to teach to their specific academic needs and strengths. I can adjust the pace of lessons and skills for different groups to allow for more time if needed for one group and keep moving on to more varied skills for other groups (personal communication, January 3, 2017). By differentiation students among their abilities and reading levels teachers are able to reach each student. They can plan activities that relate to their skill level. They can challenge students who might learn things at a faster pace than others. They can intervene for students who need more support. Braker (2013), found that by implementing intervention for below level students, reading comprehension scores were higher (pg. 32). Differentiating students by their reading levels impacts their comprehension abilities as well. For students who are well below their grade level there are intervention strategies that can be done to bring up comprehension skills.

Vocabulary as an intervention strategy

During reading, students will come across a variety of words they may not immediately recognize or know the definitions too. This hinders their comprehension immensely, because since the students do not know the word, they will not be able to comprehend its importance in the passage they are reading. Researchers found that, “In order for students to understand a text independently they need to comprehend about 95% of the words” (Braker, 2013, pg. 31).

Vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial factor in a students’ reading comprehension abilities.

According to Braker (2013), “the more words a learner knows, the more likely it is that he or she will have a greater depth of knowledge for these words” (pg. 30). Furthermore, “Keith Stanovich (1986) found that kids who have a solid word base get ahead faster and achieve more in school, while students with a less developed vocabulary tend to progress more slowly (Overturf, Montgomery, & Smith, 2013, pg. 8). Implementing a variety of vocabulary strategies will help students better understand what they are reading and will be able to answer questions about the text.

By implementing a variety of vocabulary strategies students’ comprehension scores will increase because they will better understand the words they may have once skimmed over. By providing direct vocabulary instruction students are guided into the knowledge of a certain word (Baker, 2013, pg. 32). Teachers should incorporate vocabulary into their daily reading lessons in a variety of ways to reach their learners. “A child is much more likely to remember a word after experiencing it in a memorable context rather than memorizing a list of words and definitions” (Baker, 2013, pg. 32). By adding pictures or background knowledge to the vocabulary words, students are better able to comprehend what it means. Teachers can also expose students to synonyms or antonyms of a word, using it in a sentence and pointing out letter patterns. Additionally, “Carlo et al., found that vocabulary instruction that focused in teaching academic

words made students aware of the polysemy (various word meanings), provided students with strategies for inferring word meaning, and gave students tools for analyzing spelling and cross linguistic aspects of word meaning” (Baker, 2013, pg. 34). Teachers can also reward students for implementing vocabulary words into their everyday conversation. Mrs. Tingelhoff mentions that her students get a “snap” from her when she hears them using vocabulary words in writing and conversation (personal communication, January 3, 2017). Even a simple motivation tool can aid students in understanding the vocabulary words and their meanings.

Another vocabulary strategy also correlates with the comprehension strategy of graphic organizers. Using graphic organizers to organize new vocabulary words can help students develop their understanding of a vocabulary words. For example, in the book *Word Nerds: Teaching All Students to Learn and Love Vocabulary*, the author introduces readers to a modified Frayer model graphic organizer. This organizer has students write the word in the middle surrounded by seven boxes where students are able to think about the word in several different ways (Overturf et al., 2013, pg. 41). The students write a definition, synonyms and antonyms, draw a picture, and use the word in a sentence. This helps students use their own background knowledge and make their own connections to a new word, the synonym and antonym sections helps them connect the new word to words they already understand (Overturf et al., 2013, pg. 13).

Vocabulary plays a huge role in a student’s comprehension abilities. “there is a solid body of intervention evidence indicating that instruction on vocabulary strategy use is very likely to promote higher levels of comprehension skills (Braker, 2013, pg. 31). Teachers should implement a variety of vocabulary strategies so students are getting more exposure to words and their meanings (Pang, 2013, pg. 54).

Phonics as a strategy

Many students who are below reading level struggle with English phonics and grammar (Pang, 2013, pg. 52). Decoding words can be a struggle for students who are below grade level because they lack the skills needed to do so. If students are not able to read a word correctly, or just guess, they will not be able to understand the meaning of the word. According to Pang (2013), many students struggle with English phonics and grammar because they do not understand the correct phonic English knowledge, which directly impacts their reading comprehension (pg. 52). Adding phonics as a strategy can dramatically increase students' knowledge of vocabulary words, which in turn raises their comprehension abilities. Pang (2013) also states, "teachers should adjust their teaching strategies to practice basic phonics and master the meaning of vocabulary and oral proficiency first. These basic skills help with reading fluency, which is believed to impact reading comprehension" (pg. 53). Simply going over the sounds that letters or groups of letters make can have a lasting impression on below level readers. Mrs. Tingelhoff also adds phonics to her everyday routing, "I have added Spalding Phonograms to help my students with decoding strategies and spelling words" (personal communication, January 3, 2017). By giving students the necessary phonics skills, they will be able to read more difficult words, understand them, and raise their comprehension abilities.

Graphic organizers as an intervention strategy

Graphic organizers are tools that enhance the understanding of material that is given to students. "They are useful instructional tools because they can help activate prior learning, as well as help students make better connections to the text, which stimulates better recall of material (Jefferson, Grant, & Sander, 2017, 101). Graphic organizers are very versatile and can be adapted to any lesson or activity for students. "Graphic organizers have been widely used by

teachers to help students organize and summarize content, classify facts, and analyze and compare contents they read” (Pang, 2013, pg. 54). Graphic organizers can help students who are below reading level comprehend the content of their reading by, “classifying facts, analyzing problems, summarizing main points, and criticizing or evaluating the decisions made by authors (Pang, 2013, pg. 54). Using graphic organizers when reading a story helps students organize their thinking and include different aspects of a story to help them retain more information. They can use a graphic organizer to label parts of a story (characters, setting, problem, solution, etc.), write down vocabulary words, or predictions, among others. According to McKee, and Carr, (2016), “We found it helpful to provide opportunities for our students to draw or write their understandings of the informational text read on a graphic organizer (pg. 362). Teachers can use a graphic organizer with their students to check for understanding throughout the story and use it as a summarizing tool after reading.

Rereads as an intervention strategy

Another important strategy for below leveled readers is rereading. Some students may only read through a passage or story one time and be able to comprehend what they read. However, for below leveled readers, reading though only once does not allow them to understand as much. Students should read through the text aloud at least once or twice with a teacher so they are able to decode more difficult words, and interact with the vocabulary. By reading the text chorally with the teacher, the students are able to gain confidence as well (Jones, Conradi, & Amendum (2016), According to, Jefferson, Grant, & Sander, (2017), another instructional strategy to facilitate reading comprehension is repeated reading. This method is defined as the practice of requiring a student to read the same text numerous times during a single reading session, typically orally (pg. 112). Therefore, after reading the text with the teacher, students

should be instructed to read the text a few more times to fully understand and comprehend it. Jefferson et al., (2017), states that another benefit of repeated readings is it allows students to read without interruption (because they are able to learn the words they may have skipped over before), which helps them focus more on the meaning of the text (pg. 102). By allowing students to read through the text numerous times they will not only gain confidence, but also a deeper understanding of the text which goes hand in hand with their comprehension abilities.

Poetry as an intervention strategy

Using poetry in the classroom is a standard many teachers have to teach to their students. However, poetry can also be an intervention strategy used with below level readers. Many teachers focus on the basal series for their main source of reading curriculum, which is great for whole and small group instruction. However, the basal series focuses too much on higher level thinking, the stories can be long, and can often be boring (Wilfong, 2015, pg. 41). Mrs. Connors, a third grade teacher in Ohio who has below level students in her classroom, states “I am all about complex text, but the length of the stories makes most of them give up before we even get started. And really, these students need to be working to develop their fluency and word recognition skills, along with their comprehension strategies” (Wilfong, 2015, pg. 41). Using poetry allows students to focus on shorter passages, look for word and sound patterns, and develop their word recognition and fluency. Finding short passages that focus on a vowel sound or ending sound can do wonders for below level readers. They will be able to understand the pattern of the poem and be able to read at a faster rate. Teachers can also implement the reread strategy so students are more able to comprehend the poems they read as well. After implementing poetry into her intervention time with her below level readers, Mrs. Connors states, “Given the fact that they had previously been making minimal progress, and now were

making substantial progress over a three-month period, it is clear that the poetry work must have had an impact” (Wilfong, 2015, pg. 46) The students involved in the poetry intervention showed improvement in phonics, fluency, word recognition, and comprehension (Wilfong, 2015, pg. 46). Implementing poetry into the classroom can have a lasting impact on below level students and their attitudes towards reading and their comprehension skills.

Conclusion

Implementing a variety of comprehension strategies can be intimidating. There are a numerous strategies and ideas to choose from, and teachers have to mindful of which strategies would be most beneficial to the students. However, as the research shows, implementing even one or two of the strategies mentions can do wonders for below level readers and their ability to comprehend stories. Not only will it increase the students’ comprehension abilities, these strategies will broaden their vocabulary, increase their rate of fluency, and ultimately help students gain pleasure and confidence in reading.

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