Using Writing to Develop Reading Comprehension with Beginning Readers*

Instructional emphasis on comprehension skills is essential while beginning readers are developing reading proficiency. Writing is one of the effective tools to foster the development of comprehension. The National Commission on Writing (2004) states, “Students are to make knowledge their own; they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, make new observations and directly understand concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, students must write.”

Writing also provides a vehicle on the level of a student’s understanding of text, or the student and the teacher can figure out what’s missing or misunderstood. A large-scale review of research found that reading comprehension, writing comprehension, and writing led Graham and Hilbert (2010) to make three recommendations: Have students write about the text they read. Teach students the writing skills and processes that go into creating text. And, increase how much students write. We’ll explore the first suggestion. But first, some background knowledge!

The Role of Background Knowledge

The Simple View of Reading (RC = D x BK) tells us that Reading Comprehension (RC) is the product of Decoding (D) and Language Comprehension (LC). Research also indicates that the higher the level of background knowledge, the better.

To show the importance of background knowledge (BK), we’re going to examine it using the Expanded View of Reading graph (opposite), representing background knowledge with a box. The arrows signal that BK and RC share a reciprocity—background knowledge is needed to understand text and reading adds to background knowledge.

Text Types Emerging Readers Listen to and Read

For beginning readers, comprehension can be developed using text students can read themselves and text students listen to. According to Graham and Hebert (2010), text students listen to:

1. Give listening students greater opportunities to check for understanding.
2. Shows the changing characteristics of text students read during the early stages of learning to read.

Three activities are well-suited for beginning readers: Writing notes about text, writing sentence summaries about text, and writing answers about text. Let’s look more closely at these.

Writing Activities to Develop Comprehension for Emerging Readers

Emerging readers are all around for beginning readers. Writing notes about text, writing summaries about text, and writing answers about text. Let’s look more closely at writing notes using an activity we call Knowledge Trees.

According to Graham and Hilbert (2010), note takers don’t merely record information, they process and organize it in make connections, and blend in new knowledge with prior ideas to gain new understanding. Young readers can build Knowledge Trees by first reading or listening to an informational selection, then writing (or scribbling the teacher scribbles) information from the selection onto slips of paper. Next, teachers help students sort the information, putting the topic on the trunk, main categories on the branches, and details on the leaves. As the children read or listen to more informational text on the same topic, they continue to fill out their Knowledge Trees by incorporating new information. As they grow, so does their understanding of the topic.

References

• National Commission on Writing (2004). Writing and school reform. Available at www.collegeboard.com

From Eberhardt and Compton’s forthcoming book, Comprehension: Knowledge to Practice, in the Literacy How Professional Learning Series.