

Shanahan on Literacy

Information for teachers and parents on teaching and assessing reading, writing, and literacy.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 19, 2016

Teaching Reading Comprehension and Comprehension Strategies

Teacher question: *In terms of teaching comprehension to grade 3-5 students, what is the best way to help the readers transfer the strategies they are taught so they can be independent, self-regulated readers?*

Shanahan's response: If you want to teach reading comprehension strategies to on-grade level students between the ages of 8-10, we have a pretty good idea of how to do that successfully. The teaching of strategies is a good focus as well, given the large amount of research showing that strategy instruction can be beneficial.

However, before we get to strategies, I'd like to take a couple of (what I hope will be useful) detours. For example, lots of times kids in the upper elementary grades are struggling readers. Research suggests that the vast majority of those kids will require additional phonics. I might only be willing to invest a small amount of instructional time in phonics with on-level readers during these grade levels, but if I don't with the strugglers, they're screwed. For those kids, a focus on reading strategies is okay, too, but only in the context of those kids getting the instructional support they need (obviously if they can't read the words easily, they won't have the cognitive space to focus on text meaning).

What else do we need to worry about with kids in this age range? I would invest in fluency instruction—having kids reading and rereading relatively difficult texts aloud to make them sound like English. Many schemes for doing this have students answer some questions at the end of each reading, and I think that's a reasonably good idea. Either way, that kind of fluency practice can have a big impact on reading comprehension.

I would also invest a lot of time in vocabulary learning. The research is pretty clear that we can teach high value words effectively enough to improve comprehension and the same can be said for teaching morphology (the meanings of the roots and combining forms, suffixes, and prefixes). Build up kids' knowledge of word meanings and you'll usually improve their comprehension.

The same can be said for some other aspects of language. Teaching kids how sentences work; activities like sentence combining and sentence reducing can help kids work out sentence meaning. And, teaching kids how to recognize and make use of cohesive links is powerful, too (like getting kids to figure out what the pronouns refer to).

TIMOTHY SHANAHAN



Anything else? Indeed. I would make sure kids are doing a lot of reading in the classroom. That can be in the reading books, but it can also be in social studies and science materials as well. The point is kids need to read a lot and there should be more to this than just “dumb practice.” It matters if the texts focus on valuable information, and that we make sure kids learn that information. The more they know about their world, the better they are likely to do in reading.

Finally, I would make sure that kids were writing about what they read. In the grade levels that you asked about, research suggests that having the kids write various kinds of summaries is a pretty powerful way to build reading comprehension.

Those lengthy detours aside, in that context, I would definitely teach comprehension strategies. The way I think of strategies most basically is that give readers some tools they can use independently to make sense of what they read.

Several strategies confer an advantage: teaching kids to monitor their comprehension and if they are not understanding a text to take charge and try to fix it; teaching kids to read text and to stop occasionally to sum up for themselves what the text is telling them (and to go back if they aren't getting it); teaching kids to ask themselves questions about what they are reading and to go back and reread if they can't answer those questions (kind of a discussion in the head); teaching them to look for a text's structure to figure out what the parts are and how they fit together (story mapping is the most common example of this support). There are some others but those are the ones with the most research support and the biggest payoff. (And, teaching kids more than one strategy makes a lot of sense too—apparently different strategies help students to solve different problems, so having multiple strategies is beneficial).

Research suggests that the best way to teach these strategies is through a gradual release of responsibility approach. That is, the teacher starts out explaining the strategy and what its purpose is, then demonstrating it or modeling it for the kids (show them how—explaining it as you go).

After a demo or two, then have the kids try to use the strategy under your supervision. For example, tell the kids that you want them to practice summarization. Ask the what kinds of things you did in the demo—when you stopped, what kind of information you tried to include, what you did when you couldn't remember something important. Initially, the teacher does much of the work, with the kids mainly following teacher directions. “Read the first two pages. That's a good place to stop because on page 3 there is another section.” Then when they get there, perhaps asking some questions: “What was this about?” “What was the most important thing the author told you? What other information is important?”

Once kids can answer those questions, it is a good idea to start to withdraw support (this is the real “we do it”). “We're going to read this chapter. What

would be a good place to stop and sum up? Why that point? When we get to this point, what do I usually ask you?"

As kids take over more of the process, you might have them work in smaller groups, with the teacher sporadically moving around the groups to monitor their success and to remind them of the steps. Perhaps you could give kids different responsibilities (one child might lead the discussion of stopping points, another might be responsible for asking the group members to remember the most important point, etc.).

Finally, have the kids try this out individually. They can take notes on the process and then engage with the teacher in a discussion of how well the process worked. Of course, if kids struggle with any part of it, you can go back to earlier steps to make it successful. Some programs do this with multiple strategies, all at one time, and others teach the strategies one at a time, adding them together as you go (both approaches work—but I find the latter to be simpler and easier to teach). You can usually teach a strategy well in 3-4 weeks if you have students practicing with lots of different texts.

Throughout that entire process it is important to vary the texts.

Summarizing a newspaper article is different than summarizing a story, and both are different than a science chapter. Make sure that the students are learning not only the strategy, but the content of the texts too. Finally, remind the kids from time to time to use their strategies or engage them in strategies discussions.

ABOUT ME



Tim Shanahan

Timothy Shanahan is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of urban education at the University of Illinois at Chicago where he was Founding Director of the Center for Literacy and chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. He is also visiting research professor at Queens University, Belfast, Northern Ireland. He is principal investigator of the National Title I Study of Implementation and Outcomes: Early Childhood Language Development. Professor Shanahan was director of reading for the Chicago Public Schools. His research emphasizes reading-writing relationships, reading assessment, and improving reading achievement. He is past president of the International Reading Association. In 2006, he received a presidential appointment to serve on the Advisory Board of the National Institute for Literacy. He was inducted to the Reading Hall of Fame in 2007. He is a former first-grade teacher.