

Promoting reading success: Strategies and ideas that work!

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Introduction

This article examines strategies and ideas to support struggling readers attending U-CAN READ: Literacy Intervention Years 3-10. While these strategies and ideas are implemented in U-CAN Read, they are grounded in research, applicable to all readers, pertinent to every classroom...and we know they work!

U-CAN READ is a joint initiative of the University of Canberra (UC) and the ACT Department of Education and Training (ACTDET). It is housed in the National Capital centre for Literacy Research and caters for a minimum of eighty families annually. The program is designed to address the needs of readers who are not making adequate age-appropriate reading gains. The program includes a twelve hour seminar series for parents and up to twelve hours tuition with the Literacy Advisor, student and parent. The intention is to educate parents in strategies and ideas to support their children at home. Children must be enrolled in an ACT school and referred by the school counsellor or classroom teacher with the endorsement of the principal.

This article identifies strategies and ideas used to address the three most common reading difficulties of the children attending the program – namely comprehension, fluency and vocabulary.

Comprehension

Comprehension involves understanding, evaluating and responding to texts. When readers comprehend, they actively interpret, integrate experiences, concepts and ideas, critique, draw inferences, analyse and make connections. Comprehension results in a sense of satisfaction when readers know they have attained meaning and gone beyond processing the superficial and surface features of texts. Understanding and insight are the by-products of comprehension. According to Pressley (2002), good learners use a variety of comprehension strategies simultaneously and they know how to deliberately apply specific strategies to aid their comprehension, particularly with regard to challenging texts/information.

Less able comprehenders usually focus more on word accuracy rather than comprehension (Cain and Oakhill, 1999; Nation et al., 2005). They possess inefficient strategies and use them inflexibly. They are usually unaware of what good comprehenders do and require models and demonstrations of when to apply a repertoire of comprehension strategies. Paris (2003) points out that when children read increasingly complex levels of text over the course of a year, it is difficult to assess how comprehension changes because the text difficulty is also changing.. He points out that beginning readers often over emphasise decoding and as a result comprehension may be limited. In these early years, he suggests that simply having learners complete retellings or recall specific text information could be an adequate indication of whether comprehension has occurred.

Strategies and ideas to promote comprehension

1. Questioning

Readers select from a range of questions written on strips of paper and arranged randomly on the desk. On other occasions, the reader deliberately selects the question to be addressed in relation to the specific text he/she has read.

I predict that...

In my mind, I can see...

In one sentence, this book is about...

The best/worst thing that happened was...

I am wondering about...

This story reminds me of ...

I liked/disliked when...

I thought this would happen...and then it didn't.

The questions are open ended and readers justify their answers by giving examples from the text. Following the reading of the "The True Story of the Three Little Pigs" by Jon Scieszka. Jason selected one of Aiden Chamber's (1994) "Tell Me" questions: "Tell me something that interested you". He discussed the relationship of the Scieszka's book with other fairy stories and the perspective of different characters. He was motivated to write his own story, "The True Story of Cinderella" in which Cinderella never wanted to go to the ball wanting instead to stay home and read her novel.

2. Silent reading

As readers become more independent, they often prefer to read silently. In order to monitor and assist learners with comprehension, the reader can use post-it notes to identify words or concepts that are confusing, difficult or interesting. Kathy used this strategy every time she came to something she didn't understand. However, she quickly realised that by continuing to read, the word or concept was often explained. When she no longer needed to seek clarification, she removed the post-it notes. This strategy assisted her to become more confident and independent. It also provided an opportunity to discuss a deeper level of comprehension of the book after reading.

3. Prompting

The question: "Does that make sense?" is used regularly to remind the struggling reader that the focus is on gaining meaning. Sam had difficulty comprehending and when he came to a word he didn't know, he would often substitute nonsensical words or a word that had little relevance to the text. Irrespective of the word and lack of meaning, Sam continued to read. By modelling a range of strategies such as rereading, reading on, and using context clues, Sam began to prompt himself and became much more aware of the importance of gaining meaning.

Zac was reluctant to "read on" and said that sounding out was his preferred strategy. However, it was apparent that he did 'read on' and scanned the page for more information. After six sessions at the Centre, a conference call with his classroom teacher, revealed that Zac was applying a range of prompts when reading. His teacher recalled him confidently stating when he came to an unfamiliar word that that he was "not sure what the word was so he was going to read on and come back to it later."

Readers are encouraged to make use of all cuing systems --, syntactic, pragmatic semantic, and graphophonic. Michael began the program relying on his mother as the 'instant word factory'. Whenever he came to a word he did not know he asked his mother and she supplied the word. He had become so dependent that he refused to use any other cues. Michael was introduced to other strategies such as "reading on, rereading, using context clues" and initially felt discouraged because his mother seemed to no longer support him. Michael's mother also found it difficult because up to now her only means of support was to tell him the word. By suggesting a range of prompts, she encouraged Michael to be independent. Michael quickly made obvious progress. He caught the reading bug and began to enjoy reading and challenged himself to read more complex books.

4. Visualising

Folding a piece of paper into four or six segments and drawing an aspect of the text in each segment is one way to do a visual summary. The segments can be separated and rearranged in chronological or priority order from the most significant event to the least significant.

"Sketch to stretch" (Harste, 1996) is another strategy that allows the reader to sketch in a minute all the events of a story. The reader then describes the drawing to a collaborative partner. This is an effective way of completing an oral retelling and also gaining insights into the reader's level of comprehension.

Over time, students integrate the use of comprehension strategies and often draw on multiple strategies when reading a text.

Fluency

"The Literacy Dictionary: The Vocabulary of Reading and Writing" defines fluency as "freedom from word identification problems that might hinder comprehension" (Harris & Hodges, 1995). The National Reading Panel defined reading fluency as "the ability to read text quickly, accurately, and with proper expression" (NICHD, 2000). Reading research concludes that fluency is essential to children's overall reading development (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003).

Reading fluency is often used to distinguish good readers from poor. A consideration is that any measure of fluency is based only on the oral reading of a text. Pikulski & Chard (2005) explain that readers who lack fluency read in a laboured, disconnected fashion with a focus on decoding at the word level that limits comprehension. There is a strong correlation between reading fluency and comprehension (Dowhower 1987; Shinn et al. 1992; Tan and Nicholson 1997). Stecker, Roser, and Martinez (1998) in their review of fluency research conclude, "Fluency has been shown to have a 'reciprocal relationship' with comprehension with each fostering the other" (p. 306). According to Samuels (1979) and Adams (1990), fluent reading allows the reader to attend to the meaning of text rather than to the mechanics of reading. Fluency reflects the individual's style and purpose. Any two readers will read at different speeds, influenced by their particular purposes, the different life experiences they bring to the text, and their different linguistic resources.

Strategies and ideas to promote fluency

When students commence U-CAN READ, they often read in a stilted manner, they tend to stop to decode unfamiliar words and use limited expression. They fixate on unknown words. Craig would stop reading at every third or fourth word and would attempt to sound out unknown words. By the time he figured the words, he lost the meaning of what he was reading. His reading continued in a stop start manner.

Strategies that worked with Craig included:

1. Neurological impress method (NIM)

Craig simultaneously followed the words in a text while hearing the words pronounced orally by a more experienced reader, in this case, the Literacy Advisor or his parent. He followed along with the text and echoed the reading. The more experienced reader tracked the words with a finger. The reading is completed at a normal pace and with appropriate intonation. In this way, Craig was exposed to a model of good reading.

2. Paired reading

With paired reading, the more experienced reader shares the reading either page by page, paragraph by paragraph or sentence by sentence depending on the level of support the learner requires. Craig gained sufficient meaning from hearing sections read aloud and as a result his reading became more fluent.

3. Audio books

Audio books introduce children to models of expressive reading. Craig used his I-Pod to download popular audio books.

4. Repeated readings –

Students reread a text several times. “Practice reading” of text is generally believed to be essential for the development of fluency (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1996; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Stanovich, 1986). Craig responded well to rereading the text and was able to hear himself as a fluent reader. Rereading can be fun if it centres on books the reader enjoys and can include favourite poems and song lyrics. It should not be done as a boring, repetitive exercise.

5. Using appropriate texts to promote fluency

Some struggling readers read quickly without expression and fluency resembles little more than a monotone of words. Julian’s limited understanding of the purpose and function of punctuation impacted on both his comprehension and fluent reading of a text. Poetry was crucial to his success. Through rereading, paired reading and echo reading he became more cognizant of pauses and rhythm. Scripted books such as ‘*Boyz Rule*’ were read together and led to gains in confidence and expression.

Exposing students to a range of books that use speech, journal writing, letters and poetry leads to improved fluency. Locate books that students love to read and want to read aloud.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is not only essential to comprehension but fundamental to communication. Vacca et al (2005) point out that broad word knowledge enables students to communicate in ways that are precise, powerful, persuasive, and interesting.

While traditional vocabulary instruction has involved students looking up words in a dictionary, writing definitions, and using the words in a sentence (Basurto, 2004), students acquire vocabulary best when it is used in meaningful, authentic contexts and when it connects with their experiences and knowledge. They are less able to remember words presented in isolation. Single contextual exposures to new words do not guarantee familiarization with word meanings (Baldwin & Schatz, 1985). Nagy & Scott (2000) and Pressley (2002) state that vocabulary development is both an outcome of comprehension and a precursor to it, with word meanings making up as much as 70%-80% of comprehension.

Strategies and ideas to promote vocabulary

1. Book orientation

Prior to reading aloud, readers are given the opportunity to talk about the book – the pictures, the author, illustrator, the blurb, content and challenging words. This ensures that the reader is introduced to unfamiliar words prior to reading. The reader's confidence is enhanced and reading is not a test of what the reader does not know.

Depending on the book, book orientations could involve reading the first chapter aloud. This helps orient the reader to the vocabulary, the setting, genre, and context of the story. For example, by reading the first chapter of "Rowan of Rin" by Emily Rodda, less confident readers are introduced to the village of Rin and the characters as well as to unusual words such as 'bukshah' (the beloved animals of the village). The orientation is fun and stress free and is the opportunity to sell the book as one worth reading. Orienting children to a book engages them with the text and sets them up for a successful encounter.

2. Synonyms and substitutions

In order to build confidence and independence, meaningful substitutions are encouraged. If a reader is unfamiliar with the word "chilly" and substitutes "cold", it is not necessary to interrupt the reading to correct it. It is much more appropriate at the end of the reading while reviewing the text to say something like: "Look how cold it is here. It looks chilly doesn't it?" The unknown word is put in the conversation and related back to the original context.

An example of how a reader is encouraged to seek meaning rather than give up in frustration comes from Robert. Robert has a multilingual background. He uses the context of stories to figure out the meaning of the words he does not know. For instance when reading "Superfudge" by Judy Blume, he substitutes "When is your baby going to be born?" instead of "When is your baby due?" He explained that he did not know the meaning of the word 'due' but that he understood it was a pregnancy and that the baby was going to be born. The flow of reading did not need to be interrupted as he clearly had made a meaningful substitution.

3. Book Choice

Readers are encouraged to explore their own preferences in books. The Centre has a wide selection of texts selected on the basis of reader's recommendations, popular authors and book award lists. From an assortment of 6-10 titles by different authors and genres, readers choose their weekly reading material for use in the Centre as well as home reading. They are also encouraged to self select from the shelves in the library or bring in books from home. Books are introduced through brief book orientations. Readers become enthusiastic about reading when they have a choice about what they want to read. The goal of the Centre is to "switch children onto a love of reading".

4. Read aloud to students irrespective of their grade

Students of all ages benefit from hearing texts of various kinds read aloud. Discuss the text before, during, and after reading. Relate words in the text to their prior knowledge and experiences.

Encourage students to read extensively on their own in the classroom and outside of school. *Engage students actively with a wide range of books.* Use collaborative approaches that encourage discussion and interactions amongst students.

5. Develop a love of words through word play.

Foster word consciousness by drawing the reader's attention to words, their meanings, and their power. Word-conscious readers know many words and use them well. They enjoy words and are eager to learn new words. Draw attention to the way authors choose words to convey particular meanings. Play with puns, and palindromes. Explore a word's origin or history. Look at word parts –prefixes, suffixes, root words and base words.

Conclusion

No one seeks to learn what they do not enjoy or at least sees a purpose for in their lives...learning to read is no exception! Reading has to be fun. Struggling readers have either not experienced it as fun or have lost the feeling of enjoyment associated with discovering the love of a book. This is particularly the case, if readers feel stressed, threatened, anxious or associate reading with real or perceived failure about themselves as readers or people.

Success starts with your passion for reading and your love of books, words, language in all shapes and sizes. Share what you know about how reading works and that reading is all about meaning making and not a test. Support struggling readers to connect to books they love. Relax around reading and promote enjoyment. Access quality books for children to read in your classroom. Read books aloud to students on a daily basis and create a community of avid, voracious readers who are compelled to talk about books and authors.

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