

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

The Value of Teaching Comprehension Strategies

Janice A. Dole, Ph.D. • January 2009

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Comprehension Strategies

Highlights

- Providing direct and explicit comprehension strategies can help students become more independent, self-regulated learners.
- Research studies show that comprehension improves with strategy practice; summarizing and asking questions are the most useful strategies.
- There are three components of comprehension strategy instruction: modeling and explanation, guided practice with feedback, and independent practice.
- Teachers should collaborate to learn more about teaching comprehension strategies and administrators can support these efforts with professional development.

About the Interviewee

Janice A. Dole (Ph. D., Education, University of Colorado) is Professor of Education in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Utah. Dr. Dole has taught school in the primary grades and at the middle school

level. Dr. Dole's university experience includes positions held at the University of Denver, the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Michigan State University. She has published widely in the areas of comprehension and conceptual change learning and more recently in professional development and school reform. Her publications include articles in journals such as *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Review of Educational Research*, *The Elementary School Journal*, and *Reading and Writing Quarterly*. She is also co-author of the book, *Adolescent Literacy: Research to Practice*. From 1992-2002, Dr. Dole served as a member of the reading development panel for the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). She also was a panel member of the RAND Reading Study Group on reading comprehension. In addition, Dr. Dole is currently a National Reading First consultant on comprehension instruction. She also has served on review panels for the Institute of Educational Services (IES) and the National Institute of Child and Human Development.

In 1996, Dr. Dole began a ten-year interest in school reform in reading and professional development in high-poverty schools. She co-authored Utah's Reading Excellence Act (REA) for the USOE and was project co-coordinator as well as state technical assistant for the grant from 1999-2001. Thereafter, along with two colleagues in special education at the University of Utah, Dr. Dole received the evaluation grant for Utah's Reading First. They are currently at the end of the second year of the five-year project. Additionally, Dr. Dole is an investigator for Mathematica on a four-year IES national study of the effectiveness of comprehension interventions in high-poverty schools. Dr. Dole is also working with Utah State University on a grant to develop a teacher knowledge assessment of reading and writing curriculum, and with the Salt Lake City School District on a middle school reading reform project. Finally, Dr. Dole is a member of the Teacher Preparation Committee of the National Academy of Sciences. The final report of the Committee is due out next year.

Full Transcript

My name is Janice Dole. I'm Professor of Education at the University of Utah. The value of teaching comprehension strategies, in my mind, consists of two things basically. First, we know that when we teach comprehension strategies to students, our students become more independent learners, and that's really what we want them to be able to do. As they get into later on in high school and in college, we want them to be able to learn independently without someone always being there. By using comprehension strategies, students can become more independent learners and more self-regulated as well, and that gives them really an empowerment to be able to learn on their own. It's simple. If students use comprehension strategies, especially when they get stuck, and if they know how to use the comprehension strategies appropriately, their comprehension is going to improve. And after all, in middle school and high school, that's what we want is we want their comprehension to improve.

Some teachers think, "Well, my students know how to read. I don't need to teach them comprehension

strategies. I need to help them learn the content.” And that’s obviously a very valuable position to come from. But the truth is, even though your students may know how to read, they may not know how to read the very difficult text that you are providing them. Textbooks at the middle and high school level and the different content areas now are really quite difficult, even for average readers to read. So, it really will help your students to teach them how to use strategies when they come across especially text that’s very difficult.

One study used a group of seventh graders, and they had ten classrooms in which they presented students with strategies for comprehending paragraphs that they read. And the students were taught three basic strategies: number one, read the paragraph; number two, ask questions; and then number three, paraphrase what you’ve read. When students were taught these strategies, they improved their comprehension over students who weren’t taught the strategies. So, that’s a nice example of the kind of comprehension strategies that can be taught to students and that we know are effective.

There are two comprehension strategies that seem to be the most powerful for students. One is summarizing, and many students do summarize, but it’s a very, very difficult skill to learn. And very honestly, it’s a very difficult skill to teach as well, but we know that it’s one strategy that has a powerful effect on comprehension. The other strategy that’s most effective is asking questions. Now, by asking questions, I don’t mean that the teacher ask questions of the students. Rather, the students ask questions about the text itself. So, students may be reading, and they may stop and ask a question, say perhaps: “What do the authors mean by the three branches of government?” Or “Why are there three branches of government instead of two branches of government?” Students asking themselves those kinds of questions seems to also have a powerful effect on comprehension.

Now, there are three components in explicit or direct instruction, one is modeling and explanation, the second is guided practice with feedback, and the third is independent practice. Of those three, the hardest for teachers to grasp, I think, and really work with is guided practice with feedback. Sometimes, teachers model, and then they provide an example of guided practice with feedback. They give students another example, and they work with them to help them understand it, and then they move on to independent practice. But, really in truth, guided practice sometimes can take a great deal of time, and one example is not enough. Now, there are cases, for example, predicting what’s going to happen in an upcoming text is something that students can do relatively easily and maybe with just one example of guided practice with feedback. When we’re looking at teaching something like summarizing, however, the guided practice with feedback is going to look a lot different. Students need many, many different examples. They need examples working directly with the teacher. They may need examples that they practice in groups of four or five students. They may need examples that they practice with pairs of students. So, the guided practice with feedback, that critical component of the explicit instruction model, really is something that teachers have to adapt flexibly depending on the comprehension strategies they are teaching.

When teachers want to implement this practice, the first suggestion I would give them is to work with

other teachers. I think there's real value in teachers collaborating together because there's more help in thinking about the difficult nature of comprehension strategy instruction and thinking about how to teach it explicitly. What I would suggest to teachers is that they collaborate together. You could have several teachers in different content areas work together as a team, or you could have several teachers in the same content area work together as a team. In that team, teachers can think about one or two comprehension strategies that the whole team may teach students, and so when students enter different subject areas in different classrooms, they're going to experience the same comprehension strategies used in science, used in social studies, used in English. So that's very, very powerful and I think something that is very helpful for teachers. It's not something that I think a teacher can or should do by himself or herself; I just think it's too hard.

A good principal or other instructional leader can really help schools implement comprehension strategy instruction at the middle and high school level. That instructional leader needs to be somebody who will provide teachers with the professional development that they're going to need in order to be able to implement this school-wide, and really, that's where we are going. Having teachers work together in teams, having perhaps a coach or a reading specialist work directly with teachers, and having that kind of support from an instructional leader is really going to take comprehension strategy away from being something that's just written in a textbook now to something that actually is implemented with students in classrooms in schools at the middle and high school level.