DOINGWHATWORKS

Video
FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

What Good Readers Do

Nell K. Duke, Ed.D. • November 2010

Topic: Improving K-3 Reading Comprehension
Practice: Teach Comprehension Strategies

Highlights

- Dr. Nell Duke, panel member of the IES Practice Guide *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, discusses key aspects of the recommendation to teach students how to use reading comprehension strategies.
- Duke describes several specific comprehension strategies and gives examples of what successful and unsuccessful comprehension strategy instruction looks like in the classroom.

About the Interviewee

Nell K. Duke, Ed.D., is professor of teacher education and educational psychology and co-director of the Literacy Achievement Research Center at Michigan State University. Dr. Duke's work focuses on early literacy development and instruction, particularly among children living in poverty. She has received several awards for her research, including the National Reading Conference Early Career Achievement Award and the American Educational Research Association Early Career Award. She is co-author of numerous books,

including *Reading and Writing Informational Text in the Primary Grades: Research-Based Practices* and *Literacy and the Youngest Learner: Best Practices for Educators of Children from Birth to Five*.

Full Transcript

My name is Nell Duke. I'm a professor at Michigan State University, professor of teacher education and educational psychology, and I also co-direct a research center here called the Literacy Achievement Research Center.

Teaching reading comprehension strategies is so important K–3. In fact, it's the one recommendation in our practice guide that had the strongest evidence behind it. It's really clear from research that explicitly teaching comprehension strategies to students does improve their reading comprehension even in these very early years of schooling.

A large number of studies have showed us that if we explicitly teach and then give students lots of opportunities to practice specific reading comprehension strategies, their reading comprehension will improve and improve much more than it would do just naturally. Some of these studies teach just a single comprehension strategy, and even from teaching just one comprehension strategy, we do see gains in students. Other of these studies will have students learning several different strategies and implementing those, and again, we see really, in some cases, very substantial growth from the research studies in kids' reading comprehension abilities even in the very early years of schooling.

What is a comprehension strategy?

A comprehension strategy is something you do deliberately, intentionally to help you build meaning. For example, with K–1, it's nice to teach the phrase *I wonder*. So we teach kids when they're reading themselves or being read to, "I wonder. I wonder what the character is going to do next. I wonder why the character did that. I wonder why rainbows come out when it rains." Those kinds of *I wonder* statements are really a form of strategy—a strategy we typically call self-questioning. But using the phrase *I wonder* over and over again with little kids is a way of getting them to the point where they can use a strategy like self-questioning on their own even in their earlier stages of development.

There are a number of specific comprehension strategies that we want students to develop the use of in their reading.

One is monitoring; this is really a fundamental one, which is just paying attention to whether what you are reading is making sense, and then when it isn't making sense, doing something to clarify or to fix up. For example, rereading is a great strategy to use when what you're reading isn't making sense to you.

Another important strategy we want students to use, especially early on in their reading, is to activate their

relevant background knowledge—What do they know related to the text that they're about to read?—and then to make predictions based on the background knowledge that they have.

We also want students to make inferences, to make connections between different ideas in the text and to sort of read between the lines of the text that they're reading.

We want students to visualize as well, and very interestingly although good adult readers visualize very easily, we find that many young children and even some older struggling readers don't visualize; they aren't picturing the characters and the setting of the story, for example, or they aren't picturing a process that they are reading about in informational text. So we really want students to be able to make those pictures, make those images in their minds, see a movie in their minds of what they're reading about.

We like summarizing as an important strategy to have students using, so summarizing both sections of the text and then the text as a whole as they read. That's an important one as well.

What does comprehension strategy instruction look like?

I've had the privilege of being in the classrooms of many teachers who are very, very strong at teaching reading comprehension to children in K–3, and there are some common threads that I see across those classrooms. One of the things that I see is that these teachers are really good at setting a compelling context for reading. So kids in those classrooms aren't just reading because the teacher handed them something to read; they're reading because they are really engaged with, really interested in the material they're reading. Maybe the teacher is having them read about some topic in science so that they can teach their buddy classroom about that topic. Or maybe teachers are having students read stories because they are going to write their own stories to contribute to the school library.

They always have this larger context, and the reason this is important is because reading comprehension is really hard work. There's a lot of glucose burning up there, so to speak, when we're reading. It takes a lot of cognitive energy to pay attention to whether what you're reading is making sense and apply all these active strategies and so on. And students are just less inclined to go through all of that mental effort if they don't have a compelling reason to do so. So I do notice that these very effective teachers are creating these really compelling reasons for students to be comprehending in the first place. The students work harder, they exert more effort, and it really shows in their comprehension development.

One of the things that I sometimes see is that teachers will lose sight of the purpose of comprehension strategies. The purpose of them is simply to help us understand better when we read. We don't want strategies to get to the point where they're taking on a life of their own. So to take a concrete example, some teachers, when they are teaching visualization, will have students fill out a little worksheet as they read that says, "What did you see in your mind as you were reading? What did you hear? What did you touch? What did you taste? What did you smell?" And to me, that gets too far away from what we know about what

good readers do when they read. Because when we read, very often we aren't smelling anything in the story, or we're not touching or hearing anything in the story. We're usually seeing something, but even not always that. And we don't want students to get to the point where they're just trying to apply these strategies or just trying to smell something, so to speak, for the worksheet. We want to them to be applying them only to the degree that they really help support their reading comprehension. So that's one of the mistakes I see, and teachers can get away from that mistake or that challenge by just constantly asking themselves, "What do I do as a good reader when I read? What do I know about what good readers do when they read?" and try to keep students' own activities and their own actions in their mind's eye focused on that goal.

And I would add that patience is really important. We have some research to suggest that it takes teachers several years to become really good reading comprehension teachers. It's much more difficult than teaching some of the lower-level skills. And as a result, teachers just need time to become very good at this and sort of be patient with the fact that this is really difficult work that they are trying to do.