

Regular Research Paper

Literacy for comprehension as a means of facilitating students' improved academic performance across the curriculum

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This paper adopts the position that it is imperative for teachers to get the teaching of literacy for comprehension correctly as this can impact students' academic performance across all curriculum areas. Students need to be taught literacy for comprehension and learning rather than the mere repetition of words or writing in rote mode. Students who lack this competency cannot achieve their full academic potential. Granted, students may become experts at cutting and pasting from material on the Internet and may even get good marks for their assignments; however, they do not develop the skills or competencies needed to apply what they have been taught and hopefully learnt. In the process of applying what has been taught students' brains come alive as they enter the realm of imagination and creativity.

Keywords: literacy, comprehension, learning, curriculum, imagination, creativity

INTRODUCTION

This researcher has observed over time that many students at the secondary and tertiary levels of the education system, and some adults, read content without understanding what that content means. This becomes apparent when the readers ask that the written content be explained to them; or they will ask questions, the answers to which are contained in the document which was just read. It is felt that teachers need to explore best practices in teaching literacy for understanding; and exposure to these best practices may well begin in the classrooms of teacher education institutions. The problem is universal and efforts should be made to equip teachers with the skills needed to identify possible causes and implement solutions.

What is literacy?

Keefe and Copeland, (2011) cautioned that while

there is general agreement that literacy is a human right, there is no general agreement about the definition of literacy. Neuman and Gambrell, (2014) also warn that there is no one definition of literacy. Rather, because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, we now live in a world of multiple literacies. So not only is the definition of literacy changing but new literacies emerge every day. Leu et al., (2013) explain that the meaning of literacy has become fluid or deictic, i.e., the meaning of literacy is rapidly and continuously changing as new technologies for information and communication continuously appear online and new social practices of literacy quickly emerge. Shoffner, et al, (2010) cited Bruce (2007) who believes that: literacy today cannot be understood separately from the increasingly interconnected world in which we live and work.

But according to Leu et al., (2013) historically literacy has always been changing. (Manguel (1996).

Some definitions are presented below.

Literacy is the ability to read, write and listen, and use numeracy and technology, at a level that enables individuals to express and understand ideas and opinions, to make decisions and solve problems, to achieve their goals, and to participate fully in their community and in wider society. Achieving literacy is a lifelong learning process. (Literacy Advance, 2015).

Goldman, (2012) expressed the view that to be literate today means being able to use reading and writing to acquire knowledge, solve problems and make decisions in academic, personal and professional areas.

Moore-Russo and Shanahan, (2004) have presented a broader definition of literacy to include visual elements. They state:

Having the ability to interpret visual representations and the visual and stylistic elements in them is becoming increasingly important because, within the current digital landscape (including textbooks, newspapers, and magazines), visual representations are incorporated to a greater extent than ever before. Being literate, therefore, should relate to an individual's ability to read visual elements as much as linguistic elements.

Alber, (2014) believes that today literacy is about being able to make sense of and engage in advanced reading, writing, listening, and speaking – all of the communication skills.

This researcher respects that all of these definitions given of literacy are meaningful and possess integrity. However, the reality is that these expanded and functional definitions would not be realized if students do not acquire the skills of "basic literacy", i.e., learning to read and write and move on to glean meaning from, or to comprehend what they have read and written.

It is to be noted though that this researcher is not advocating that literacy be taught for comprehension only in English. Indeed, whatever the language of instruction students need to be able to use the basic literacy skills acquired to facilitate learning across all curriculum areas.

The question may be asked why is literacy for comprehension an issue, shouldn't the issue be that students and adults are able to read and write? Literacy for comprehension becomes an issue when literate students are failing to achieve across curriculum areas because they are unable to understand the content in their textbooks, on the Internet and other written or verbal sources.

Literacy for comprehension

McLaughlin, (2012) advises that to teach students to

be successful readers teachers need to know what comprehension is, how it works and how teachers can help students comprehend what they read. This definition of reading comprehension is given:

The construction of meaning of a written or spoken communication through a reciprocal, holistic interchangeable of ideas between the interpreter and the message in a particular communicative context.

Reading-tutors.com, (2015) offered their view on reading comprehension by saying:

Reading without comprehension or understanding is not reading. Many children can pronounce words fluently but when asked what they have just read they cannot respond. Although they may score high in terms of reading rate or fluency, they are not good readers. What makes a good reader? A good reader is someone who has a purpose for reading, whether it is to look for specific information or to read for pleasure. A good reader is involved in a complicated thinking process as he or she reads.

Literacy for comprehension is very important in this technologically advanced era where information is shared almost at the speed of light! Texting is a way of life with a language of its own and the letters of the alphabet are combined to form words so that a message can be effectively delivered and understood. While basic literacy is a crucial element in the learning process literacy for comprehension advances the process.

Coyne and Carnine, (2010) explained that reading comprehension is an essential literacy outcome for students and the ultimate goal of reading instruction.

Neufeld, (2005) explains comprehension in this way: Comprehension can be defined broadly as the process of constructing a supportable understanding of a text. Implicit in this brief definition are two important features of the comprehension process. First, seeking to comprehend a text is an active, intentional thinking process through which the reader constructs meaning. Second, while students' understandings of texts are expected to vary as a result of differences in their background knowledge and experiences, not all interpretations of a given text can be considered valid. The important point to remember here is that both what the reader brings to the text (i.e., knowledge of the topic) and the ideas conveyed through the words printed in the text are important to the comprehension process.

It can be said therefore that comprehending something means that you are able to carry out various activities related to the topic or concept, e.g. driving, how to reverse, parallel park; following the instructions in a recipe or for assembling a piece of equipment. When students are able to comprehend what they read and

write then learning at all levels (academically, socially, personally, etc.) can occur. In effect they are reading to learn. Goldman, (2012) writes that successfully reading to learn requires the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information from multiple sources. Goldman continues that:

Effective readers must be able to apply different knowledge, reading, and reasoning processes to different types of content, from fiction to history and science, to news accounts and user manuals. They must assess sources of information for relevance, reliability, impartiality, and completeness. And they must connect information across multiple sources. In short, successful readers must not only use general reading skills but also pay close attention to discipline-specific processes.

It is felt that these competencies fall within the realm of higher-order thinking skills and do pose a challenge to some teachers who are focused on the lower-order skills of knowledge and recall.

Why teaching literacy for comprehension is important?

Neufeld, (2005) believes that learning from texts is an important part of the process of learning in virtually all subject areas. Therefore, the skills outlined by Goldman, (2012) can be utilized across the curriculum, and literacy becomes a tool for learning.

Afflerbach, et al, (2008) describe as learning strategies the deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meaning of text. This is what reading to learn involves.

Perkins, (1996) emphasizes the need for teachers to teach for comprehension when he writes that:

Knowledge and skill in themselves do not guarantee understanding. People can acquire knowledge and routine skills without understanding their basis or when to use them. And, by and large, knowledge and skills that are not understood do students little good.

Neufeld, (2005) cautions that reading comprehension instruction should not be viewed as falling within the domain of language arts alone, but as having a place in other subject areas as well. Therefore, when students are taught literacy for understanding/comprehension they can apply the skills learnt to all content areas. Then one can state that a person is literate and that literacy is a precursor to learning.

Pedriana, (2010) explained that early literacy is among the most powerful predictors of school success,

gainful employment and, societal adjustment... And because it is so vital those of us in the schools need to know the best way to go about accomplishing it.

Kassam, (1989) states that: the most profound, far-reaching and significant impact of literacy on people's lives is its "empowering" potential. To be illiterate is thus to be disempowered. Empowerment from literacy is the foundation of all other benefits and advancement of people and their societies.

Some problems with teaching literacy for comprehension:

Teachers may encounter some problems when teaching literacy for comprehension but the problems are not insurmountable and can be overcome through appropriate interventions and the use of appropriate pedagogical strategies. Some problems are listed hereunder.

- A student may have a language problem; the language of instruction may not be the student's mother tongue.
 - There may be a physical problem – the person may be visually impaired or have a hearing problem.
 - An inability to relate what is being read to the reader's foreknowledge.
 - The person may have a reading or learning disability, e.g. dyslexia.
 - The person may be unable to decode or encode the written word.
 - The foundational skills of reading have not been automatized.
 - The person may have a limited vocabulary or a spelling problem.
 - Lack of imagination on the student's part.
 - There may be a phonics related problem.
- (Edublox. A to Z of brain, mind and learning. Reading comprehension problems(n.d); Logsdon (2014) and BonnieTerryLearning.com)

Some ways to teach literacy for understanding/comprehension:

Alber, (2014) explains that content is what we teach, but there is the *how*, and this is where literacy instruction comes in. There are an endless number of engaging, effective strategies to get students to think about, write about, read about, and talk about the content taught. The ultimate goal of literacy instruction is to build

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student's comprehension, writing skills and overall skills in communication.

Brozo and Fisher, (2010) advocate that there can be no significant improvement in the literacy skills of adolescents without comprehensive staff development. This is vital as many high school teachers have not been trained in current theories of content literacy. Just like students, teachers need scaffolding for change. If teachers are overwhelmed by having to teach too many new strategies to build adolescent literacy, teachers may find it easier to stick with the status quo.

The above is supported by Guytchewsky and Curran, (2012)] who advised that teachers should create a cadre and meet as a professional learning community to focus on best literacy practices which can be used in the classroom to help students' literacy development.

The International Literacy Association, (2015) recognizes that the task of achieving worldwide literacy is a "herculean effort" that cannot be accomplished by just one person or even a single organization. The same can be said for literacy at the school level, teachers need to collaborate in this effort. When this is done teachers create a learning community within their schools. But the process of best practices in literacy instruction for comprehension should have started at the teacher training institutions.

Some strategies for teaching reading for comprehension to secondary school students which are outlined below are also applicable to adult learners.

- Encourage students to ask and answer questions. Adler, (2015).
- Let students read slowly, annotate, synthesize, think inferentially and reread for clarification. Harvey (2015).
- The teacher needs to remember that there are boys and girls in the classroom and teach to facilitate both sexes. Smith and Wilhelm, (2002).
- Encourage students to write as this helps them to become stronger readers. Allyn, (2015).
- The use of graphic organizers or diagrams to illustrate concepts, relationships and connections between concepts in a text. Zayapragassarazan and Kumar, (2012).
- The teacher should connect the text to students' life experiences so that they experience authentic learning.
- Let students make predictions, this encourages active reading and keeps students interested. Wilson, (2012).
- Teach students to write summaries. Collins, (2012).
- Let students make predictions, this encourages active reading and keeps students interested. Wilson, (2012).
- Let students know the purpose or objective for the reading exercise. Tovani, (2005).

- Let students retell what has been read, using their own words. Adler, (2015).
- Encourage students to visualize what is being read. Visualizing causes students to read with more care and concentration. Wilson, (2012).]
- Teachers should plan assignments that encourage critical thinking. Gutchewsky and Curran, (2012).
- Teachers should hold poetry slams where students are given opportunities to perform and share in a public forum. Adams, (2006).
- Students should engage in close reading; this should be encouraged from the youngest age. Fisher and Frey, (2014); Allyn, (2015).
- Teachers should continue to establish libraries in their classrooms. Wolpert-Gawron, (2015).
- Remedial work should be undertaken to help learners with reading problems.
- Appropriate teaching strategies should be used to cater to the students' disabilities.
- Oral telling or reading aloud to students should be done every day. Allyn, (2015).
- Students should be encouraged to read every day. Hudson and Williams, (2015)
- Give students an opportunity to practice what has been taught. Adams, (2006).
- Recruit parents to reinforce at home what has been taught in school. Clark, (2007).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper sought to explore literacy for comprehension being taught as a tool for facilitating learning across all curriculum areas. Efforts were made to define literacy, the benefits of teaching literacy for comprehension; some problems in teaching literacy for comprehension and some suggestions on instructional practices which can drive this process.

The reality is that literacy educators, i.e., all teachers across the various curriculum areas, need to help their students develop literacy for comprehension so that it can be used as a tool for learning. I now make a plea that as literacy educators we acknowledge our students' right to be taught literacy for comprehension so that learning is facilitated in all curriculum areas; and for the development of the skills needed for students to thrive, not just survive, in the 21st century.

At this time, I am the voice of all students and I appeal to you to do whatever is necessary to ensure that our students have successful literacy experiences, including being taught literacy for understanding/

comprehension,

which would serve them well in this very competitive world. Teachers are critical to this process. This is how McLaughlin, (2012) puts it:

... the sincerest expression of child advocacy that schools can offer their students is to take whatever steps are necessary to make proficient readers of every child. And since teachers lie at the heart of that effort, one cannot advocate for children without advocating for them (teachers).

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