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TURNING PASSIVE READERS INTO ACTIVE READERS IN CONTENT AREA SUBJECTS

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Learning disabled (LD) students have been typically characterized as being passiver learners (Torgesen, 1977) who demonstrate a lack of fundamental information processing skills (Brown, Campione, & Day, 1981; Torgesen & Kail, 1980). The LD adolescent has a particularly difficult task in the pursuit of learning. Compounding the academic deficits associated with learning disabilities are the normal, developmental problems of the "teen-age" years. The LD adolescent must deal with questions arising from dating, driving, and job seeking. Academically, the LD adolescent needs to actively engage in reading and studying to pass courses required for high school graduation. This active engagement may be particularly difficult for some LD adolescents due to an environment which bombards these students with television, movies, home videos, and "ghetto blasters". An environment which is "tuned-in" electronically may create a student who is used to passively receiving information (or entertainment).

Recent research has produced a variety of techniques to promote a more active approach to information processing. These techniques include mnemonic strategies (Hagen & Barclay, 1982), visualization techniques (Alvermann, 1983), geometric organizers (Derr & Peters, in press), and listening strategies (Alley & Deshler, 1979). The magnitude of high school course requirements, however, suggests that the resource teacher should have the capability to teach reading strategies while teaching course content.

The purpose of this paper is to detail a metacognitive strategy which has exhibited the ability to improve the reading comprehension of poor readers (Brown & Palincsar, 1982) and LD adolescents (Elrod, 1984). Metacognition has been defined as "one's knowledge concerning one's own

cognitive processes and products" (Flavell, 1976). Metacognitive reading strategies have been effective in enhancing the reading comprehension performance of LD adolescents in the resource room while concurrently demonstrating the transferability of that performance to the regular classroom (Elrod, 1984). The metacognitive strategy outlined below could be an effective approach for a high school resource room teacher who has several mainstreamed LD students.

Procedure

The techniques discussed should be viewed as a total instructional package. All component steps would be used during the course of one reading assignment. Initially, teachers may want to have students write down responses to specific steps until the students master the entire strategic process.

Step 1: Establish a Purpose for Reading. Poor readers have been shown to demonstrate a characteristic of reading words without reading for meaning (Myers & Paris, 1978). To succeed in content areas, LD students must process important information that is contained within the text. Content area tests and assignments are structured so that the students will recall relevant information, not to have students remember or pronounce every word of the text. Therefor, it is of utmost importance that the teacher establish a foundation for reading--that is, we read to gain information.

Step 2: Skim for Relevant Cues (Pre-reading. Before reading the assigned passage, students should be directed toward picking out overt textual cues that provide clues to the information the passage contains. Examples of these cues are: (a) chapter title, (b) major heading, (c) subheads, (d) photos and illustrations, (e) maps, (f) charts and tables, and (g) words in italics or bold-face type.

Step 3: Predict Textual Content (Pre-reading. Using the textual cues obtained in Step 2, the students and the teacher should brainstorm some possible predictions as to the content of the reading passage. Depending on the skill level of the students, the teacher may have to define prediction and model possible predictions using the textual cues.

Step 4: Read. Having made a set of predictions, the students read the assigned passage, silently or orally.

Step 5: Verify/Alter Predictions. The teacher now directs the students to recall the predictions made in Step 3. Based on the actual content of the assigned passage (gleaned in Step 4), the students check their predictions and verify them if they are correct, or alter them if they are incorrect. In either case, specific evidence from the text should be cited as a reason to verify or alter.

Step 6: Clarification. During this step, students are asked if they had problems with terms, conepts, or information contained within the passage. Since LD adolescents are often reluctant to admit that they do not comprehend, the teacher may have to model appropriate clarification questions by asking "I was not quite sure about . . . Could someone help me? Was anyone else confused about this?"

Step 7: Question Formation. Using both the verified predictions (Step 5) and the material gleaned from reading (Step 4), the students are asked to "pretend that you are teachers and make up a test." As with previous steps, the teacher may have to model appropriate question-formation techniques. Students could be cued into precursor words that precede questions such as: "who," "when," "where," "how," and "why." After the questions have been brainstormed, each should be answered and discussed. As a possible motivating technique, the students' chapter tests could include a representative sample of student-generated questions.

Step 8: Summarization. During this step the students will paraphrase the content of the assigned reading passage. Students should be encouraged to recall the verified predictions and the self-generated questions and answers (Step 7). Again, the teacher may have to model appropriate summaries and relate which cues were used to generate the summary.

Step 9: Self-Check and Monitor. The teacher should inform the students that if they cannot complete Steps 5, 7, or 8 on their own, they do not full comprehend the material. In this case, the students may wish to carry out one or more of the following alternatives: (a) re-read a portion of the assigned passage, (b) re-read the entire assigned passage, (c) check the glossary or dictionary to clarify unknown words, (d) re-examine the textual cues (Step 2), (e) consult with another student, or (f) consult with the teacher.

Discussion

The strategic steps outlined in this article are designed to assist high school resource teachers in answering that perplexing instructional question: "How do I teach reading when I have to teach content?" When applied in a resource room, the metacognitive strategy has demonstrated its utility in increasing LD adolescents' comprehension abilities in content area subjects.

The structure of the high school curriculum places unique demands on resource teachers who must assist their students with a variety of content requirements. With the limited material that often reflect a resource teacher's instructional environment, the metacognitive strategy would appear to be an inexpensive and efficient means to enhance students' comprehension performance. The strategic package could be used for any content course in which reading comprehension is a key to success. Examples of such courses would include history, science, economics, health education, and driver's education. The metacognitive approach could ultimately transfer the reponsibility for reading comprehension success to the student. This transfer may alleviate the problems of having LD adolescents failing to apply techniques learned in the resource room to regular classes.

Future methodological research in reading comprehension should consider that some teachers do not have the luxury of teaching reading in a "reading" class. High school resource room teachers usually have to contend with ensuring the success of their students based on the demands of regular classes. Instructional strategies which address psychoeducational processes such as memory, or prerequisite educational skills such as reading, should consider the instruction of these process and skills within a content area framework. This approach may not only prove beneficial to high school resource teachers, but to regular teachers, as well.

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