
Reading Comprehension Strategies in Secondary Content-Area Classrooms

Many middle and high school students lack the strategies they need to comprehend the demanding content-area textbooks used in secondary classrooms. And their teachers lack the time and knowledge to help them develop those strategies. Ms. Ness offers suggestions for overcoming both of these obstacles to student success.

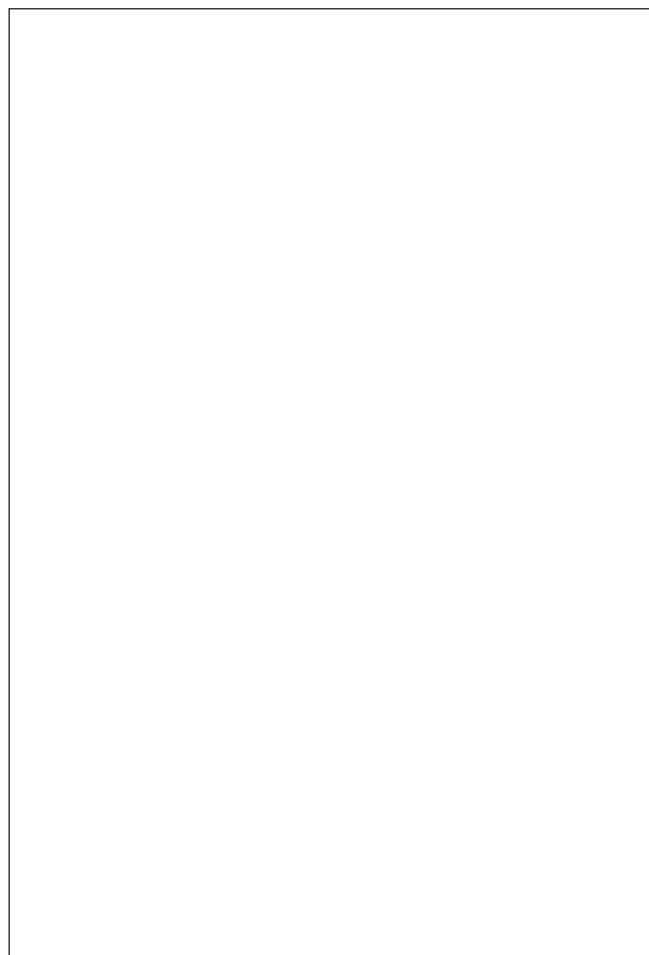
BY MOLLY NESS

AS STUDENTS move up through the grades, the academic demands on them increase, and a great many of those increases come in the form of reading. While basic literacy is certainly a problem for some students, they are in the minority. Most of our middle and high school students can read — if by that we understand the ability to “decode” text.

But the academic tasks students encounter in the upper elementary grades, and even more so in secondary school, involve a great deal of reading in support of learning new and complicated content. As Michael Kamil has reported, the ability to comprehend the expository texts in content-area textbooks is critical to students’ academic success.¹ Yet as the academic demands on our secondary students become more complicated, explicit reading instruction diminishes.²

The academic importance of instruction in reading comprehension is clear. Students who are taught such comprehension strategies as predicting, questioning, and summarizing improve their reading comprehension scores on both experimenter-constructed tests and

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standardized tests.³ So it seems clear that secondary teachers can help students become proficient readers of academic texts if they arm them with a variety of comprehension strategies.

Of course, for many decades literacy researchers have called on content-area teachers to provide explicit read-

ing instruction in secondary classrooms. Cries of “every teacher a teacher of reading” are anything but new. However, the message sometimes seems to have fallen on deaf ears, and there is much room for improvement with regard to literacy integration in math, science, social studies, and the fine arts.

Over the course of the 2005-06 academic year, I set out to examine the extent to which content-area secondary teachers included explicit comprehension strategies in regular classroom instruction. I examined the instructional practices of four content-area teachers in middle school and four content-area teachers in high school and sought answers to two broad questions:

- To what degree do the teachers incorporate reading comprehension strategies in their science and social studies classrooms? (That is, what percentage of instructional time do they spend on integrating literacy strategies in their classrooms?)

- Which reading comprehension strategies are most frequently used in middle and high school science and social studies classrooms?

I collected data from 2,400 minutes of direct classroom observations in eight middle and high school science and social studies classrooms. Acting as a nonparticipating observer, I coded the instruction I observed according to whether it was judged to be comprehension instruction or non-comprehension instruction.

While I began my study under no illusions that literacy integration would be extensive in these classrooms, I was surprised by how little instruction in reading comprehension I actually saw. In a total of 40 hours of classroom observations, these secondary content-area teachers allotted an average of just 82 minutes to teaching, explaining, modeling, scaffolding, and assisting students in using effective reading comprehension strategies. That’s just over 3% of instructional time devoted to helping these adolescent readers make meaning of text by asking and answering questions, summarizing, applying fix-up strategies when comprehension broke down, examining text structures, using graphic organizers, predicting, and clarifying. Furthermore, the reading comprehension instruction I did observe was limited in scope: the most heavily used strategies to support comprehension were asking literal questions and having students write summaries of text.

What might these findings mean? First, because middle school and high school curricula emphasize breadth over depth, teachers are likely to see their major instructional responsibility as covering their particular content in preparation for state tests. Teacher-led instruction dominated the classrooms I observed and took various forms: lectures, discussions, and films. But there

was little direct exposure to print. It seems clear that, when teachers feel instructional time is best spent delivering content, literacy integration takes a back seat.

In addition, my findings suggest that teachers see literacy integration and providing support for reading comprehension as just one more time-consuming burden, not as an effective way to improve student understanding and retention of content. Content-area teachers must be encouraged to reshape their understandings of reading and writing across the curriculum. Only then will they begin to see literacy integration as a fruitful opportunity rather than an instructional burden.

Of course, it’s easy to say secondary teachers should help students develop skills in reading for understanding, but the truth is that many of them have only limited knowledge of how to go about doing it. Of the eight research-based comprehension strategies discussed by the National Reading Panel,⁴ teachers in my study made use of just three: answering questions, summarizing text, and examining text structure. This suggests that teacher training and professional development opportunities are not effectively conveying the range of pedagogical possibilities for supporting students’ reading comprehension.

WHAT CAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS DO?

Even a minimal effort to include reading comprehension strategies in the professional development of practicing secondary teachers would have implications both within their classrooms and schoolwide. Here are three suggestions.

1. *Provide explicit professional development opportunities that show the instructional value of literacy integration.* To increase instruction in reading comprehension in secondary classrooms, schools must show teachers its value in content classes. With solid professional development in this area, teachers can begin to understand that literacy integration does not detract from content coverage but actually improves both comprehension and retention. In addition to receiving appropriate professional development, practicing teachers would also benefit from mentoring and coaching so that they could see the range of possibilities in content literacy. And as Gina Biancarosa and Catherine Snow explain it, integrating literacy, in particular comprehension strategies, into content-area instruction need not mean that content learning must suffer:

The idea is not that content-area teachers should become reading and writing teachers, but rather that they should emphasize the reading and writing practices that are specific to their subjects, so students are encouraged to read and

write like historians, scientists, mathematicians, and other subject-area experts.⁵

2. *Create an inquiry-based school environment where teachers critically reflect on their instructional goals and priorities.* Secondary schools can provide opportunities for inquiry-based teacher reflection. Though the majority of professional development opportunities will provide teachers with a plethora of reading and writing strategies, teachers are rarely asked to examine critically how literacy instruction might support their content-related instructional goals. When schools create collaborative environments in which teachers share both their instructional successes and struggles, literacy integration becomes a schoolwide priority, rather than a mere catch phrase. Among the ideas schools might try are teacher-led book clubs, in which colleagues read and discuss professional books by such authors as Kylee Beers and Chris Tovani or case studies of effective literacy integration in content-area classrooms.⁶ In these ways, teachers can begin to critically examine their own instruction and see literacy integration as an essential support for their content-related goals.

3. *Make use of literacy coaches and curriculum specialists.* Given the minimal literacy instruction that took place in the classrooms I observed, secondary teachers could certainly benefit from the presence of literacy coaches to act as “experts” in literacy integration. If literacy coaches were fixtures in our nation’s secondary schools, content-area teachers might begin to understand the need for literacy integration across the curriculum. By establishing a collaborative environment, literacy coaches could assist teachers in reflecting on their own instructional practices and beliefs. Literacy coaches could show content-area teachers that reading comprehension strategies do not detract from students’ learning of content but help them engage with, think critically about, and retain content.

The stakes are high for our nation’s middle and high school students. We expect them to read and learn a wide variety of material in texts with complex vocabulary and dense content. Secondary schools and teachers simply cannot shirk the responsibility of preparing their students for the academic demands they face. There are tremendous opportunities for schools and teachers to rise to the challenge; a wide body of research, including professional development journals and books, shows what effective literacy integration in secondary classrooms entails. By improving professional development, encouraging reflective school environments, and sparking collaboration between teachers, literacy coaches,

and curriculum specialists, we can make instruction in reading comprehension an expected classroom norm, rather than a rare occurrence.


1. Michael Kamil, *Adolescents and Literacy: Reading for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2000).

2. Patricia Alexander and Tamara Jetton, “Learning from Text: A Multi-dimensional and Developmental Perspective,” in Michael L. Kamil et al., eds., *Handbook of Reading Research, Vol. III* (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2000), pp. 285-310.

3. Michael Pressley, *Reading Instruction That Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching* (New York: Guilford, 1998); and Barak Rosenshine, Carla Meister, and Saul Chapman, “Teaching Students to Generate Questions: A Review of the Intervention Studies,” *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 66, 1996, pp. 181-221.

4. National Reading Panel, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction: Reports of the Subgroups* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

5. Gina Biancarosa and Catherine E. Snow, *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy: A Report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York* (Washington, D.C.: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004), p. 15.

6. Elizabeth B. Moje, “‘I Teach Students, Not Subjects’: Teacher-Student Relationships as Contexts for Secondary Literacy,” *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 31, 1996, pp. 172-95. 

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