What is Reciprocal Teaching?

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Statement of the problem

Reading comprehension is a key predictor of a student's broader academic learning. Teachers need to be aware of the strategies that best facilitate reading comprehension development.

Proposed solution/intervention

Reciprocal teaching is an instructional approach designed to teach students metacognitive strategies for reading comprehension. It has been used with typical readers and with students who have specific learning or reading comprehension difficulties. Students are explicitly taught four strategies: **summarising** what has been read, **asking questions** about the text, **predicting** what will happen next, and **clarifying** any unfamiliar word meanings.

Instruction proceeds with a gradual release of teacher responsibility. The teacher begins by reading a text and modelling application of the strategies. As students become familiar with the process through ongoing teacher-supported dialogue, they progress to discussing the text with – and providing instructional support to – their peers. In some iterations of the approach, each student will be asked to demonstrate all four skills at a time. Alternatively (e.g., in a small-group setting with four students), they may use different texts to rotate through roles of 'summariser', 'questioner', 'predictor' and 'clarifier'.

The theoretical rationale

The purpose of reciprocal teaching is for students to practise strategies for understanding a written text. Demonstrating each of the four strategies involves actively allocating extra time and attention to the text comprehension process and, in addition, to monitoring one's own comprehension success.

The reciprocal, interactive nature of the instruction means that the student is an active participant and that they have immediate access to feedback and guidance. The strategies are also taught and modelled with explicit links to a relevant written text. The gradual withdrawal of teacher modelling and aid means that the student remains 'comfortably challenged' – that is, engaged but not frustrated.

What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

In a small-group instructional context, there is good evidence that the approach improves reading comprehension for typical readers in Years 4-7 (~9-13 years old), as well as for students of various ages with learning (and specifically comprehension) difficulties. It is unclear what the minimum required duration of reciprocal teaching implementation is, though, on average, the approach has been employed twice weekly for six weeks.

Conclusion

Reciprocal teaching is an effective approach for teaching reading comprehension strategies. Given that students' learning of these strategies is likely to reach a ceiling after a finite number of instructional sessions, the approach is relatively low cost in terms of resourcing and time.

Key references

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