

My strengths and weaknesses for effective comprehension instruction for fifth grade seem to be fairly balanced. Given the Language Arts curriculum from my school district, there is a variety of comprehension strategies to teach and use within one story, wide range of vocabulary, and various word structures (prefix/suffix, Greek and Latin roots, homophones, etc.). One thing that the curriculum lacks is diversity of genres. Most of the stories used are expository texts and few narrative texts. Also, the curriculum lacks in the amount of time students spend reading the text. To make up for the faults within the curriculum (there is no magic curriculum that does EVERYTHING), my school uses Accelerated Reader, which is a computer program that students get points for quizzes they take on books that are in their ZPD. I set the goals for the students based on a pre-assessment they take, and the students read for the quarter to reach their goal. This seems to be effective, because in order for students to reach their goal they have to answer comprehension questions based on the book. However, if students do not manage their time well during the quarter and are scrambling for points, they tend to read books that are less challenging in order to get the points.

I believe the strengths within my comprehension instruction can be found in using KWL charts and graphic organizers, and explicitly teaching a variety of comprehension strategies. Each story within the curriculum takes us about five days to get through. The first day the students are introduced to the idea of the story, genre, activating prior knowledge, and vocabulary. According to Ehren, "Activating and building students' prior knowledge before reading a text improves their reading comprehension" (Ehren, EBP in Reading Comprehension Instruction, pg. 315). I find that my students enjoy talking about what they already know about a topic and I find that we sometimes get into deeper discussions about the given topic for the week. The second day we listen to the story on CD and use strategies such as clarifying and visualizing, and on the third day the students read the story with a partner and answer comprehension questions about the story. The fourth day we discuss the story as a group and I discuss other comprehension strategies such as compare and contrast, fact and opinion, and summarizing. On the fifth day the students are tested on their comprehension of the story and their use of the various strategies.

I find that when the students read the story the second time with a partner, they tend to think about things differently than they did from their original read. They usually find a new detail or discuss the story with their partner and some of them may change their thinking or consider ideas they didn't before. After the students read the story a second time we discuss the story aloud and I teach them the given strategies, such as comparing and contrasting, or making an inference. I find that some of my students really struggle with inference or drawing conclusions, because some of them lack the prior knowledge about a topic. It is very difficult when a few of my students lack the background knowledge, and I have struggled as a first year teacher to give them those exposures/experiences. Ehren gives three strategies for constructing knowledge base: strengthening knowledge of the world, teaching word meaning, and teaching concepts and relationships (Ehren, EBP in Reading Comprehension Instruction, pg. 312). I believe that I use these, but that I haven't developed them as well as I would like.

The comprehension needs of my students lie in the area of strategy use. Even though they are exposed to several different strategies, I worry that they are not independently using the strategies when they are reading. I feel that my instruction has a lot of control of when they should use a given strategy, but I do not believe that they always use the strategies when they are reading their Accelerated Reader books. Also, many of my students struggle with comprehension strategies that involve prior knowledge. As I said before, my students enjoy talking about what they already know about something, but many times they cannot make the connection of their prior knowledge and how to use that to predict, draw conclusions, or make an inference about a story. Whenever we have to use these types of strategies I always ask the students what helped them draw a conclusion or make an inference, so that the whole class can hear each other's thinking process.

Another need of my students would be exposure to different genres. The curriculum gives the students a lot of exposure to expository text and few narrative texts. Therefore, my students learn the comprehension strategies within the expository text genre, but when they are reading independently, many of them are reading fiction. This is part of the reason I feel that many of them are not using the reading comprehension strategies we use in class. I sometimes find it difficult to find ways to expose the students to other genres, because our district does not allow us to use chapter books to teach, because we have to use the Language Arts curriculum. This is extremely frustrating, because obviously the curriculum doesn't include everything and we are told to supplement for the missing pieces, but in this case they will not let us supplement.

I will change the environment of reading comprehension in my room by using more graphic organizers and finding ways to expose my students to a variety of genres other than those provided within the curriculum. By exposing the students to a variety of genres I will be able to show them how to use the reading comprehension strategies that we use in class with the books they are reading for Accelerated Reader. Also, even though I use KWL charts, I believe that I should be using other organizers and charts for them to organize their information and strategies used within a story. Even though we discuss and talk about the ideas in class, it would be helpful for them to have it written down, so they can remember what was used and why.

Out of all the subjects I teach (Language Arts, Math, and Social Studies), I find reading comprehension to be the most challenging. There is so many strategies, text genres, word analysis, vocabulary, and several others to teach the students to use, and not to mention the variety of the context to use it all in. Sometimes I feel that they really get it and then other times it seems as if I am speaking a completely different language. I wish there was a consistency where I can say that we just need to focus on vocabulary or word analysis, but the truth of the matter is, the students need to be prepared to use any genre of text and use a multiple strategies at one time while reading. I think, even as an adult, when I am reading I do not sit and think "okay this a time where I need to use 'compare and contrast,'" but I just use comprehension strategies without even thinking about it. I feel that we need to teach students to internalize the comprehension strategies and be able to use them in any text.