

## Activating Comprehension: Non-Fiction in the Classroom

by Carol Einstein

Comprehension is the reason for reading. According to *Put Reading First: The Research Blocks for Teaching Children to Read*, good readers are purposeful and active, but it is often difficult to earn and maintain a student's interest in a text. One of the best ways to engage students in reading and learning is through nonfiction. Much research has been done on *why* and *how* students can best comprehend a text, but less has been said about *what kinds* of texts can best aid the development of comprehension skills. Besides the usual trade book, basal reader, or magazine article, there are many other texts on many interesting topics, an endless variety of people, places, and things to read about. Nonfiction can help students learn to read purposefully and actively, to develop strategies, to interact directly with a text—while exploring new people and places, investigating new ideas about the world around them.

Luckily, I had parents who were always telling me interesting stories about people, places, and historical events. Unfortunately, in our hectic world parents don't always have time to tell stories. As teachers, we can make these stories of positive role models and significant events a dynamic part of the curriculum. When I started teaching reading comprehension, many of my students said they wished there were more books about women who had lived long ago. Then my students told me that they would like some stories about men, too, and about people living right now who had made a difference in the world.

When I first started planning my biography series, I thought all my subjects would be deceased. After all it's easier for the author; no one will pop up and question you, and there will be no unpleasant surprises. But after talking to a number of children I decided that half the subjects in my books should be living. To a second, third, or even fourth grader, fifty years might as well be several hundred. And when asked, most children will tell you that they much prefer reading about something that is happening now, not something that happened long ago. I also found that once students become interested in reading about living people, they are more willing to read about an important person of the past. I feel

the same way about places and events. Get your students interested in current events or neighborhood or city issues, and then you will see that historical places and events gain new significance, a new life.

So how can you use nonfiction to develop comprehension skills? The vitally important first step is for you to show and share your enthusiasm not only for the person, place, or event you're going to read about, but also for the activity of reading itself. Research shows that motivated teachers motivate children. Modeling enthusiasm and appreciation for reading is ever important in teaching children to enjoy reading and developing students' literacy horizons. You need to be a cheerleader for your subject.

The next step is pre-reading. Before your students begin reading a text, introduce any challenging vocabulary in advance. The National Reading Panel (2000) reports that the complex process of reading comprehension can not be understood without "a clear description of the role that vocabulary development and vocabulary instruction play in the understanding of what has been read." We all know from our own experience that sometimes one can understand the meaning of a word through its context, but often one cannot, especially if it is a content-area word in a content area with which one is not familiar. Before your class reads a story about women workers of World War II, you should pre-read the text and record the challenging words: *discrimination*, *distract*, *welding*, *riveter*, and *foundry*. Write them on the board and pronounce them clearly. Then ask if anyone knows what they mean. If no one does, write the definition. In the *Claims to Fame* and *Einstein's Who, What, and Where* series, vocabulary words and definitions follow the passage. It is helpful to model these words in a sentence or have students create sentences using the new words. The larger the reader's vocabulary, the easier it is to fully understand a text (NRP, 2000).

In order to help develop automaticity, I like to create personal *word boxes*, small file boxes of word cards, for my students. Students give the definition of the word on the card and use the word in a sentence five times in a row. If

the student can do this correctly, I put a checkmark on the card. When the student gets five checkmarks in a row, I say that the word is automatic, and it's placed at the back of the file box in an "automatic" section to be reviewed later on. My students are very proud of their boxes and many of them don't want to discard their automatic words. They save them from year to year as they become more and more fluent and better able to comprehend and appreciate what they read.

Teachers need to make students active participants in the learning process right from the beginning. The most effective way is by personalizing the assignment, and one of the most effective methods for achieving this, as reporting in *Reading First*, is by engaging the students' prior knowledge. The K-W-L model developed by Donna Ogle is an excellent strategy to use when reading nonfiction texts. This three-step process asks the students:

- What do you *know*?
- What do you *want* to know?
- What did you *learn*?

Before students read a story, ask them what they know about the subject. If you are reading about Jerry Yang, the founder of *Yahoo!*, ask your students what they know about searching the Internet. Next, ask them what they would like to know about it. After you have read the story, ask them to recall what they have just learned. These are crucial exercises to help engage students in the subject matter, and modeling is extremely important in K-W-L. Think aloud so your students can listen to your exact thinking process. Provide questions for the students to consider. In *Claims to Fame* and *Einstein's Who, What, and Where*, I have provided some model questions for students to ask themselves before they even begin reading. Before students read the story about women during World War II, I ask "What have you done to help your community or your country?" Before students read about the transcontinental railroad, I ask "Why is it important for a country to have a good transportation system?" Before they read a passage about the battle to end segregation, I ask "When you see something unfair happening, what do you do?" Activating prior knowledge of the subject not only makes students think about what they are about to read, but also helps teachers understand and appreciate what each child brings to the reading experience.

You can use the K-W-L strategy before, during, and after reading. You might want to ask some children to read their answers aloud. Demonstrate how you would answer such questions and verbalize your thought processes. Once your students have learned this strategy through modeling and practice, you can have them work in small groups, in pairs, or individually, and apply it to all kinds of texts.

Remember that text comprehension is both purposeful and active. With high-interest nonfiction texts and strategies such as K-W-L, we give students a purpose for reading and learning. We also must encourage our students to be active readers in order to achieve their purpose, to get the very most from a text, and we can do this by teaching them specific strategies proven to increase comprehension (Armbruster et al., 2000; Snow, 2000). The National Reading Panel (2000) outlines the most important of these scientifically-proven strategies, including:

- comprehension monitoring
- summarizing
- question answering
- question generating

**Monitoring** one's own comprehension is a difficult task because it involves metacognition, or thinking about one's thought process. This strategy involves all the stages of reading, from thinking about what you already know about the subject, to adjusting your reading speed of the text, to "fixing-up" any problems that you encounter as you try to understand what you have read. One monitoring approach that has worked well with my students is **coding**. Encourage students to mark-up their texts: put a check next to parts they find interesting and a question mark next to something they don't understand. Students can put a star beside important ideas and write in the margin about why the ideas are important.

Modeling is a very important step in teaching the skill of active reading. I suggest you read aloud from a transparency text and think-aloud as your students follow in their books. As you read, model how to monitor your comprehension and interact with the text by coding it.

Another proven strategy is **summarizing**. Encourage students to pause after they are through reading to think about what they have just read. Ask them to retell the story.

If they have trouble recalling what they read, they should reread the story again, this time more slowly and actively, monitoring their comprehension along the way. If students have difficulty recalling the entire passage, have them pause mid-text (or after every paragraph if the student is still struggling) and have them summarize the text up to that point. You might have students write their summaries down, as this often helps them retain the information. Have students share their information with a partner or the reading group. Some students may have recalled an important element that another student has missed.

One of the most important components of effective instruction in reading comprehension is **questioning**. As they read, students should be self-monitoring by questioning themselves about the text as well as questioning the author. Asking questions helps them to focus, understand, and remember the text. Questioning is also one of the only ways to assess comprehension, and achievement tests attach very high stakes to students' ability to find answers in a text. Even when the specific goal of the test is to assess knowledge in the content areas, says a report by Catherine Snow (2000), the tests actually reflect a student's skills in reading comprehension.

Students are expected to answer questions that require knowledge of detail, sequence, main idea, and inference. Teachers should understand the strategies that help students understand how and where to find these answers in a text, and then to express their answers in a clear, effective way that demonstrates what they have learned. One of the most important purposes for reading nonfiction is to answer specific questions (Harvey and Goudvis, 2000).

I always ask my students to write answers that are complete sentences, as it provides context to and helps them remember their answers. I always also stress how important it is for the students to look back at the passage for the answer to a particular question, then underline or highlight the exact information if it is a detail question, or the information needed to infer an answer. Searching a text for information is a skill that students will use throughout their lifetimes, not to mention when reading passages for information on standardized tests.

In order to find answers within a text, it is important to teach students to distinguish between essential and nonessential information. This strategy of "determining importance" is best introduced with nonfiction (Harvey

and Goudvis, 2000). The task of determining importance and finding answers go hand in hand, and can often cause difficulty for some students. Fortunately, there are several strategies students can use to help in the task. Encourage your students to look carefully at the first and last lines of each paragraph, which often contain important information. Train your students to pay attention to and code any information that takes them by surprise, as it is probably new or important. Nonfiction texts often contain cues that will signal important information. Encourage your students to look carefully for the following signals.

- italic or bold print
- cue words or phrases such as *for example, for instance, most important, therefore, on the other hand*, etc.
- illustrations and photographs

It is also worthwhile to teach the specific expository patterns that nonfiction forms can take: cause and effect, problem and solution, comparison and contrast, etc. Students will be able to find and construct meaning more easily when they are familiar with the structure and know what to expect of the text, whether it is a trade book or textbook, a newspaper article or a standardized test passage.

Because nonfiction often follows a specific expository pattern, it can also be used to spark students' writing skills. If a person, place, or event interests your students, encourage them to further explore the topic in writing. In *Einstein's Who, What, and Where*, writing exercises follow the passage and comprehension questions. After a passage about the Great Wall of China, I ask students to imagine they are a reporter working on an article for a travel magazine. After a passage about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I ask students to compile a bill of students' rights, sequence them in order of their importance, and write a letter to the school board persuading them to accept the bill. After a passage about Gabriel Garcia Marquez, I ask students to write a story in which magical things happen in everyday life.

Nonfiction is often an excellent way to introduce and develop language and critical thinking skills, essential components of good reading comprehension. When my students read about Jerry Yang in *Claims to Fame* Book 2, they learn that he used categories to build his search engine. After this passage, the students categorize items as *states, insects, or jewelry*. Your students can do this individually,

with partners, or in small groups. You can develop extension activities that require students to place items in categories they create themselves, compose tables and charts in a word processing document, or study and map the categories on the *Yahoo!* pages.

Nonfiction texts can help encourage our students to think about the words they use in their own writing, to be precise writers, and to vary their word usage. After all, there are many more interesting and exact adjectives besides *good* or *bad*. After a passage about Ferdinand Magellan, I ask students to provide four adjectives to describe him and three other important figures in the text. Exercises in important language concepts such as synonyms and antonyms, homophones, homographs, similes and metaphors, and idioms and proverbs will deepen students' appreciation of a text and help them become better readers and writers.

Nonfiction studies are inherently cross-curricular, and have a place in almost every aspect of the curriculum, not just in reading. A passage about the Silk Road can be read in social studies class, Marie Sklodowska Curie in science, or Ludwig van Beethoven in music. Guided by the careful modeling of the teacher, nonfiction comprehension can be easily

incorporated in the classroom, in small cooperative groups, or in remedial situations, where students can explore a text and employ these ever important strategies one-on-one with their instructors.

Emily Dickinson once said "There is no frigate like a book to take us lands away." This is certainly true of fiction, but it is also true of nonfiction. There is something very special about a real person, place, or event. It happened. It is the truth. Nonfiction gives children knowledge. And knowledge gives children dreams.

#### About The Author

Carol Einstein received her M.A. and M.Ed. from Columbia University and has significant experience as an educator in both public and private schools. She has taught second grade, has worked as a reading specialist for grades 1–7, and is now an educational therapist. Her publications include *Reading for Content; Claims to Fame; Einstein's Who, What, and Where* (Educators Publishing Service); and *Be Your Own Reading Specialist: A Guide for Teachers of Grades 1–3* (Modern Learning Press).

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