

Reciprocal Teaching

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Of late, the role of metacognition in reading has received considerable attention from researchers and practitioners. This is reflected in the views advanced by researchers such as Brown and Palinscar (1985) and Gracia and Pearson (1990). This line of research is particularly important because of the difference between teaching of discrete skills and making learners aware of the internal processes that are carried on in the mind through metacognition. Often, individual readers may be able to perform discrete skills such as skimming and scanning, tolerating ambiguity, finding meanings from context and drawing inferences, but face difficulty in summoning the right strategies to gain holistic understanding of text. One methodology that has proven to offset this difficulty and internalize the process of understanding is Reciprocal Teaching.

This paper will first explain the four activities in Reciprocal Teaching which orientate students to a new conceptual model of the task of reading as opposed to the traditional, and involve them in metacognitive skills necessary for expert reading. The four main activities are:

1. **Summarizing** - When students summarize they are forced to pick out the main idea of the paragraph or text. This strategy helps students to evaluate the importance of ideas and line them up accordingly. Students learn that if they cannot form a good summary they do not understand the text and will either have to reread or try to clarify difficulties before they move on.
2. **Formulating Questions** - When students have to make up questions to ask they are indirectly checking whether there is logical sequence in the text presented, and hence, if the text makes sense to them.
3. **Clarifying** - When students clarify points of difficulty they are in fact getting a clearer picture of the whole. If summarizing can be said to be a global test of comprehension, then clarifying attempts sort out small points of difficulty at word or phrase levels of meaning.
4. **Predicting** - When students attempt to predict they should have a proper understanding of the part of the text they have already read so that their prediction will be in line with what is to come subsequently. If their predictions are wrong then perhaps, their understanding of the text is not thorough and they will have to clarify their points of difficulty.

In carrying out these activities there are several central principles and steps that must be adhered to. Brown and Palinscar (1985) list them as follows:

- a. the teacher must model the activity one by one so as to make it explicit to the students. All strategies must be contextualized, that is, they must always be modeled in the context of a dialogue between student and teacher during the actual reading of a text.
- b. students should be encouraged to intervene during every activity and should be in the know of the range of options of that particular strategy.
- c. students must see for themselves that the strategies are working.
- d. the teacher should gradually wean students to other more capable students who will assume the role of the teacher.
- e. the teacher should act only as a scaffold/coach after her responsibilities are handed over to the student-teacher, coming into the picture only and if necessary.
- f. eventually the teacher should fade out of the picture and stay in the background to monitor and provide feedback.

For Reciprocal Teaching to be effective the teacher must first model, then coach and eventually fade into the background and monitor the activity as students assume the position of teacher.

By modeling activities, the teacher shows students what expert readers do when they comprehend and remember text. Furthermore, observation of teacher modeling helps learners develop a conceptual model of the target task before attempting to execute it. Collins et. al. (1989) argue that, a conceptual model is crucial to a learner attempting complex skills for it provides him/her with: firstly, an "advanced organizer"; secondly, "an interpretive structure for making sense of the feedback, hints, and corrections from the master" and thirdly, "an internalized guide for the period of relatively independent practice".

Throughout the four activities of Reciprocal Teaching, coaching is initially provided by the teacher and later by peers. Coaching enables a novice to solve his/her problems and attain his/her goals which would not be possible if unassisted. This takes care of a situation which would otherwise be embarrassing for a weak, shy or inhibited learner. Right from the start the student is aware of the tacit contract drawn between him, his teacher and peers, that help would be granted and that he is expected to reciprocate when others are in need.

The final aspect of Reciprocal Teaching requires the student to assume the role of teacher and the teacher to fade into the background. The student-teacher will not only have to model and monitor but will also have to evaluate questions, summaries, and predictions other students have made/formulated.

By becoming critics as well as producers students are forced to articulate their knowledge about what makes a good question, prediction and summary. This knowledge becomes more readily available for application to their own summaries and questions, thus improving a crucial aspect of their metacognitive skills. Moreover, once articulated, this knowledge can no longer reside in tacit form. It becomes more available for performing a variety of tasks, that is, it is freed from its contextual binding, and can be used in many different contexts

(Collins et. al. 1989: 10).

Brown, Campione and Day (1981) see the principle of this sort of metacognitive awareness training or Reciprocal Teaching as getting students to understand the interactive nature of reading and the

active role played by the reader. Instead of advocating blind training techniques they propagate informed, self-controlled training.

The next part of the paper provides a guideline for the use of Reciprocal Teaching in a classroom.

Beginning Reciprocal Teaching

(adapted from: Reciprocal Teaching Project, 1988).

Sort out reading texts that are of interest to students and grade them according to the level of difficulty. As students progress give them more and more complex texts.

Before modeling each activity, introduce the activity to students by asking them what they think it is and if necessary expand on their definition.

Then show examples of what each activity is. For instance, in the case of "summarizing" you could ask one or two students to give the title of their favourite story or film and ask them to tell the class, what the story is about. After they have told the stories, explain that these stories are really summaries as they are shortened versions of the original and that they had in them what was crucial to the story. Also, explain that summarizing is a way to test their understanding of the text.

After explaining each activity as you approach it, preferably in the given sequence (the summarizing strategy is recommended before the questioning strategy as the former provides the student with guidelines for evaluating the importance of ideas, which will in turn help in generating main idea questions), give students the prepared texts.

Examples of how texts can be used for each strategy is given below:

Step 1: Identifying the topic

Ask students to identify the topic by asking themselves, "What is the text mainly about?" After they have identified the topic ask them to ask themselves, "What has the author told me about this topic?" Then, tell them that sometimes the author summarizes the most important information in one sentence called the topic sentence, and that it is generally found at the beginning or end of a paragraph. Use a chosen text to illustrate. Refer to the examples that follow.

Text: When the cat feels threatened, its whole body shows how it might feel. It arches its back. Its hair stands on end. The cat might even put its ears back and make a hissing sound.

Ask what the topic of the paragraph is or what the paragraph is mainly about? (a cat)

Ask what the author has told us about cats. (their whole body shows how they feel)

Tell students that the author has summarized the most important information, and ask them where exactly it is. Once they have given the answer, point out that it is at the beginning of the paragraph. Later, give other examples of topic sentences at the end of paragraphs.

Step 2: Create your own summary.

Tell students that when the author does not provide a summary in a topic sentence, then, they must create one by using whichever of the three rules given below is applicable.

List the three rules on the blackboard:

1. Leave out information that is repeated.
2. Leave out information that is not important.
3. Give steps of lists - a title.

Text: It is a wonder that castles were ever built at all. Most of them were made so long ago that every single job had to be done by hand. There were almost no machines. So all the work was done by people. Hundreds and hundreds of men had to do all the work.

Ask the students to ask themselves:

what the topic of the paragraph is. (Castles)
 if there is a topic sentence. (No)
 if there is any information that is repeated. (All the work was done by people, and men had to do all the work).

Once students point out information that is repeated, tell them that it is now easier to figure out the most important information that we need to include in our summary and ask them what it is. (Castles had to be built by hand since there were no machines. Hundreds of men were needed to build a castle).

In the same way, get students to practice rules #2 and 3.

Text: Many people used to die from snakebites. In the past few years, doctors have discovered a medicine that works against the snake poison. This medicine is called antivenin. If a person is bitten by a poisonous snake and gets this medicine quickly, he will not die. Thanks to antivenin, very few people in Malaysia now die from snakebites.

Write on the board one or two questions which are not relevant to the text and ask students why they are not. For example: why do snakes bite people? (This is not relevant because the paragraph does not tell us about why snakes bite).

In what country do few people die of snakebites? (Although this question can be answered from the text it is not an important one because it does not help us to understand the paragraph).

Point out that the best question would be, "Why do few people die from snakebites these days?" because not only does it demand understanding about the medicine that saves people from snakebites but also helps students to think about the important ideas in the paragraph.

Predicting

Text: Alligators and crocodiles are alike in some ways. Both alligators and crocodiles are reptiles. Both eat other animals. But in other ways, alligators and crocodiles are different.

Ask students to ask themselves what it is that would follow the last sentence. When the right answer is given ask them what the clue was that led them to their prediction.

Explain that headings and subheadings in a story can also help us make predictions.

Example: The Big Pile of Dirt

No place to play How the dirt came to the lot Students meet city council

Clarifying

Text: In those days, most of the sidewalks and many roads were made of wood. A fire could take a walk down a city with little trouble.

Ask students to ask themselves what it is they don't understand in the text. If they appear to understand, prompt them to explain what, "fire could take a walk down the city" means. Besides using straight forward clues to find meanings in a passage, urge them to find out meanings of metaphorical phrases from the context as well. Also, demonstrate to students by using the right text, that some meanings are available only if you read ahead and how some words must be looked up in the dictionary.

After explaining and demonstrating the four activities, get students who can take the lead and assign them, one at a time, to conduct the discussion the way you did it.

Coach the student-teacher whenever it is necessary, thus keeping him on the right path. Also help-out when students get stuck by asking the appropriate questions and showing them how you arrived at the answer. Encourage the other students to ask questions if they have not understood any part of the text and get the student-teacher to answer them. The student-teacher must also make sure that all questions are answered and if not why they cannot be answered.

Although every one in the small group must participate, the student-teacher must lead the discussion, Give students specific feedback like, "your question was very good because it referred to the right information", or "the clue that you chose to find out the meaning of the word is appropriate" etc. Don't ask vague questions like, "a better question might be...?"

To the extent you find the students assuming greater responsibility, withdraw yourself correspondingly and eventually leave your discussion solely to the students. Your role now, will be to monitor and assist, only and if necessary. Throughout instruction, however, assume the role of leader at regular intervals so to bring the students back into the fold, should they go astray. In short, everything must be done to keep students conscious of the metacognitive skills.

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