Teaching Comprehension and Text Structure in the Content Areas
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The Common Core standards place significant emphasis on comprehension and text structure instruction for increasingly more complex text that is both narrative and informational (Common Core, 2010). The adoption of these standards by most states has drawn attention to the need for all teachers to explicitly teach text comprehension.

In the past few years a number of resources have become available that provide information about research regarding comprehension literacy instruction for students in grades 4-12, including those who struggle with reading (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Torgesen et al.,2007; National Institute for Literacy, 2007; Scammacca et al., 2007; Kamil et al., 2008). A consistent recommendation found in these reports is that content literacy skills taught by content-area teachers using subject-specific reading materials are essential for improving comprehension skills. This is especially true for struggling readers. In the middle and high school grades, there are often minimal opportunities to receive intervention instruction, and when this is available it is often for only a small amount of time each day – these struggling learners still spend most of their school day in content classrooms.

Torgesen and colleagues (2007) make the point that in order to meet adolescent literacy goals all teachers must be involved, especially since most middle and high school student spend most of their time in content-area classes and must learn to read expository, informational, content-area texts with greater proficiency. The report said, "Although reading strategies might be taught explicitly in a designated reading support class, students are unlikely to generalize them broadly to content areas unless teachers also explicitly support and elaborate the strategies' use with content-area texts" (p. 12).

After grade 4, reading in content areas becomes longer, more complex, and more full of content. It also becomes increasingly more varied in vocabulary, text structure, purpose, and style (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). Every academic subject has different ways of using written materials to communicate information, which means being literate may mean different things in differing contexts and content areas. One of the main conclusions of *Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas* is that comprehension (including before, during, and after routines), word-level, and writing strategies are best taught in the content area classes using challenging, content-rich texts. Research reports addressing instruction for struggling readers identify decoding as a possible area for intervention, but add comprehension and text structure as key areas for intervention and content reading instruction (Torgesen et al., 2007; Kamil et al., 2008). Torgesen and his colleagues make these specific recommendations:

- *Comprehension strategies*—Educators can use multiple approaches to help struggling readers become more active and strategic readers. Strategy instruction should be explicit and include modeling, guided practice, feedback, and scaffolding. Student collaboration in comprehension strategies has also been shown to be helpful (Torgesen et al., 2007).
- *Text structure*—Helping students organize the information through the use of graphic organizers and providing direct instruction on text structures and organizational patterns is helpful (Toregesen et al., 2007).

Text Structure Instruction
Text is written much in the same way a house is built. The writer begins with a basic blueprint that guides the overall design of the house, which is like the overall organization of a piece of text. The blueprint for narrative text tends to be organized around literary elements such as setting, characters, plot, and theme. The blueprint for information text tends to be based on a hierarchy of main ideas and subordinate main ideas, often reflected through the use of headings and sub-headings.

The details of text, like those of a house, are determined by the structure at more specific levels. Continuing with this metaphor, the sections or chapters of text represent the rooms of the house, the paragraph represent the walls that frame each room, and the sentences represent the details in each room such as floors, doors, windows, electric sockets, etc. Just as some homes fit a standard style or blueprint (e.g., a split level, ranch, two-story colonial), some text structures are fairly predictable. Sometimes readers encounter unusually structured or very complex text, similar

to unique building designs. Students need explicit instruction to learn how to determine the broader structures of the texts they read.

Students also need explicit instruction in the detailed structures – that is, how sentences and paragraphs are structured. One of the anchor reading standards in the Common Core literacy standards (2010) specifically addresses sentences and paragraphs:

> 5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole. (p.10)

The ways in which authors express their ideas through syntax (sentence structure) and paragraphs greatly affects a reader's ability to access and identify those ideas.

Syntax is the study and understanding of grammar – the system and arrangement of words, phrases and clauses that make up a sentence. In order to comprehend a sentence, the reader must process, store (in working memory), and integrate a variety of syntactic and word meaning information (Paris & Hamilton, 2009). One by one, sentences communicate ideas that combine to create meaning. Efficient processing of sentence structure is necessary for overall comprehension. The level of a text's syntax is one predictor of a text's comprehensibility (Snow et al., 2005), and effective readers have knowledge of phrase structures, parts of sentences, and how they work (Scott, 2004). Sentences that are complex, contain a large number of ideas, or have unusual word order will make it difficult for students to comprehend what they are reading, especially students who enter school with limited oral language exposure or for whom English is a second language. Students build syntactic awareness through exposure to oral language and particularly through exposure to written language that they hear through read aloud or are able to start reading around grade 3.

Teachers can use activities to build syntactic awareness; sentence combining in particular has been found to improve reading comprehension and writing skills (Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham & Hebert, 2010). Other activities that can build sentence skills include sentence anagrams, sentence deconstruction and expansion, and coding of parts of sentences. These types of activities enable students to practice manipulating words and parts of sentences, which builds fluency in sentence writing and sentence comprehension. It is important to note that more traditional approaches for grammar instruction (i.e., teaching parts of speech and labeling of parts of sentences) has not found to be helpful for developing syntactic awareness (Anderson, 1997; Saddler & Graham, 2005 as reported in Graham & Perrin, 2007). Rather, teaching students to focus on the function and practical application of grammar within the context of reading text and writing (e.g., sentence combining) does produced strong and positive effects on students' literacy skills (Graham & Perin, 2007).

Knowledge of basic paragraph structure is also critical to text comprehension. Knowledge of paragraph structure enables students to more readily identify main ideas and key supporting details while reading. Basic paragraph structure can be introduced in the primary grades (i.e., topic sentence, supporting sentences, concluding sentence). However, as student progress into grades 4 and above, they need to be taught that text often contains unstructured paragraphs that contain more than one idea or have a main idea that must be inferred. Therefore, paragraph instruction is best taught using actual content classroom reading material.

Conclusion
Text structure has long been neglected, and many teachers are not as aware of best practices for teaching text structure, especially content teachers who need to play a significant role in developing student knowledge of text structure. Hopefully, the emphasis on text structure in the Common Core standards and of the more recent research on content literacy instruction will provide the incentive and background knowledge so that teachers can take on the challenge of text instruction.

For further information about comprehension instruction, the author can be contacted through the Keys to Literacy website: www.keystoliteracy.com

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