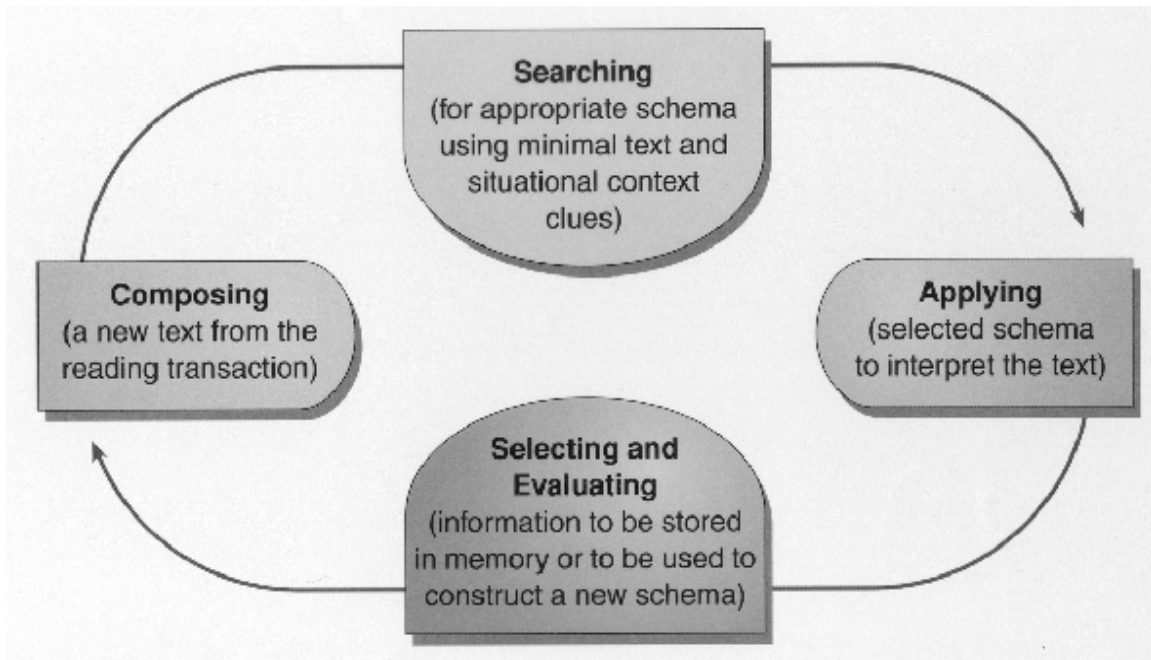


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***Session Title: Overcoming Comprehension Challenges: Assisting Struggling Students  
to Eliminate Comprehension Difficulties***

*D. Ray Reutzel*  
*Emma Eccles Jones Center for Early Childhood Education*  
*Utah State University*



Reutzel, D. R. & Cooter, R. B. (2000). *Teaching Children to Read: Putting the Pieces Together*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice-Hall.

**A Sampling of Comprehension Problems**

1. Students do not have the necessary background knowledge to understand a specific topic.
2. Readers may have well-developed background knowledge for a topic, but authors fail to provide enough information to access their knowledge.
3. Teachers may not help students activate appropriate background knowledge or experiences.
4. Readers may activate their background knowledge to understand a text but fail to change it when the text demands a change.
5. Readers may not know an important word in the text.
6. Readers may know one meaning for a word in a text but the author used it to mean something else.
7. Readers may not know how to recognize and use text organization.
8. Readers may not recognize when they do not understand the message of the author.
9. Readers fail to shift the relevant from the irrelevant.
10. Readers fail to select appropriate strategies for understanding a text.

***Assessing Student’s Background Knowledge and Experiences - PReP***

Children’s background information and experiences are among the most important contributors or inhibitors of comprehension. Researchers have determined that students who possess a great deal of background information about a subject tend to recall greater amounts of information more accurately from reading than do students with little or no background knowledge (Pearson, Hansen, & Gordon, 1979; Carr & Thompson, 1996; Pressley, 2000; Block & Pressley, 2002; Reutzel and Cooter, 2000). It also a well known fact that well-developed background information can inhibit the comprehension of new information that conflicts with or refutes prior knowledge and assumptions about a specific topic. Thus, knowing how much knowledge a reader has about a concept, topic, or event can help teachers better prepare students to read and comprehend successfully. One way that teachers can assess background knowledge and experience is to use a procedure called PReP developed by Langer (1982) for assessing the amount and content of students’ background knowledge about selected topics, themes, concepts, and events.

***Materials***

The checklist and materials shown below:

Phrase 1	What comes to mind when ...?		
Phrase 2	What made you think of ...?		
Phrase 3	Have you any new ideas about?		
Select a stimulus to prompt students to activate background knowledge (Picture, word, phrase, experience, event, etc.)			
	Much – (3)	Some – (2)	Little – (1)
	Category Labels	Examples	Personal Associations
	Definitions	Attributes	Word Parts
	Analogies	Defining	Sound Alikes
	Relationships	Characteristics	Personal Experiences
Student Names			
Mary Jacobs	_____	_____ <u>  X  </u> _____	_____
Jawan Sites	_____ <u>  X  </u> _____	_____	_____

*Select a story for children to read. Construct a list of specific vocabulary terms or story concepts related to the topic, message, theme, or events to be experienced in reading the story. For example, students may read the story Stone Fox by John R. Gardiner (1980) about a boy named Willy, who saves his grandfather’s farm from the tax collector. Construct a list of 5 to 10 specific vocabulary terms or concepts related to story. Use this list to probe background knowledge and experiences of the students about the story’s message and plot. Such a list might include the following:*

1. Broke
2. Taxes
3. Tax Collector
4. Dogsled Race
5. Samoyeds

Students are asked to respond to each of these terms in writing or through discussion. This is accomplished by using one of several stem statements, as shown in the shared area above such as, "What comes to mind when you think of paying bills and you hear the term “broke?" Students then respond. Once students have responded to each of the specific terms, the teacher can score the responses to survey the

extent and nature of the class's and each individual's knowledge and experience with, in this case, taxes and tax collectors. Award the number of points that most closely represents the level of prior knowledge in the response for each item. Divide the total score for the list of terms, concepts, or events by the number of terms, concepts, or events in the list to determine the average knowledge level of individual students. By scanning the x's in the checklist, a teacher can get a sense of the entire class' overall level of prior knowledge. Information thus gathered can be used to inform both the content and nature of comprehension instruction aimed at activating and using background knowledge and experiences.

### ***Reciprocal Teaching Cards***

Palincsar and Brown (1985) designed and evaluated an approach for improving the reading comprehension and comprehension monitoring of special needs students who scored two years below grade level on standardized tests of reading comprehension. Their results suggest a teaching strategy called Reciprocal Teaching that is useful for helping students who have difficulties with comprehension and comprehension monitoring as well as those who are learning English (Johnson-Glenberg, 2000; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994; Casanave, 1988). Although Reciprocal Teaching was originally intended for use with expository text, we can see no reason why this intervention strategy cannot be used with narrative texts by focusing discussion and reading on the major elements of stories.

Hoyt (1999) describes a process using cards for teaching children the four interrelated processes of Reciprocal Teaching:

- *Prediction*: Students predict from the title and pictures the possible content of the text. The teacher records the predictions.
- *Question Generation*: Students generate purpose questions after reading a predetermined segment of the text, such as a paragraph, page, etc.
- *Summarizing*: Students write a brief summary for the text by starting with "This paragraph was about . . ." Summarizing helps students capture the gist of the text.
- *Clarifying*: Students and teacher discuss various reasons a text may be hard or confusing, such as difficult vocabulary, poor text organization, unfamiliar content, or lack of cohesion. Students are then instructed in a variety of comprehension fix-up or repair strategies.

Card #1: Please get ready to read to \_\_\_\_\_.

Card # 2: I predict this part will be about \_\_\_\_\_. (Leader speaks.)

Card # 3: Does anyone else have a prediction? (Group members speak.)

Card #4: Please read silently to the point we selected.

Card #5: Are there any words you thought were interesting? (Group.)

Card #6: Are there any ideas you found interesting or puzzling? (Group).

Card #7: Do you have comments about the reading? (Group.)

Card #8: Summarize (in 2 or 3 sentences): This was about \_\_\_\_\_. (Discussion Leader.)

Prepare children to use Reciprocal Teaching Cards by modeling the process with several segments of text. Next, have students use the cards shown below in small groups. The group leader shows the cards. Teachers who use Reciprocal Teaching to help students with comprehension difficulties should follow four simple guidelines suggested by Palincsar and Brown (1985). First, assess student difficulties and provide

reading materials appropriate to students' decoding abilities. Second, use Reciprocal Teaching for at least 30 minutes a day for 15 to 20 consecutive days. Third, model frequently and provide corrective feedback. Finally, monitor student progress regularly and individually to determine whether the instruction is having the intended effect. Palincsar and Brown (1985) and Pressley (2000) have reported positive results for this intervention procedure by demonstrating dramatic changes in students' ineffective reading behaviors. Other research has demonstrated the effectiveness of *Reciprocal Teaching* with a variety of students (Casanave, 1988; Johnson-Glenberg, 2000; King & Parent-Johnson, 1999; Kelly, Moore, & Bryan, 1994; Pressley & Wharton-McDonald, 1997; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994)

## Graphic Organizer

Students often have difficulty comprehending information texts. A *Graphic Organizer* is essentially a visual display summarizing and organizing information to be learned which is distributed to students prior to reading. It is a way of showing relationships concepts and helping teachers clarify teaching goals (Simmons & Kameenui, 1998).

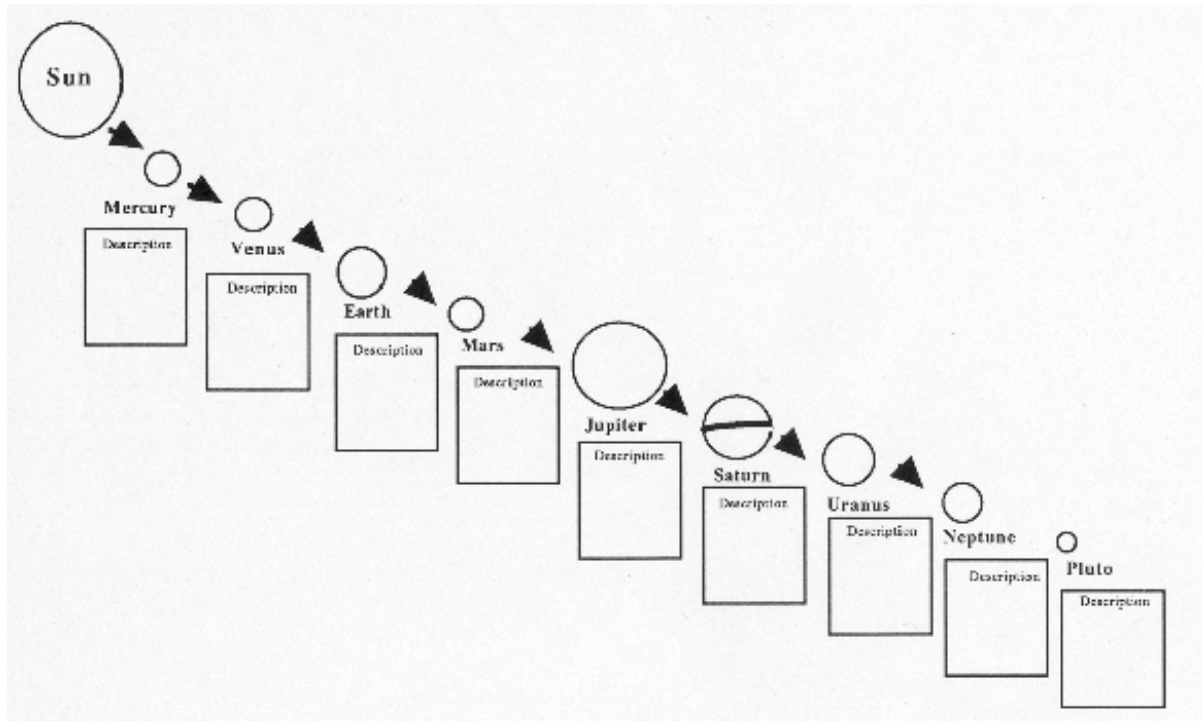
### • *Materials*

An information text to be used as part of a new unit of instruction

A graphic organizer is constructed in essentially two steps. They are:

1. Identify the type of text structure or organization used by the author.
2. Select a visual that will highlight this type of structure.

*Format.* Teachers may wish to use a variety of graphic formats to depict the same text. It is important that the visual communicate the overall organization of the text to the readers and help them understand the relationships of ideas to one another. Below find an example of a third-grade level trade book called, *My Book of the Planets* (Krulik, 1991). This graphic organizer depicts the author's organization, a collection structure, very clearly for students to follow and use in gathering text information during and after reading.



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