Monitoring Comprehension

Even when students have acquired the decoding and word recognition skills to "read" grade level text, teachers are still concerned about their students' ability to construct meaning. What teacher hasn't experienced situations where a student's oral or written responses to text clearly indicated a lack of comprehension? Teachers may ask themselves if students were aware, while reading, if the text was making sense or not.

What is Monitoring Comprehension?

Monitoring comprehension is the ability of a reader to be aware, while reading, whether a text is making sense or not. A considerable body of research investigated this aspect of reading in the 1970's and 1980's (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione (1983); Flavell (1981); Garner (1987). These investigators sometimes used "altered text" on good and poor readers. The altered text usually contained an inconsistent element. After reading, the students were asked to discuss the selection or were asked questions to ascertain who noticed the inconsistent element. In almost all cases, the skilled readers noticed the inconsistency while the unskilled readers did not. In fact, the skilled readers not only noticed the inconsistency, but were at times puzzled and somewhat annoyed. To resolve this inconsistency, the skilled readers employed a host of techniques to "fix-up" their comprehension. The unskilled readers, who were not monitoring their comprehension, were unaware, during reading, whether they were comprehending well or not. They, therefore, could not employ any "fix-up" strategies.

Assessing Students' Comprehension Monitoring

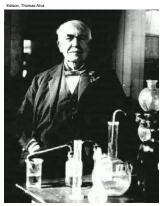
The first step in helping students develop the skill of monitoring their comprehension is determining whether the students already have this skill. Teachers can use their memories of how students have responded to comprehension questions and tasks and then infer whether students must have been monitoring their comprehension. Teachers can also do "action research" in their classrooms by replicating the methods researchers have used to assess students' monitoring abilities.

Strategy: Inconsistent Element

An easy and informative technique to see whether students are monitoring their comprehension is to select a passage on a group's instructional level, then retype it adding an inconsistent element. Introduce the selection as you would normally do when you are getting students ready to read (tapping prior knowledge, setting a purpose for reading). After reading, ask students to comment on what they read. They may summarize or relate the information to a personal experience. See if any student points out the inconsistent element. **The next page has an example of altered text: Thomas Edison.**

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"Thomas Edison"



The Bettmann Archiv

Thomas Alva Edison was one of the greatest inventors of the 19th century. He is most famous for inventing the light bulb in 1879. He also developed the world's first electric light-power station in 1882.

Edison was born in the village of Milan, Ohio, on Feb. 11, 1847. His family later moved to Port Huron, Michigan. He went to school for only three months, when he was seven. It is warm in the summer. After that, his mother taught him at home. Thomas loved to read. At twelve years old, he became a train-boy, selling magazines and candy on the Grand Trunk Railroad. He spent all his money on books and equipment for his experiments.

At the age of fifteen, Edison became manager of a telegraph office. His first inventions helped improve the telegraph, an early method for sending messages over electric wires. At twenty-one, Edison produced his first major invention, a stock ticker for printing stock-exchange quotes. He was paid \$40,000 for this invention. He took this money and opened a manufacturing shop and a small laboratory in Newark, N. J. Later he gave up manufacturing, and moved his laboratory to Menlo Park, New Jersey. At this laboratory, he directed other inventors

During the rest of his life he and his laboratory invented the phonograph, film for the movie industry, and the alkaline battery. By the time he died at West Orange, New Jersey on Oct. 18, 1931, he had created over 1,000 inventions.

Adapted from Grolier Electronic Publishing, Inc., 1995

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Using The "Thomas Edison" Altered Text

In using the "Edison" selection, the following procedures can be used:

- 1. Introduce the topic by talking about inventors and inventions. Student responses can be recorded for the group to see. The discussion can then turn to Thomas Edison. Students could volunteer any knowledge they have about the inventor. These responses can also be recorded.
- 2. Tell students you have a short selection about Thomas Edison. Tell them their purpose for reading is to learn (additional?) information about the inventor. Ask them to read only the first two paragraphs. You can also project the passage on an overhead or have it printed on a large chart and only show the first two paragraphs.
- 3. When students have read the first two paragraphs, ask them to respond to the purpose you gave them. Then ask them if they had any other reactions to the information. Note if anyone comments on the inconsistent element in the second paragraph [It is warm in the summer]. If no one does (don't be surprised), ask increasingly direct questions about the inconsistency, such as;

Was this piece easy or hard to read? Did you understand everything you read? Was there anything that didn't make sense? Did all the information fit?

If some students detected an inconsistency, have them identify it for everyone and discuss why it didn't fit. Ask the reader(s) who detected it how they did it? Also ask them what they did about it when they discovered it? Compliment the readers who discovered the inconsistency.

- 4. Now tell the class you have two more paragraphs of information about Edison. Ask them what their purpose should be for reading the rest. In addition to reestablishing the original purpose (learning additional information about Edison) guide students to include the purpose of trying to find any other information that doesn't fit.
- 5. After reading, ask students to reveal whether they detected any other inconsistencies (there aren't any more). Some "overzealous" students will be certain there is another one. Resolve these concerns by revisiting the text.
- 6. Ask students to discuss whether they read the second two paragraphs in a different way than the first two paragraphs. Point out that good readers always think about whether the text is making sense while they are reading.