

Conversation: The comprehension connection

Conversation is a basis for critical thinking. It is the thread that ties together cognitive strategies and provides students with the practice that becomes the foundation for reading, writing, and thinking.

Growing up today, some children are limited in the amount of time they spend engaged in actual conversations with adults. Adult and child interaction is often reserved for directives like “watch TV,” “leave me alone,” or “stop fighting with your sister!” Adults’ busy lifestyles provide children with lots of time to be alone, to watch television, or be involved in organized activities, but they have few opportunities to engage in conversations that support critical thinking and cognitive development.

In some classrooms, students are required to be quiet for most of the day. They have little opportunity to practice thinking strategies or show evidence of their level of cognitive development. In other classrooms, conversation becomes the way that we, as teachers, determine the strategies a student understands and employs as he or she comprehends. Teachers who model cognitive strategies and foster student discussion know that strategies get better as students practice their use. In addition, teachers recognize the value in providing time for students to reflect, form ideas, cite evidence of their evolving thinking, and comprehend. Students actively engaged in the conversation process can, over time, become reflective, critical thinkers.

Discussions focused on the reading students are doing or hearing in the classroom provide a framework for talk for students and teachers. This

framework helps students stay focused upon the topic at hand rather than on unrelated dialogue.

Conversation helps individuals make sense of their world. It helps to build empathy, understanding, respect for different opinions, and ownership of the learning process. It helps students sort out their ideas of the world and begin to understand how they fit into it. Used as a connection to cognitive strategies, conversation fosters comprehension acquisition.

In recent years, proficient reader research has yielded information about what good readers do as they comprehend text. Comprehending readers commonly use seven cognitive strategies. *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997), *Strategies That Work* (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000), and *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction* (Farstrup & Samuels, 2002) give clear and useful information about these cognitive strategies.

Commonly noted cognitive strategies

As readers comprehend, they *make connections* (Gordon & Pearson, 1983; Hansen, 1981; Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992). It is these connections to the text, to the world, to background information, and to experiences (schema) that make readers feel like the characters, connect to the story, or remember similar experiences.

Readers also *question* as they read (Andre & Anderson, 1978/1979; Brown & Palincsar, 1985). Often, the questioning is so subtle that readers are unaware they are even doing it. A few years ago, I was talking with a teacher about questioning. The teacher told me that she didn’t believe she asked questions as she read. I challenged her to think

about her thinking. She decided to make a question mark in the text next to places when she realized she had a question. In our next conversation, she shared with me that she was astounded that she did ask questions as she read. She kept searching for the answer as she continued reading. Other questions surfaced as she read further. Readers come up with their own questions about what they have read. These questions guide the reader to search for additional information. Students should be asked, on a regular basis, to become aware of their own questions.

Readers are often coaxed into reading through *mental imagery* (Gambrell & Bales, 1986; Gambrell & Jawitz, 1993; Pressley, 1977; Sadoski, 1983, 1985). Smelling the chocolate chip cookies the author writes about or making a movie in one's mind propels readers to continue reading. Mental imaging includes one's senses and emotions. Connecting to emotions and senses helps us get deeper into the layers of comprehension within text because we can identify with the character or situation in extremely personal ways. Readers apply this knowledge and make comparisons on the basis of mental images and emotions.

Another key strategy in understanding is to *determine importance* (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1986; Baumann, 1986; Tierney & Cunningham, 1984; Winograd & Bridge, 1986). Readers sort through passages, taking note of pertinent information and discarding extraneous facts. Students are often surprised to find that everything in print is not equally important. Conversation about what is important helps students sort through all the hierarchy of information presented in text.

Using all of this information and their personal schema, readers *infer* as they read (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Brown, Day, & Jones, 1983). Readers analyze and differentiate data and then infer. Inferences are based on personal knowledge and the information found in text.

As readers read, they *retell and synthesize* (Brown et al., 1983). While retelling is a surface-level skill, it plays an important role in synthesizing. In retelling, one states the key points or events in the text. Synthesizing is a more advanced skill, in that it involves retelling, analyzing, evaluating, summarizing, inferring, and linking to personal experiences and knowledge. It leads to understanding

a deeper meaning than what is found from literal interpretation of the words.

Readers continually employ *fix-up strategies* to correct and monitor meaning while reading (Garner, 1987). When comprehension falls apart, readers act to get it back on track. Readers employ different strategies to get back to the meaning of the story. Sometimes they reread, place a finger under the difficult parts, subvocalize, locate pages where the tricky part was first mentioned, or check out a picture. Action is taken to fix up the lost meaning. Reading continues, guided by the meaning of the text.

When readers comprehend, they use these seven strategies continuously and simultaneously. Students need opportunities to practice using these strategies in authentic ways. Conversation can be a vehicle through which children learn and practice the cognitive strategies.

Social Inquiry–Conversation

I have observed children use these strategies for more than 30 years. During my career, I have focused on literacy acquisition. I have done no formalized studies, so what follows is based solely on my observations, intuitions, reflections, readings, conversations, action research, and thoughts about my experience working with kindergarten through sixth-grade students. I have seen what happens as readers, writers, mathematicians, and thinkers begin to understand their work and talk about that understanding. As I have closely observed children and adults, I have come to believe there is another integral part of the cognitive strategies that must accompany any dialogue about teaching comprehension. I call it social inquiry or conversation. It is the thread that is woven throughout the comprehension quilt. It is the tie that binds. Regie Routman stated in her book, *Conversations* (2000), “All learning involves conversation. The ongoing dialogue, internal and external, that occurs as we read write, listen, compose, observe, refine, interpret, and analyze is how we learn” (p. xxxvi). Conversation is our connection to comprehension.

Alvermann, Dillon, and O'Brien (1987) talked about conversation as the vehicle that enriches and refines one's knowledge. Hearing ideas discussed orally from another's point of view increases

understanding, memory, and monitoring of one's own thinking. Ideas transition on the basis of the conversation. The oral process helps students clarify and solidify their thoughts. The thinking changes from what it was before the conversation took place. Through conversation, the student is in charge of his or her own mental processing. The teacher acts as a facilitator, pushing the student to rely upon and monitor his or her own comprehension, which fosters critical thinking.

Vygotsky believed learning is a social activity. In *Mind in Society* (1934/1978), he talked about language as a mechanism for thinking—a mental tool. This mental tool is employed over and over as we comprehend issues—when we read, hear, or experience a new idea. We reflect and internally react to it using cognitive strategies as the filter. We have internal conversations about topics or ideas. We clarify and fit the theory into our thinking and then seek feedback from others. We can't wait to share what we've learned by having a conversation with friends. In such conversations, we can be tentative at first, but as the conversation continues, the feedback we receive clarifies, strengthens, or diminishes the original concept. Through the conversation we transition to a more complex meaning than we would have made solely from our own efforts.

Careful modeling, discussion, and coaching help us evolve thoughts or ideas. Conversation and simultaneous reflection, using the cognitive strategies, are a critical part of comprehension for most of us. Feedback from conversation helps us form a new idea or support or reject an original idea. Internal inquiry can proceed from, accompany, or follow social inquiry. The conversation and thinking become more complex as the discussion continues because of the different viewpoints of others. These viewpoints are forged into new or solidified thinking by conversation. We learn through discussion, and it molds our thinking. Our growing body of knowledge is forever changed after such conversations. The internal and external input, reflection, and conversation have propelled our knowledge to a new place. It is deepened, strengthened, rejected, clarified, or confused—transitioned in some way because of the discoveries made during reflection and conversation. Cognitive strategies can be used as we try out many tentative ideas with one another.

Conversation is a critical part of learning how to make meaning and how to make sense out of the world in which we live. One of our roles as teachers is to promote ongoing learning. Opportunities to use and practice the cognitive strategies are a critical piece of this ongoing learning. This includes conversation. Successful learning communities encourage students to try out their thoughts and ideas about the world through conversation with others. Classrooms should be places where students think out loud and are asked by the teacher to share why and how they came to their beliefs. Having a balance of focused, student-directed, and student-led conversation and time for reflection provides an environment that targets comprehension acquisition. Creating classroom conversations, where students are authentically learning, accessing information, and reflecting on and trying out their theories about the world will create students who comprehend and think for themselves.

Routman (2000) emphasized the important role of conversation and comprehension. She said,

Much of what I know, I know because I have questioned and thought about ideas with others, tried things out, modified stances, talked with colleagues. Always, conversations play a major role in my thinking, learning, teaching, and changing. So it is with all learners. I would argue that when no conversations are going on, as in whole class "skill and drill," it's not learning that's taking place but rather rote memorization. (p. xxxvi)

Conversation and comprehension instruction

In classrooms, teachers use many different formats for conversation. The following are some common ones:

- literature circles—students have specific roles and discuss books in light of their roles,
- book clubs—students talk about significant parts of the book,
- cross-age conversations—students of different ages talk together,
- whole-class discussions—students share their ideas together,
- think/pair/share—students converse with a partner then share,

- small-group discussion—several children in a group engage in discussion, and
- individual conferences—students have a conversation with a teacher or a peer.

Recently, I visited a classroom of fifth-grade students in a school with a 98% free and reduced-cost lunch classification. The teacher liked to use a combination of the whole-class and small-group discussion formats. He had previously instructed his students about the individual cognitive strategies. As he worked with students, he used conversation and explicit teaching to strengthen and connect his students' cognitive strategies. I observed a lesson that began with a student reading a passage from a textbook orally. The reader made an inference about the meaning of the paragraph. This particular paragraph was about the Industrial Revolution. It referred to the emergence of assembly lines in businesses. The reader inferred that the United States was changed due to workers lining up for work. At that point, other students raised their hands to signal agreement or disagreement with the inference. The teacher asked students to talk with their partners about the inference the reader had made. As I listened to a small group of children talking, I heard another student say that she thought an assembly line was what her mother worked on at the tire factory. She said her mother was responsible for checking treads on tires. She continued by telling that others on the line had different responsibilities. Each person did his or her job quickly and many tires would be ready to be sold in a short amount of time. One of the girl's partners agreed, saying that her uncle also worked at a plant and she had heard him talk about the assembly lines. They continued making additional connections to the text and to their lives. Through the ensuing conversation, students had many questions clarified and answered. Information was synthesized as new information was attached to existing ideas. Combining facts from previously read passages of the text and their knowledge of life experiences, students concluded that this was a different way of producing goods than had been used in the past. Their inference was that it changed the way the United States produced goods. Conversations continued throughout the room. Students flipped through pages of the text and talked about their own lives to provide evidence that led to their reasoning. New ideas and thoughts

began to weave in and out of existing ideas. Students began looking at the original thoughts with new insights. The teacher signaled time to bring their ideas together and called on various students to share their thinking.

At the end of the period, students had concluded that the meaning of this reading was entirely different from the original inference. In this process, students questioned, thought about ideas in light of others' viewpoints, made and shared connections, used mental imaging, determined importance, inferred, retold, synthesized, and arrived at a clearer understanding of the passage. The teacher talked with his students about how the conversation was a tool to make the cognitive strategies concrete and how the conversation aided everyone's comprehension. He reminded students that they should use conversation and the cognitive strategies to help themselves in every subject all day long. Students discussed how the conversation helped them to understand what they were reading and thinking. Students have daily opportunities to practice the cognitive strategies through conversation in this classroom. The teacher could have easily told the students the meaning of the passage, but they would not have engaged in the thinking process or practiced how to use the cognitive strategies to gain meaning.

Every student was engaged in this classroom. Students wanted to be a part of the discussion. They liked the opportunity to talk about what they knew and link it to what they were learning. In this classroom, they knew they could share their ideas in an encouraging and nurturing environment that promoted respect for each individual and his or her thoughts. Comprehension has improved and strengthened since the teacher implemented this process.

In a first-grade classroom at a different school with a similar free and reduced-cost lunch status, I observed a teacher reading a book aloud to students. After several readings, she asked the students to take time to think about a character in the book. In this particular passage, the character continually said and did mean things to others. The teacher then asked students to turn to their neighbor and share words that might describe the character. As I listened to pairs, I heard them talk about siblings or friends that were just like the character. They described the character in great detail. After the

conversation, students shared words they had come up with that described the character. Words like *spoiled*, *self-centered*, and *conceited* appeared on the list the teacher wrote. The teacher used the list to talk about descriptive words and character traits. Later, she and the students used the list as a reference for writing. She could have easily written the list of character traits without engaging students in a think/pair/share activity, but the students would not have gone through the thinking process. Students need to experience the process in order to become thinkers. Again, all students were engaged. The conversation pulled students into the lesson and made it personal. Each student was accountable for his or her own thinking. The teacher made statements that encouraged thinking and independence. She asked students to cite evidence from the read-aloud and their own lives that helped them to make connections. The conversations become the out-loud practice for what happens in the students' heads as they read in the future. The teacher felt that the students were thinking on a much deeper level than in the past because of this activity. As the teacher works with students, she sets up the situation so students will use the cognitive strategies to find meaning. She does this using conversation as the vehicle to make thinking concrete. This teacher sees further evidence of students' deep thinking in the discussions from reading group, and in their writings in Writer's Workshop.

In an inner-city school, I conferred with a student in Reader's Workshop who had just finished reading *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White (1952/1974). I asked the student to tell me about the book. She stated very literal, surface-level interpretations of the story. She told me, "This is a story about a pig who wanted to be famous. He had a friend named Charlotte." I asked the student to talk about her friendships and the friendships in the book because she had mentioned that Charlotte was Wilbur's friend. She talked about her friends and began to make connections to the story. As she discussed what was important to her, she began to make some inferences between her life and what happened in the story. Our conversation continued. At one point, the student's eyes lit up and she said, "Charlotte was Wilbur's friend. Charlotte gave so much for Wilbur that she had nothing left for herself. That's friendship!" As we continued our conversation she began to see that the story was about

much more than a pig wanting to be famous. Through the conversation, this student was able to understand the book on a deeper level. Individual comprehension depends greatly on personal knowledge and experiences, reflections, and exposure to thoughts of others. Without conversation, we are limited to our own insights. With conversation, we can explore and expand our developing thoughts. We construct our own meaning, influenced by the knowledge and experience of others. This student constructed her own meaning with input from another person. Comprehension was deepened through the conversation.

In all three examples, conversation is what engaged the students. It was their opportunity to practice thinking. It would have been easier, and certainly quieter, to just tell the students what the teachers wanted them to know, but the students are the ones that need to have practice in using the cognitive strategies. In addition, the conversation is evidence for the teacher to assess the student in her or his thinking. Teachers observed the conversation by listening to students in all of these examples. If the conversation strayed, they posed questions to get students back on track. In classrooms that use conversation as a comprehension connection, student engagement is unusually high.

Palmer (1998) encouraged teachers to expect and invite talk. As teachers, we can provide opportunities for students to engage in conversations. In so doing, the talk can transform teaching into learning. As this happens, teachers are amazed at the depth of comprehension students demonstrate.

Students need opportunities to practice the use of cognitive strategies in order to internalize them and strengthen their comprehension. Students who engage in conversation in the classroom become reflective thinkers. Conversation brings meaning to life as students seek to contemplate and understand our complex world. Conversation is the comprehension connection.

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