



Ask Chris

This month Chris Turner answers a question about comprehension and vocabulary.

My student reads reasonably fluently. However, he seems to have difficulty with comprehension. Do you have any suggestions.

Puzzled

There are two main causes of poor comprehension. The first is poor decoding skills. If students have a great deal of difficulty with decoding, their reading will be slow and they may guess at a lot of words, which limits understanding. Because your student reads fluently, decoding is probably not a major problem for him.

The other main reason people fail to understand what they read is that they don't have the necessary vocabulary or background information. This holds many students back so we need to help them increase their vocabularies as they read.

1. Pre-reading activities

It is easy to forget how important pre-reading activities are for new readers. In general, you should probably plan to spend as much time on pre-reading and review as you do on actual reading activities. Here are a couple of suggestions for pre-reading activities. You can find other suggestions in your Handbook.

Before you begin, pick out seven or eight key words from the passage to review. Include a couple of words you think he already knows, as well as new words. Including familiar words will make the task of reading less daunting. Go over the meaning of the words together. Let your student predict the content of the passage from the words.

Another useful pre-reading activity is to go over comprehension questions before reading a passage. This gives your student a chance to think about what he will be expected to learn and gives you a chance to clarify unfamiliar words or concepts.

2. During Reading

Read in chunks. Ask your student to make a small mark whenever he comes to a word he does not know, so that he doesn't have to stop in mid flow. Some students like to put a small dot on top of the word or a check mark beside them. Stress that you will go over the words later and he will have a chance to learn them, but for now he just has to mark what he doesn't know. Remind him that the more words he knows, the easier it will be for him to read, so he doesn't need to worry about how many he marks. Let him read either silently or out loud.

Stop after each paragraph and go over the words he has marked. Remember to use prefix and suffix clues and to link the word to other familiar contexts. Talk about how the word conveys meaning in the passage. Don't move on until you are sure your student understands the main idea in the paragraph and all of the words he has marked.

Then have him read the passage again. Check back that your student remembers the new words. Keep working on the same passage until your student feels that not only can he read it smoothly and fluently, but that he understands what it means. You want to get him to the point where reading and understanding come together easily. Then move on to the next chunk.

3. After Reading: Personal Dictionary

Your student needs to own a dictionary and get used to looking up key words on his own. In addition, he should be developing a small personal dictionary. He can buy a small alphabetized notebook so that he can write down new words and look them up again easily. It may take persistence on your part to get him in the habit of doing this. Encourage him to use his new words, especially in the writing that you do together.

Other problems

If these suggestions don't appear to be helping, then you may need to consider whether your student might have information processing difficulties. Use the Checklist for Struggling Learners at the back of your Handbook to help you identify areas of difficulty. If it appears that his problems understanding go beyond an undeveloped vocabulary, then give me a call for more advice.