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# Effective Reading Strategies for Increasing the Reading Comprehension Level of Third-Grade Students with Learning Disabilities

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**Annotation:** This article study is to identify the reading problems that prevent third graders with learning disabilities from comprehending the text well and discover the effective reading comprehension strategies that experienced special education teachers utilize in resource room settings to improve their students' comprehension levels. To understand the essence of the present research, a review of relevant literature is discussed in the following sections: reading comprehension skill and models, reading problems that prevent students with learning disabilities of comprehending what they are reading and classroom-based reading comprehension assessments that teachers use to assess students' reading comprehension and the effectiveness of these strategies.

**Keywords:** reading comprehension, effective strategies, text, reading problems, skills, assessments.

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Reading is an essential skill that students need to gain in the early grades because it will be the foundation of learning in all academic subjects throughout their education [7]. Mastering reading skills before students reach third grade is especially critical because after third grade, students begin to read in order to gain knowledge and learn from the academic content. In addition, students who fail to master reading skills by the end of third grade, have low motivation for learning, behavioral challenges, and low academic achievement and are possibly at a risk of not graduating from high school. However, students who are able to master reading by third or fourth grade have greater possibility of achieving academic success [6]. More importantly, while engaging in reading activities, 19 students need to be able to understand what they are reading. Reading comprehension is one of the most important components of reading to master. It requires students to move beyond decoding individual vocabulary and statements to constructing a solid understanding of the entire passage (Woolley, 2011). Comprehension is a complex process that requires an active interaction between the students' background knowledge of the context, the purpose of the reading material, and the level of vocabulary and language used by the authors in order to gain meaning of a text [6]. The process is complex because it requires students to engage in multiple cognitive activities, processes, and skills. These skills involve fluently decoding words, understanding the language syntax, making inferences, using background knowledge, and managing working memory as needed (FletcherJanzen, Reynolds, & Vannest, 2013; Hollenbeck, 2011; Kendeou, McMaster, & Christ, 2016; Woolley, 2011). Even a short passage of material requires the reader to have strategic control of when and how to use each of these skills. The Importance of Reading Comprehension Students need reading comprehension skills in order to be successful in both academic and personal life. In students' academic lives, reading comprehension is the basis for understanding all the

academic content. The importance of reading comprehension increases significantly in all academic subjects as students go ahead through grades. In particular, students need reading comprehension skills to successfully accomplish the educational expectations at school and in the classroom. For example, students are expected to understand what they are reading from multiple sources in order to research topics in different academic areas. Also, being able to understand what they are reading allows students to quickly locate pertinent information, exclude non-relevant information to the present topic, and identify the important information to focus on. Academic success also requires students to be able to understand, analyze, and apply information they gathered through reading. Also, students need reading comprehension skill to be able to understand and perform their academic assignments. However, without having reading comprehension skills, students cannot accomplish all of that work (Clarke, Truelove, Hulme, & Snowling, 2013; Wong, 2011). Reading comprehension is also an essential skill that individuals need in order to be successful in their personal lives (Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007). For instance, to be successful, individuals need to understand the basic text that appears in utility bills, housing contracts, career applications, and newsletters (Hoeh, 2015). Also, individuals need reading comprehension skills in order to be able to have and maintain a job and successfully engage in different daily activities [5]. The need for reading comprehension significantly increases when thinking about the negative consequences of not being able to read in critical situations. For instance, not being able to read and comprehend dosage directions on a bottle of medicine or caution on a container of dangerous chemicals can put individuals in a very dangerous situation that threatens their safety and lives (Marshall, n.d.). If not being able to successfully read prevents students from graduating from school, they cannot easily find a job and live independently [5]. Even though they might find a job, the pay rate will be much less when compare to proficient readers (Brault, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Another possible negative consequence of not being able to read is being socially exclusive[5]. In contrast, individuals who can recognize what they are reading, can safely live their lives, and continue to gain socially and intellectually [5].

### Reading Comprehension Models

There are three major reading comprehension models that play a significant role in managing and facilitating the comprehension process, as well as assisting readers to better understand a written passage and overcome their reading comprehension difficulties while engaging in the reading process. These models include the bottom-up model, the top-down model, and the interactive model. The three models differ from one another based on their concentration of the method that readers apply in order to obtain meaning from a written passage. For instance, the bottom-up model requires readers to decode each word in the text in order to gain meaning. In contrast, the top-down model emphasizes the role that both the reader's background knowledge and previous experience about the given topic play in order to obtain meaning form a text. However, the interactive model looks at the reading process as an activity that requires engaging in two interactions. The first interaction occurs between the written text and the reader's prior experiences about the topic, while the second interaction occurs between different kinds of reading strategies that the reader utilizes[1]. More explanations of these reading comprehension models follow.

#### Bottom-up model.

The notion behind the bottom-up model is that readers should gradually start the reading process by decoding every letter, vocabulary word, and eventually sentence in order to construct meaning from a written passage. In other words, this model looks at the entire reading process as letter and vocabulary-based. Thus, in order to successfully gain meaning from a text, readers are required to understand and recognize each letter and vocabulary word while reading. Since this model emphasizes the importance of understanding every single word for comprehension, quick word understanding is an essential requirement for the bottom-up approach (Ahmadi et al., 2013; Van Duzer, 1999). This reading comprehension model supposes that readers who follow the bottom-up reading process rapidly become expert readers whose proficiency plays a significant role in improving their ability to decode

(Pressley, 2000). However, this model looks at the readers who are not able to quickly decode words in the text as struggling readers whose comprehension process is interrupted by their failure to decode. Proficiency in decoding enables successful readers to easily and rapidly understand letter chunks, prefixes, suffixes, and the original vocabulary. As a result, readers' ability to rapidly decode words can exploit more memory capacity in their brains for reading comprehension. On the other hand, struggling readers spend more time and effort trying to figure out the meaning of each vocabulary word in the text, which results in losing a lot of the processing capacity in the brain that needed for understanding the text (Ahmadi & Gilakjani, 2012; Pressley, 2000). Even though having the ability to rapidly decode is important for improving reading comprehension, the bottom-up model has been criticized for several reasons. First, according to Grabe and Stoller (2002), the "bottom-up model suggests that all reading follows a mechanical pattern in which the reader creates a piece-by-piece mental translation of the information in the text, with little interference from the reader's own background knowledge" (p.32). Second, this model requires readers to apply the vocabulary-by-vocabulary decoding process, which is considered slow process that requires a lot of time and attempts from the reader to understand a text. Trying to decode each word in the text can weigh the reader's short-term memory; therefore, the reader is more likely to forget what they have read by the time they finish their reading process. As a result, instead of gaining a solid understanding from the written passage, the reader may only be able to understand different isolated words. Without having comprehensive understanding of a text, the reader will not be able to engage in reading and activate their critical thinking skills, which might also negatively impact their motivation level to read on a regular basis. Next, this model has been criticized because it does not take into consideration the role that the readers' prior knowledge plays in facilitating reading comprehension process. In other words, the constructing of the bottom-up model (letters→ words→ sentences) can limit the readers' ability to notice the processes that exist during the overall reading process. The limitations linked to the bottom-up reading comprehension model contributed to the produce of the top-down reading model [4]. Top-down model. In contrast to the bottom-up model, the top-down reading comprehension model engages readers' prior knowledge, experience, and expectation about a particular topic in order to obtain meaning from a written passage. Thus, as described by Eskey (2005), the top-down model considers reading comprehension as a process that begins "from the brain to text" (p. 564). In the top-down model, readers are required to start the process of reading comprehension with building particular expectations about the text. These expectations should be built based on a reader's previous knowledge about a particular topic. After building some expectations, the reader moves to another task in which they draw on their world knowledge in order to decode vocabulary within the text to either prove or modify their pre-established expectations. The top-down model emphasizes the importance of different comprehension skills, such as prediction, analysis, making an inference from the text, and summarizing. Even though the top-down reading comprehension model emerged to address the limitations within the bottom-up model, it has been criticized due to its heavy dependence on readers' prior expectation, information, and background knowledge, and its disregard of the significance of the text. Also, the top-down model is criticized for its neglect of the potential problems that readers might encounter while building their expectations or predictions about a specific passage, especially when the topic is not familiar to them.

Interactive model. Since the interactive model emerged to address weakness and limitations that were found in both the bottom-up and the top-down reading comprehension models, it tends to integrate features of each. Today, the interactive model is the most widely conclusive model for explaining the process of reading comprehension and confirms the importance of the interaction between a reader and the text [1]. Mainly, the interactive model adapts the notion that neither the bottom-up nor the top-down model can be used in isolation to explain the entire reading comprehension process. Therefore, it called for the creation of an

interaction between these two models [1]. In addition, Rumelhardt (1977) emphasized that “both sensory and non-sensory come together at one place and the reading process is the product of simultaneous joint application of all the knowledge sources” (p. 735). Similarly, Alderson (2000) pointed out that “the whole reading process is not an ‘either/or’ selection between the bottom-up and top-down models, but involves the interaction between both approaches” (p. 38). The interactive reading comprehension model stresses the important roles that both lower-level processing skill, such as word recognition and higher-level inference and reasoning skills, such as text explanation play in comprehending a text (Grabe, 1991). Thus, the interactive model considers reading comprehension process as a product that emerged as a result of gaining meaning through the interaction between both readers and written passages, instead of looking at reading comprehension as an easy transmission of the textual passage and information to the reader’s brain [4]. However, when the reader loses the appropriate bottom-up skills required to understand a passage, they will compensate by using the high-level processes. Unskilled readers usually resort to use more high-level processes than skilled readers do. That is because the use of the top-down processes appears to compensate for their lack of not being able to use the bottom-up processes (Eskey, 2005; Stanovich, 1980).

Overall, although various strategies have been demonstrated as effective intervention for improving students’ reading comprehension, educators should not rely on one single strategy while teaching their students. That is because one specific strategy might be beneficial for one particular student, but not for another due to the unique comprehension problems that each student has. Also, educators should be aware of that even utilizing evidence-based strategies may negatively influence students’ reading comprehension if it is employed in an inappropriate or very modified form.

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