

An Examination of Strategies to Improve Main Idea Comprehension

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### **Introduction**

While high-level readers often intuitively understand how to dissect expository passages and locate the main idea, striving readers are often not equipped with the tools necessary to both decode a passage and wade through extraneous details. Most strategies taught to low-performing readers are limited to finding literal main ideas (Schumaker, Denton, & Deshler, 1984; cited in Boudah, 2013). However, state testing requirements often monitor a student's ability to locate *inferential* main ideas. And, for almost all reading purposes, successful comprehension hinges on a reader's ability to detect a main idea (Van den Broek, Lynch, & Naslund, 2003). Therefore, it becomes essential that English teachers explicitly instruct low-level readers on how to identify the main idea in order to aid comprehension and build reading agency. Because of the connection between a student's ability to locate the main idea of an expository passage and their relative level of comprehension, it is integral to explore exactly what it means to identify the main idea of a passage and to examine the strengths and weaknesses of particular comprehension strategies.

### **Definitions**

In the existing research base, the main idea of a passage is separated into two domains: global and local. The global main idea refers to the "central idea of a multiple-paragraph, expository text" while the local main idea refers to "the most important point about the topic of an individual paragraph" (Danhua, 2009). An important distinction should be made between the general topic and the main idea of the passage. Whereas the general topic is simply what the text is about, the main idea refers to the most important points being made about said topic (Lord, 2015). Identifying the main idea is more than just restating or recalling the first or last sentence. Instead, readers are asked to synthesize common ideas from all details (Lord, 2015; Van den

Broek, Lynch, & Naslund, 2003). Therefore, students must learn how to dissect the organization/structure of expository passages and to separate the most important statement from redundant or irrelevant details. Ultimately, students who can identify the main idea are able to build a summative statement that integrates key ideas while forming a clear mental representation of the text. With this in mind, it becomes important to analyze the efficacy of various strategies to teach students to identify the main idea of texts.

### **Strategies**

#### **Passage Selection**

When it comes to text selection, it is important that only informational texts are used, instruction begins with simple texts, and that students already have knowledge or interest regarding the text's topic (Lord, 2015; Boudah, 2013). State and national standards make a distinction between identifying the main idea and identifying theme. While main ideas are located in expository texts, themes are located in literary texts. Furthermore, when teachers begin introducing concepts related to identifying the main idea, instruction should begin with simple texts that are slightly below-grade level. Using texts with simple vocabulary and concepts allows students to develop proficiency with strategies and become more confident in their ability to successfully identify main idea. High-interest expository passages also help students to remain engaged while practicing the skill of identifying main idea (Hedin and Conderman, 2010). As students practice the skill and gain competency, texts should increase in complexity (Lord, 2015; Boudah, 2013). It is also helpful to ensure that the text selection does not include obvious topic sentences or headings as students need to learn to rely less on explicitly stated main ideas. This

gives students the opportunity to practice finding implicit clues from commonalities in the passage.

### **Summarizing**

One strategy that is teachable and aids readers in identifying the main idea is summarization (Gorgen, 2015). This technique asks students to represent the important sentence structures that comprise a text. Any unnecessary or extraneous information is separated from the summary and only the macro structure containing the piece's essence remains (Gorgen, 2015). The process of summarization allows students to think critically about what they have read, write or speak about their reading comprehension, and put into their own words the critical elements of a text. According to numerous studies, the acquisition of summarizing strategies greatly enhances reading comprehension (Brown et al., 1983; Cikrikci, 2008; Erdem, 2012; Gorgen, 2015; Karatay and Okur, 2012).

In order to implement the strategy, students must learn the rules of summarization. First, students should shorten what is given in the passage. Next, they should delete repeated sentences. Only one of the repeated sentiments should be included in the summary. After, students should delete any irrelevant, unrelated, or unimportant sentences. Finally, students must locate or construct the topic sentence and include it in their summary (Dijk and Kintsch, 1978; Gorgen, 2015). Strong summaries or paraphrases requires all necessary, useful, or relevant information to be clearly and accurately transcribed. Students should not be restating information from a text verbatim, but should write their own statement that encapsulates the main idea (Boudah, 2013).

Research conducted by Gorgen (2015) sought to determine whether direct instruction or reciprocal teaching of summarization strategies was more effective. Direct instruction refers to a teacher-centered approach whereby the rules and generations are presented and practiced with examples. Direct instruction also includes lecturing, showing, completing exercises, repeating, and didactic questioning. Conversely, reciprocal teaching asks teachers to begin an activity and then include the students in the activity. Over time, the students take more responsibility and teach each other. In this approach, the teacher acts as a model rather than a lecturer. Ultimately, Gorgen (2015) found that there is no significant difference between the summary mean scores of the experimental and control group. Summarizing skill levels for students exposed to direct instruction and to reciprocal teaching are similar. Under both approaches, students were successful at deleting unimportant information. However, with both approaches, students had a more difficult time deleting repeated information and retaining the sentences containing important information. Often, students would take information that is relevant to their personal interests rather than information that was most relevant to the text.

### **The Main Idea Strategy**

The Main Idea Strategy consists of teaching a mnemonic device (MAIN-I) to students. The five steps are (1) make the topic known, (2) accent at least two essential details, (3) ink out the clarifying details, (4) notice how the essential details are related, and (5) infer the main idea (Boudah, 2013). The topic refers to what the paragraph/selection is about and is only made up of one or two words. Details come in two types: essential and clarifying. Essential details are directly related to the topic, whereas clarifying details are not. When asked to infer the main idea, students are locating the most important statement being made about the topic. During the

controlled practice phase of instruction, students should be given short passages and a highlighter, pen, or pencil. Students should only read one paragraph at a time, should highlight any essential details, cross out clarifying details, and verbally paraphrase the main idea to a teacher or a partner. It is critical that students are given specific and timely feedback to improve their strategy performance (Boudah, 2013). The Main Idea strategy is already strongly emphasized in the United States. Ninety-four percent of students reported that their teacher emphasized main idea on a weekly basis and instructional materials place great emphasis on the strategy (Ramsay, Sperling, & Dornisch, 2010).

Boudah (2013) tested this strategy with middle and high school students with mild disabilities. The research included pretesting, the introduction of skills, controlled practice, and independent use with posttesting. The average student performance increased substantially on the posttest. Even as the readability of passages increased in complexity, students improved their performance on all measures (highlighting, verbal paraphrasing, comprehension questions). On the state reading test, 100% of the middle school students with disabilities passed whereas only 63% had passed in the previous year. Teachers and students also provided support for the strategy, stating that it was easy to understand and conformed to their beliefs (Boudah, 2013).

Ramsay, Sperling, & Dornisch (2010) examined the relative effectiveness of the Main Idea strategy, the Elaborative Interrogation strategy, and an independent study control strategy. The Main Idea strategy taught students to examine the text structure to determine the gist of the text. The Elaborative Interrogation strategy is a generative questioning strategy that asks students to retrieve appropriate prior knowledge and relate it to a text. It refers to the strategy to generate elaborations in response to “why” questions. Through their research, Ramsay, Sperling, and

Dornisch (2010) found that neither the Main Idea nor the Elaborative Interrogation strategy was more effective than independent strategies from the control group.

### **Understanding Text Structure**

Knowing that low-level readers, especially those with minor to moderate disabilities, are often less aware of text structure and are less successful at recall of main ideas, researchers have shown that direct instruction helps to fill in gaps, strengthen main idea comprehension, and teach students to self-monitor their progress (Gajria & Salvia, 1992; Graves, 1986; Jitendra, Hoppes, & Xin, 2000; Malone & Mastropieri, 1992; Nelson, Smith, & Dodd, 1992; Pearson & Dole, 1987; Williams, Brown, Silverstein, & deCani, 1994). While students are learning main idea identification strategies, they can also be taught to use self-monitoring, or the systematic observation and recording of their own behaviors (Jitendra, Hoppes, & Xin, 2000; Shapiro & Cole, 1994). Direct instruction plus self-monitoring strategies has been shown to be more effective than direct instruction alone (Graves, 1986; Jitendra, Hoppes, & Xin, 2000). When Jitendra, Hoppes, & Xin (2000) conducted research to understand the efficacy of pairing main idea strategies with self-monitoring instructional procedures to improve comprehension for students with high-incidence disabilities, results showed that comprehension levels increased and were maintained over time. Students exposed to the strategies statistically outperformed students in the control group.

Additionally, Wang (2009) researched students' abilities to determine both explicit and implicit global and local main ideas, finding that students performed more poorly when asked to identify the global main idea, largely because of an inability to understand text structure. Students performed more highly when asked to find local main ideas because it is a lower-level

cognitive task. Wang (2009) contended that merely understanding single paragraphs does not necessarily mean that students will understand an entire piece. Wang (2009) recommends that students learn to become sensitive to text structure so that they are able to use local main ideas to develop the global main idea. In order to become more successful global main idea comprehenders, readers must start by identifying the structure of the text and practicing the thought process to form better inferences. Reading and thinking must be practiced simultaneously to help students form connections among the various ideas in an expository text and think more critically about global main ideas.

### **Rereading and Think Alouds**

Multiple researchers have shown the efficacy of teaching students to identify the main idea through think alouds and modeling. Lord (2015) encourages teachers to model an approach where readers separate the sentences in a paragraph, number each sentence, and explain how each sentence connects to the preceding one. After time, students can practice in partners and small groups while teachers formatively assess students' think alouds (Lord, 2015; Oster, 2001). Verbally practicing the steps of main idea strategies reinforces the cognitive process that readers are engaged in and supports students through their own controlled and independent practice (Boudah, 2013).

Hedin and Conderman (2010) argue that one of the most important strategies that readers can use to clarify meaning and identify main ideas is to reread or look back in the text. However, most struggling readers start and end their reading task with mere decoding, failing to recognize that they have lost the deeper meaning of a text (Hedin and Conderman, 2010). The researchers found that isolating concepts by chunking the text allowed for teachers to pause at designated



points. In this way, teachers were able to set a clearer, localized purpose for reading and helped their students develop more reading endurance. Furthermore, teachers were able to model fix-up strategies like rereading. Within the modeling, teachers explained to their students what section to reread, how to reread efficiently, and why rereading is helpful. While modeling, teachers were able to pinpoint areas where main ideas are implicit, embedded, or in strange textual locations.

Dan Boster, an instructional coach at Ralston High School, argues that think alouds are one of the most beneficial ways of helping students locate main ideas (personal communication, December, 2017). He finds that students are often stuck in the decoding phase of reading and do not take the time to pause and reflect on the reading process. Therefore, when teachers make their thinking explicit, students are better able to understand the strategies that good readers employ and practice them themselves. Beers (2003) also supports the use of think alouds, stating think alouds incorporated in minilessons showcase direct modeling of particular reading strategies to help students clarify skills and apply them to their daily work.

### **Visual Aids**

Correspondingly, teachers can aid the modeling process by using visual aids and graphic organizers to show the cognitive process (Lord, 2015). It is important that a particular organizer is chosen to be used consistently throughout the identification process. Rather than creating a unique organizer for each reading activity, the visual aid should be generic enough to be used independently by students on any expository reading exercise. When using graphic organizers to support students' attempts to locate the main idea, it is important to format in such a way that the reader knows that the main idea originates from details found in the text (Lord, 2015). Another way to create a visual aid to reinforce a reordering process is to photocopy the expository text

with blank lines at the beginning of each paragraph. Teachers and students can reread the paragraph for understanding and write the local main idea as a topic sentence (Hedin and Conderman, 2010). Visual supports are important tools to help students make connections among main ideas, text organization, and supporting details.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Altogether, there are myriad strategies for helping students to identify the main idea of an expository piece. For most struggling readers the process of determining the main idea is not often explicated. However, researchers have noted that students who are taught processes for locating main idea often outscore their peers who have not received explicit training. Therefore, it is important that teachers are explicitly teaching and modelling main idea identification strategies like summarizing, the Main Idea strategy, self-monitoring, and rereading. Furthermore, teachers need to handpick expository passages that are slightly below-grade level, are of student interest, and have implicit main ideas so that they can steadily increase complexity while teaching text structure. Additionally, the use of visual aids can often help to streamline and clarify the process for students.

With all of this in mind, it is important to be deliberate about the particular texts, strategies, and methods used to teach main idea. Although there are many options to choose from, it is clear that consistency, practice, and feedback are necessary for struggling readers to improve their main idea identification skills. Moving forward, it will be important to investigate the best method of presenting successful comprehension strategies to aid student understanding.

## References

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<p><b>Research</b> (NB PTS 2 &amp; 5)</p>	<p>Literature review provides a research base for the strategies implemented, to include what was learned, how it is good for students, and how it connects to the study.</p> <p>Katlyn,</p> <p>This is very well written and covers the research in depth. I really like how you blended your reflection on the content with the summary of research. This was easy to follow and made it easy to hear your voice as a writer. Please see the notes above. You have a few minor corrections to make. Email me once these are complete.</p> <p><u>Tie to Presentation:</u></p> <p><i>The candidate incorporates current research-based learning theory and instructional strategies to support student learning and/or work with students.</i></p> <p><i>Candidate articulates a rationale for instructional decisions based on information from multiple sources of evidence.</i></p>	<p>Literature review provides a research base for the strategies implemented.</p>	<p>Literature review provides a research base.</p>
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