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Types of Questions to Foster Text Comprehension

Pearson and Johnson (1972) articulate three types of questions that can be used with text to support students' thinking and understanding of the content of the text. They note that questions cannot be classified by simply examining the wording of a question; the cognitive challenge and comprehension focus can only be classified by examining both the question and the text students must process in order to respond. They call this the question-answer relationship. They distinguish between textually explicit, textually implicit, and scriptally implicit questions.

Textually Explicit Questions (TE)
Textually explicit questions are questions whose answers are right there in the text, "some would call them factual recall questions" (Johnson & Pearson, 1972, p. 157). There is a right or wrong answer to these questions that can be found explicitly in the words in the text.

Textually Implicit Questions (TI)
Textually implicit questions are questions that require the reader to make inferences based on information in the text—to fill in gaps in the text that the author doesn't explicitly state. These questions cannot be answered without the text, but they also cannot be answered by using exact words from the text. They require readers to think about what the author has stated explicitly, what the author has hinted at or implied, as well as what readers may know from their background knowledge to make inferences Some textually implicit questions are quite "local" (can be answered by reading just a sentence or two) but others require readers to read greater amounts of text—to select evidence from multiple places in the text—to make their inferences. These are usually more difficult textually-implicit questions than "local" textually-implicit questions.

Scriptally Implicit Questions (SI)
Script refers to a person's schema or background knowledge– what they know from their life experiences or prior learning. Scriptally implicit questions require readers to use information outside the passage. A student may be able to comprehend a particular passage quite competently—at the literal, inferential, or analytic levels—but if the question requires knowledge that is not in the passage, then the same student may struggle. On the other hand, a question related to a passage that can be answered without reading the text, is not a good indicator of a student's ability to read with comprehension.

Pearson and Johnson (1972) provide us with this example of the three types of questions in relation to a short text segment.

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Will Wends His Way

Right after the Civil War, many distraught soldiers made their way West to find fame and fortune. Some could not go home because there were no homes to go to. The war had devastated them. One young man, Will Goodlad, made his fortune in the hills of Colorado. He found gold in a little river near Grand Junction. His fortune was short lived, however. In 1875, he declared bankruptcy and returned to the land of his birth- the Piedmont of South Carolina.

Textually Explicit (TE) Question-Response:
Q: How did Will Goodlad make his fortune?
R: In the hills of Colorado
* Notice that although this is a correct answer drawn directly from the words in a single sentence, a teacher would want to prompt beyond this by asking about how people make their fortunes from hills. This would push the cognitive challenge further and require some inferencing (textually implicit question).

Q: What was short lived?
R: Will's fortune
* Notice that the answer for this question is in the same sentence as the words in the question. However, also notice that the sentence says, *His fortune,* which requires students to make a connection (inference) that *his* refers to Will. This makes the question more difficult but still fairly explicit.

Textually Implicit (TI) Question-Response:
Q: According to the text, what problem did many soldiers face after the Civil War?
A: They were upset (distraught) and searching for a way to have success (fame and fortune). Many also couldn't go home because their homes had been destroyed by the battles of the war.
* Notice that students could provide several answers to this question but that each of them requires inference between sentences and understanding of specific vocabulary words (e.g. distraught, devastated) in the context of the passage.

Scriptally Implicit (SI) Question-Response:
Q: For what side did Will fight during the War?
R: The South
* Notice that students must do a fair amount of inferencing to answer this question. It never directly mentions the side Will was on. But, it does say that he returned to the *land of his birth- the Piedmont of South Carolina.* So, readers must first infer that the place he was born has something to do with his side in the war. But, that isn't enough—they must use their own background knowledge to conclude that South Carolina was part of the South during the Civil War. So this question involves both textually-implicit and scriptally-implicit comprehension.

Other Types of Questions:

In addition to asking questions that help students dig into the content of the text, teachers often pose questions to help students focus on text features, genre features, and their own reading processes. These questions are often identified in the text mapping/analysis stage as teachers identify potentially important or challenging aspects of the text and they also emerge during the discussion. The following are examples of these types of questions:
1. Why do you think the author placed the words "hunk of dirt" in italics?
2. What we already know about fairy tales that might be important in this story?
3. What do you notice about the titles of these chapters?
4. What hints in the text helped you know this was a flashback?

Developing Questions to Foster Comprehension and Discussion

Asking students a variety of types of questions and scaffolding their thinking through prompting, coaching, and demonstrating are essential to helping students build comprehension. But all questions are not equally valuable in helping students develop deep understanding of text. Good questions help students develop a *coherent* understanding of a text—an understanding of what the big ideas and concepts mean rather than thinking of comprehension as a collection of discrete details and interesting facts. This is not to say that details and facts are unimportant, but more to say that they are best understood when viewed in the context of understanding the central ideas in a text. This is why we recommend that teachers carefully analyze the text they will use in preparing their lessons (see text mapping/analysis in Before Reading tool). The analysis helps teachers determine a coherent set of questions they can use to guide students in developing understanding of a text, anticipate challenges in the text that need more attention, and it leads directly to establishing content goals for reading a particular text.
For example, in The Little Red Hen teachers might be inclined to ask questions around sequence, specifically the order in which the hen asks the animals for help or about the steps in making bread. However, in understanding the story, the sequence of the animals nor the steps in making bread are not the most important ideas. More important is that the hen asks many different animals to help with various steps in farming wheat to make bread and none will help her. Ultimately she decides not to share her bread with them because they were unwilling to help her with the hard work.

College of Education, University of Washington
Box 353600 Seattle, WA 98195-3600
coe@u.washington.edu

More than just asking a variety of question types, it is important for teachers to ask valuable questions strategically—at appropriate spots in the text and about important content—that will support children in constructing a coherent understanding of the text or help them understand challenging sections. And, more important than students' responses to questions, is their thinking about the ideas in the text and their ability to draw inferences and read critically. Teachers need to support and to engage students in explaining their thinking during text discussions; they need to help students make their thinking visible to themselves, their peers, and the teacher (see below).

Chunking Text for Text Discussions

Because our tool involves teacher-mediated comprehension—teachers working directly with students during the read of a text—and because authentic reading experiences for intermediate-grade students often involve longer, more complex reading selections, we suggest "chunking" the text into multiple smaller sections to facilitate student understanding and learning. Rather than having students read an entire selection and then discussing– chunking the text allows for in the moment and more in-depth discussion and scaffolding of both the content and reading processes used to construct meaning. The chunks are determined by teachers during analysis of the text (see Text Mapping/Analysis in Before Reading tool) and are adjusted during the lesson as the need arises. In general, the chunks are meaningful sections of texts—not too long and not too short—that help students dig into the important ideas and tackle challenging sections along the way.

Teacher Explanations During Reading

In addition to mediating comprehension during reading through questions and discussion, teachers can help students develop comprehension of the text by highlighting, modeling, or cueing students to features that may be confusing or new for them. This should happen naturally as part of reading the text for specific purposes—it is not a time to interrupt the flow to teach an isolated lesson. For example, the teacher may:
- Briefly explain a challenging vocabulary term or phrases in the context of the particular sentence/text.
- Point out how to use text features (timelines, graphics) to understand the content.
- Point out or explain language cues such as particular words (however, unlike) or figures of speech or dialect
- Help students make connections to other texts or fill in background knowledge students may not have but need to understand.

Discussion Talk Moves

Talk moves can explicitly be taught to students to support them in having productive discussions with their peers. Using talk moves furthers the conversation and creates a space for other ideas and thoughts to be shared with the group. Talk moves allow a teacher to facilitate a discussion around a rich question that connects to the content or reading process objectives in the lesson. The following table illustrates five productive talk moves (Chapin, O'Connor, & Anderson, 2009), phrases students can be taught in using the moves (Nichols, 2006) and questions teachers can ask to push student thinking and the discussion (Dorn, 2005).