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Supporting the comprehension-composition connection in an elementary classroom

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Supporting the comprehension-composition connection in an elementary classroom

Abstract

This paper will focus on the comprehension-composition connection, specifically the similarities in the reading-writing processes. First, the reading-writing processes will be described, and then the comprehension-composition connection and its contribution to an integrated language arts program will be explained.

Supporting the Comprehension-Composition
Connection in an Elementary Classroom

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
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by

Carol M. Lutkenhaus

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of Master of Arts in Education.

Jeanne McLain Harms

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In developing instructional programs in the language arts, much attention is being given to the comprehension-composition connection: How to capitalize on the similarities of these language processes to provide more effective learning experiences for children is receiving serious consideration.

The comprehension-composition processes are used to create meaning. They are recursive in nature, for language users move back and forth between the two processes as they listen/read and speak/write. For example, in school programs students are encouraged to write about their reading and to read their own writing. Because of the similarities in the comprehension and composition processes, engaging in and studying one, strengthens understandings in the other. Therefore, language arts programs need to integrate these processes for instruction (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985).

Purpose of the Paper

This paper will focus on the comprehension-composition connection, specifically the similarities in the reading-writing processes. First, the reading-writing processes will be described, and then the comprehension-composition connection and its contribution to an integrated language arts program will be explained.

Description of Reading and Writing Processes

The movement between language and thought results in thought being generated into language, which in turn generates more thoughts. Reading prompts prior knowledge which brings meaning to the text and results in the creation of new thoughts. Writing, too, brings prior knowledge into play as ideas are generated (Vygotsky, 1978).

Frank Smith (1988) collaborates with this view of the language processes by saying that readers must bring meaning to texts. They must have a modifiable set of expectations about what they will find in the reading experience so they can make predictions about the text, based on the presentation and visual cues. Readers need to predict what writers intend. The writer will likewise have expectations of how the text might develop and therefore will begin to consider questions such as "Why am I writing this? Who will be the reader? What type of language should I use? What is the best way to say it?" (p. 168).

Kenneth Goodman (1986) relates that writing and reading are both dynamic, constructive processes. Writers must decide how much to provide so that readers will be able to infer and recreate the writer's intended meanings. Readers will bring to bear their knowledge of the text and their own values and experiences as they make sense of a writer's text. Writers must

have a sense of audience, and readers must have a sense of the writer.

Comprehension-Composition Connection

Reading and writing place similar demands on thinking abilities. The composing process is critical to children's emerging thinking abilities because it actively engages the learner in constructing meaning. Through composing, children develop ideas, connect ideas, and express thoughts. Comprehending requires the learner to reconstruct the structure and meaning of ideas expressed by another writer. Creating ideas from the process of reading requires competence in regenerating the ideas and in learning how to interpret the ideas of another. Thus, both comprehending and composing are reflections of the same cognitive processes (Squire, 1983).

The reading-writing connection is described as recursive (Boutwell, 1983). Children while writing are moving back and forth from writing to reading and then from rewriting to rereading. As children write, they will pause, switch to the child as reader, and consider the text. Readers read what writers write. Neither reader nor writer can exist without a text. Writers must produce them and readers must interpret them. Composing and comprehending occur interchangeably as children use language to construct meaning (Bromley, 1988; Cambourne, 1988).

Similarly, Calkins (1983) says that writing involves reading. When children view themselves as authors, they gain a sense of ownership over their reading. This author found that there was no way she could watch writing without watching reading. While composing, children read continually. They read to savor what they have written.

Loban (1963) investigated the relationship between reading and writing achievement. He found that good readers were good writers and poor readers usually wrote poorly as well. Other studies have corroborated Loban's findings. A positive relationship does exist between reading and writing (Stotsky, 1983). Graves (1983) says that children who write for others achieve more easily the objectivity necessary for reading the works of others.

Comprehension-Composition Connection and the School Program

Both reading and writing abilities are developed by creating meaning while involved in the processes of reading and writing. Fluency in both processes comes with years of engaging in them, not with repetitive and separate exercises and drills. In a print rich environment, children learn to read and write as naturally as they learn oral language abilities (Smith, 1983).

Shanahan (1992) says that children benefit when reading and writing are brought together in an instructional program.

Reading and writing should be combined in the classroom for three major reasons: First, reading and writing depend upon much of the same knowledge and the same strategies and tasks. Therefore, the combined teaching of common aspects of the reading and writing processes can provide more effective and efficient instruction. Second, reading and writing are communication activities. Writers need to think about their audiences, and readers need to think about authors. Those with experience with both processes can engage in thinking more effectively. Finally, reading and writing can be combined profitably within other functional activities across the curriculum. The collaborative use of reading and writing can be a more important study strategy than the use of a single process. Students need the opportunity to learn how to combine these processes to create powerful language.

Role of the Teacher as a Reader and Writer

Reading and writing must be modeled for students by those around them who are more linguistically able. The teacher, as a reader and a writer, serves as a model and a collaborator in the reading-writing classroom. As models, teachers need to be observed by their students engaging in the processes of reading and writing within the functions of language and genuinely liking to read and write. Holdaway (1979) says teachers must display themselves as joyfully literate readers and writers if they

expect their students to become successful readers and writers. Teachers play a critical role in affecting students' attitudes toward reading and writing. Their encouragement and influence help students adopt a positive attitude toward the language processes.

Teachers need to encourage their students to take risks while engaging in reading and writing. Without it, students cannot discover the potentials of literacy. Their approximations in reading and writing need to be accepted as their experimentations in speaking were accepted in early childhood. Prediction should be encouraged as readers make sense of print. Writers must be encouraged to think about what they want to say, to experiment with punctuation, to make approximations when spelling, and to explore genres. Teachers need to emphasize to children that miscues and invented spelling are part of the ongoing learning process; they are not a signal to shutdown reading and writing (Goodman, 1986).

Teachers should create a physical environment that is congruent with the nature of language. Immersing children in a literate environment will empower them to become more responsible for their own growth as readers and writers. Teachers should provide children with many opportunities in the classroom and through library facilities to engage in meaningful activities with print (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987).

During teacher-student conferences, the children's areas of interest become more apparent. Then, teachers can refer children to reading materials that will interest them. Teachers can suggest literature works to spark ideas for writing and extend a topic. Also, teachers can suggest that writers do a library search for information, using reference materials and other nonfiction texts to provide authentic details for their drafts (Calkins, 1986).

Providing a Rich Learning Environment

A print rich learning environment supports interaction between the comprehension and composition processes. Kenneth Goodman (1986) says that the learning environment should be rich in content and filled with a whole array of possibilities for engaging in the thinking-language processes, but at the same time is predictable and secure. Within such a classroom structure, children can engage in the functions of language to create their own meaning, thereby developing thinking-language abilities and discovering the nature of language.

Brian Cambourne (1988) believes that the real world does not provide the same conditions for learning to read and write that it provides for learning to talk. He advocates using the natural functions of written language to teach reading and writing as children learned much of their oral language abilities. Therefore, teachers need to create a stimulating

environment that supports children's involvement in the functions of language.

Children also learn from the models of language that quality literature provides. Quality literature exemplifies the richness of language and presents a wealth of vicarious experiences for young learners. Books provide patterns that children can use in their own stories (Goodman, 1986).

Read-aloud experiences. Read-aloud periods can offer unforgettable experiences with ideas and language. The teacher who has carefully examined a quality piece of literature can offer it as a model of language. As a result, children can experience the sound of language, the vividness of language through imagery, the associations of ideas made through figurative language, the flow of the plot, the unfolding of the characters and their relationship, the development of the theme, and the characteristics of the author's style. As children listen, they can use these elements to recreate the story in their minds and then in their writing (Harms & Lettow, 1986).

Reading aloud helps children to generate topic ideas. Children who experience many carefully selected reading aloud sessions are constantly building a background of prior knowledge. As a text is read aloud, it may prompt children to recall memories or to create new ideas. Also, children may attend to specific elements of the text (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987).

The language and content children use in their writing is greatly influenced by the stories and poems they hear. Whether consciously or nonconsciously, children pick up words and phrases from books they have experienced. Writers often internalize a storyline and reuse it to suit their own purposes. In their writing, children also use form, genre, and book design from literature experiences. For example, they try out quotation marks when they need conversation, and experiment with different genres. In publishing their writing, they use book design elements from tradebooks, such as endpapers and title pages (Calkins, 1986).

Sustaining centers. These centers are permanently placed in the classroom to provide a secure, predictable environment. A listening/reading center and an author center, both sustaining centers, can contribute to a print rich environment (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

The listening/reading center contains literature representative of all genres. The stories the teacher has read aloud can also be placed in the center. Cassettes, commercially prepared or developed by the teacher or the students, to accompany picture books allow children to follow along with the print. These experiences help children attend to text, provide models of language, and foster an awareness of the song of language. These experiences can also provide ideas for related

expressive activities. Retelling opportunities, such as puppetry, nesting dolls, and flannelboard stories generated from listening/reading experiences can strengthen children's understanding and appreciation of stories and can help them internalize the structure of stories (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Throughout the school year, the author center focuses on the works of various authors. For each featured author, a biographical sketch and their representative works are displayed to help children see how the author's experiences have influenced their work and how they engage in the reading-writing processes (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Providing Opportunities to Engage in the Processes

Engaging in the language processes to create meaning takes time. Reading and writing require large blocks of time, so children can be free to think about the meaning they are creating and to discuss it with others. Jane Hansen (1987) says readers and writers need long blocks of uninterrupted time: Readers need time to select books, read them, and then respond to the ideas created through expressive activity and interactions with others. Writers need time to explore topics just as readers peruse books, follow through with the writing process, and then share their compositions with others.

Atwell (1987) relates that short writing periods rush students, hampering their thinking, and restricting the quality

of their writing. When students are given time to reflect on prior literacy experiences and apply new knowledge, they will take risks. When they consider what they have written, children are more likely to achieve clarity, the voice of good writing.

Because of the similarities in the reading and writing processes, the common thinking-language tasks reinforce children's learning. A school program needs to provide many opportunities for children to make reading-writing connections. These opportunities--shared book experience, intertextuality, literary borrowing, redrafting and revising, and sharing with peers--will be explained.

Shared book experience. This group activity which includes both teacher and student involves sharing stories, poems, and songs for the pleasure of enjoying fine literature. According to Holdaway (1979), this experience fosters student participation, encourages independent reading, and generates ideas for writing topics. Children can discover different kinds of book format, and reading and writing strategies.

Connections between reading and writing can be brought into play during shared book time. Often shared reading leads to shared writing with the teacher and students collaborating to compose a text based on the ideas and patterns found in their reading. As the teacher takes down the dictation on a chart or chalkboard, both students and the teacher say the words aloud as

they are writing. Then, the children's own natural language becomes the predictable text that they read. This experience can help children understand the patterns of language and the organization of the stories (Butler & Turbill, 1987).

Intertextuality. This process involves interpreting one text by connecting with previously constructed texts. While reading a text, readers may make connections with other texts that they have written or read. These connections change both the meaning of the current evolving text and the understandings of the past texts (DeBeaugrande, 1980).

Harold Rosen (1986) relates that a story exists only because of experiences with other stories. Writers construct their own stories by connecting their current experiences with their past ones. In sharing their stories with others, writers not only bring stories to life, but they also make new connections and create meanings. Once they share a story, the text becomes a source of further dialogue and composing by both the reader and the writer; thus the process of intertextuality is endless.

Literary borrowing. In this process the reader reconstructs another writer's style and intentions. As a result, connections are made between reading and writing. Literary borrowing takes three forms: genres, topics or themes, and techniques modeled by another writer. According to Atwell

(1987), a writer cannot write without appropriating ideas, frameworks, rhythms, and form from their literary heritage.

Students who are exposed to a wide range of literary resources are more apt to tap into their literary backgrounds when encountering various types of texts. Students who seldom read for pleasure are deprived of experiences that capture their imaginations or satisfy their needs and therefore will not become literary borrowers. Elementary school students who read only the voiceless prose of basals do not borrow. What captivates students as readers inspires their writing (Atwell, 1987).

Probable passages, a form of literary borrowing, is a process that involves readers in predicting the types of information that an author might provide and then using this information to construct their own text. Readers can examine the story title and pictures and some of the major vocabulary words. Using these clues, they write their own story. Then, students read the original story and compare their responses to it. Through this process, children come to see that prediction is a form of composition and that the types of thinking they do when they create their own compositions are similar to what an active reader does during reading (Shanahan, 1992).

Innovating on text is another form of literary borrowing. This process involves making up a new sentence or story based on the structure of existing text. It is done by substituting,

adding, or deleting words and phrases. If one or two words are substituted, many other words in the text may need to be changed in the story to make sense. From engaging in this process, children can gain insight into how other writers write. When they are reading books, they can notice the author's use of language and think about changes the author could have made to improve the clarity of the story. By showing various writers' techniques and by demonstrating revision with their own writing, teachers can help children begin to develop a repertoire of their own strategies (Butler & Turbill, 1987).

Redrafting and revision. Readers and writers have similar concerns after completing their tasks. Readers may consider whether or not they have achieved their purpose for reading and have reconstructed the author's intended meaning. Writers may check to make sure that what they constructed is meaningful and whether or not they have achieved their purpose for writing. The redrafting phase of the composition process best illustrates the recursive nature of writing. As children rewrite parts of their composition to refine the meaning, or redrafting, they are continuously reading and rereading their work to ensure that they are communicating the meaning to their audience. As they reread what they have written, they often rewrite their ideas, making additions, substitutions, deletions, and rearrangements. After writers have focused on content, they turn to revising to provide

form that will assist in signaling writers' meanings (Calkins, 1986).

Sharing with peers. A learning community can foster children's social development through cooperative language activities. The classroom can be carefully structured so that the children learn from each other, from their teacher, and from the literature that surrounds them. Young writers need a host of strategies for gathering information, such as discussing their topics and drafts with others and reading related literature (Calkins, 1986).

Peer conferences can support children in writing for an audience. In such conferences, the author reads the piece and asks the peers for comments and needed assistance if requested. The responder's role is to listen, make comments, and ask questions. The children's questions during these conferences reflect how they engage in the writing process: What do you mean when you say ____? Could you read that part again? What happened when ____? Tell me more about ____? These kinds of questions help the writer understand what readers look for when approaching written material. Therefore, these conferences help the writer develop a reader's perspective on their writing (Atwell, 1987).

The group sharing sessions provide children with opportunities for the publication of their works. As children

read aloud their compositions to their peers and the teacher, they are making a comprehension-composition connection. In these sessions, children find out what their peers have been writing. A special place can be designated for sharing writing with others, which is sometimes called the "author's chair." Authors sit in a special chair and read their works to the rest of the class. The children respond with positive comments about the piece and ask questions about the writing. Sometimes the author's chair is used for sharing writing of professional authors, a reading experience (Graves & Hansen, 1983).

Group sharing can energize children, both the writer and the audience, to engage in further writing experiences. Ideas can spread like wildfire through the classroom as children borrow topics and themes from each other. It is important to understand that in retrieving and borrowing, the writer is not imitating or plagiarizing. Everyone who writes is a borrower because their reading experience comes into play when they write (Atwell, 1987).

Summary

This paper reviewed the professional literature concerning the nature of the comprehension-composition connection, particularly between the reading-writing processes. This review supports combining reading and writing instruction to provide more effective, efficient learning experiences for children.

Both processes have common thinking-language tasks, so instruction in one enhances the other.

Because language is a recursive process, instructional programs need to present children with opportunities to make connections between the reading and writing processes. A reader reconstructs the author's meaning and may make note of the elements used by the author in creating that meaning. In other words, the reader is reading like a writer. In reading a piece, a reader may be energized to create his/her own meaning. As a reader becomes a writer, it is likely that he/she will use some of the same reading tasks in writing. A writer is continually moving back and forth from writing to reading the text. In these instances, the writer is writing like a reader. These connections strengthen children's thinking-language abilities.

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