Reciprocal Teaching

Reciprocal teaching is an instructional technique developed by Palincsar and Brown (1984) and described by them as "a dialogue between teachers and students for the purpose of jointly constructing the meaning of text." It is designed to improve students' reading comprehension by teaching four key reading strategies:

- Summarizing the main content
- Formulating questions
- Clarifying ambiguities
- Predicting what may come next

The teacher begins by introducing each of the strategies to students and telling them the purpose and use of each. Strategies are then taught through a series of dialogues between teacher and students, with the dialogues centering on sections of text that students have first read silently (or heard read aloud by the teacher, if students lack decoding skills).

The teacher is the discussion leader in the initial dialogues. S/he models strategy use, generally in the form of "think alouds." Using the first and second strategies, s/he begins by briefly summarizing the reading and beginning the discussion with questions about the main content of the text. Students respond to these questions, raise additional questions, and in the case of disagreement or misunderstanding, reread the text. The teacher again summarizes or synthesizes for the purpose of identifying the gist of the reading and their discussion. There is then more discussion for the purpose of agreeing on the summary.

Using the third strategy, clarification, teacher and students seek to clarify words or concepts they do not understand. The teacher may lead students to discover word meanings or prompt them to apply previously learned clarification strategies (e.g., using context for identifying the meaning of unfamiliar words).

Finally, the teacher offers or asks for predictions regarding what will come next in the text. Students base their predictions on their prior knowledge of the topic, clues that are provided in the text, or perhaps just what they hope the author will address. Throughout the dialogue, the teacher is modeling how to go about applying the strategies when reading.

The teacher's role changes from model to coach as the position of discussion leader passes from teacher to students. Students rotate leading the discussion, initially with considerable assistance from the teacher in the form of feedback and encouragement. Over time, as students gradually acquire proficiency in strategy use, teacher involvement fades and control of the discussions passes to the students.

Theoretical Rationale and Research-Base

Reciprocal teaching illustrates a number of powerful ideas in teaching and learning and is based on both developmental and cognitive theories. The strategies embedded in reciprocal teaching represent those that successful learners engage in while interacting with text. They

serve to encourage self-regulation and self-monitoring and promote intentional learning (Brown, 1980).

The design of this instructional method was influenced primarily by the work of Vygotsky and his notion of a "zone of proximal development," which he characterized as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). The assistance provided the learner is a good example of scaffolding in that both temporary and adjusted support is provided, according to the needs of the participants. The assistance is withdrawn when it is no longer needed. The sequence of teacher modeling, coaching, and then fading also provides an excellent example of the structure of a cognitive apprenticeship as outlined by Collins, Brown, and Newman (1989).

Research conducted by the developers of reciprocal teaching has reported substantial, significant improvements on measures of reading comprehension. Follow-up studies have shown that improvements are to a large extent maintained over time (Brown & Palincsar, 1987).

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References and Additional Reading

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* These references have sample dialogues. Reviewing a sample dialogue is highly recommended.