

Creating Active Readers
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Stafford County
Sixth Grade

Although reading comprehension is quite complex, Mrs. Heaney narrows her focus to three strategies: **setting purpose for reading, clarifying and summarizing**. She wants her students to become independent with these before she adds more complexity. She chooses *Letters from Rifka* by Karen Hesse: a text on the students' instructional and emotional level; written as fast-paced, personal letters introduced with a short poem.

Summarizing Independent Reading

Mrs. Heaney asks her students to share what they've read independently the previous evening. Assigning self-chosen, silent reading as homework is very powerful as reinforcement for strategies taught in class. In this case the students are working on summarizing.

Summarizing Text before Continuing to Read

Before Mrs. Heaney and her sixth graders continue to read *Letters from Rifka*, they remind themselves what has happened previously in the book. One student refers to the summary she wrote the day before.

Preparing to Read: Reading and Rereading the Poem

Mrs. Heaney compares the poems in *Letters from Rifka*, to illustrations in other books. She and her students read the short poem **three times**: silently, while listening to the teacher, and as a chorus.

Preparing to Read: Using the Poem to Predict

Repeating the poem helps students increase fluency, gain independence, and understand that rereading leads to deeper comprehension. The students use the poem to help them predict and set purpose for reading Rifka's letter.

Writing Purpose for Reading

Mrs. Heaney asks her students to jot down what they think the purpose for reading today's letter will be. The students base their purpose for reading on what has happened previously in the book and the poem they have just read.

Discussing Purpose for Reading

Notice that most of the students use purpose for reading and prediction interchangeably and Mrs. Heaney encourages this overlapping of concepts. But when one student actually states a purpose, Mrs. Heaney reinforces it by having him restate his idea in the form of a question.

Clarifying Before Reading

Mrs. Heaney assigns each student one page of the letter to preview. The students will look for and write down the “speed bumps” which might cause readers to stumble or miss meaning. When students preview and clarify they gain confidence with the text prior to reading it aloud to others. In this way fluency is increased and comprehension is enhanced by rereading.

Clarifying the “Speed Bumps”

The students discuss the confusing words and ideas they’ve found. Mrs. Heaney encourages them to provide most of the clarification for each other. When a word with a French origin needs to be clarified however, she springs into action. The students also point out some similes, but they are demonstrating appreciation of figurative language rather than seeking clarification, a sign that their skill with similes is reaching independence.

Clarifying with a Visual

Mrs. Heaney had anticipated that the word **samovar** would be unfamiliar to her students and she has brought one to class to help them visualize. She clarifies for the students.

Reading Aloud

The students take turns reading the letter, but since each has already previewed a page, they read more fluently and confidently than students who are asked to read aloud text they have never seen before. When they come to “speed bumps” they navigate well and comprehension is achieved. Students learn that time spent previewing is time well spent.

Checking Predictions after Reading

Mrs. Heaney takes her turn to read aloud and then leads the students in checking their predictions. They know that predictions need not be correct, but that predicting allows readers to read purposefully and to check their own comprehension.

Writing Summaries

Mrs. Heaney asks the students to summarize in three sentences or fewer. By giving them a limit, she is reminding them that summaries are meant to be brief. Notice that each of the three focus points of the lesson has included a writing component.

Discussing Summaries and Summarizing

Students share ideas while Mrs. Heaney writes a list on the board. They know that the list should be in chronological order and that only important ideas should be included. When they discover less important ideas, they delete them. Mrs. Heaney instructs the students to write a one-sentence summary, similar to the one found just after the title page. Providing models of good summaries is very powerful.

Revising Summaries

The students write again. Now their summaries are even more concise than the ones they wrote before discussion.

Sharing Summaries

The students share their revised summaries; most are one or two sentences in length and incorporate the ideas discussed and listed on the board.

Setting Purpose for Reading Further

Mrs. Heaney and her students revisit their purpose for reading, which had been written on the board but not achieved. They realize that it could still be their purpose for reading on. They demonstrate comprehension by discussing the structure of fiction as well as some of the protagonist's problems introduced previously in the story.