

DEVELOPING READING SKILLS THROUGH GRAPHIC ORGANIZERSby Julia Koifman (*jkoifman@yandex.com*)**Abstract**

This paper represents ways of teaching reading skills with the help of graphic organizers. This method of teaching is useful for all students from the elementary to high school grades. It is especially helpful to young people with learning disabilities (LD) to help them improve their way of studying. General understanding of texts is an important skill and LD students often struggle and have difficulties with reading comprehension. Graphic organizers, mainly frames or diagrams, help them visualize and understand concepts more effectively. Therefore, they are excellent tools that can be used in order to enhance the students' ability to organize information from a text and access deeper meaning. I also use them to help my students identify the main idea, the plot structure and develop their critical thinking. Such tools prevent LD students from misunderstanding stories and poems, getting bored and giving up.

Introduction

I am an English coordinator in Beit Ekshtein. It is a chain of schools for students with special education needs (SEN). In this article I will share my experience on how to deal with the problem of learning how to learn, which is especially important for young people with LD. Reading is an integral part of learning and plays an important role in a student's success in the school program; "reading comprehension is the mental process the reader goes through in an effort to understand the content of a reading text" (Suyitno, 2017). When students learn how to learn they are supposed to move from simple texts to more complicated texts, step by step and work independently both in class and at home.

As individuals read they use their prior knowledge along with clues from the text to construct meaning. This means that they have a purpose for their reading and adjust it to each reading task. Strategic readers are those who are "good at monitoring their comprehension, know when they understand, what they read and when they do not" (Adler, 2015).

In my teaching experience I have often noticed that it is not unusual for a child, who has been diagnosed as learning-disabled, to have a high IQ and other remarkable talents, usually in creative areas. It means for example, that they can be gifted at painting, singing, or playing musical instruments. Indeed, many of our students stay at school until 16.00 and attend extra classes after lunch. "These children have the ability to learn more easily in a different way, and what they really need is help to learn how to learn" (Block, 1996).

When I accept the fact that my learners learn differently, I have more opportunities to reach all of them. One of the methods that work with students of different levels and abilities is using graphic organizers, in order to enhance their general understanding of regular texts for reading, literary pieces for the National Literature program and learning higher-order thinking skills (HOTS).

Learning to Learn from the Text

We believe that if teachers understand the nature of reading comprehension and learning from the text, they will have the basis for evaluating and improving learning environments. In this regard we find many advances, in the psychology and pedagogy of reading comprehension in remedial classes, which provide good possibilities for changing our approach to helping LD students learn to learn from texts. Texts for reading comprehension and literary pieces allow them to communicate their ideas with one another across time and cultures. Indeed, a large part of what each person knows comes from reading texts. The problem with LD students is that sometimes they cannot focus, they miss some information and as a result, they misunderstand what they read.

For such students, comprehension, memorizing, and learning require more effort than for our students in the regular program. Walter Kintsch, a cognitive psychologist who has studied text comprehension and learning, claims that "children can comprehend, or recall, an arithmetic problem without being able to solve it correctly and adults can recall a set of directions without being able to find a particular location." Thus, readers have to connect the separate ideas in a text into a coherent whole that resembles the text in order to improve their comprehension. Sometimes LD students lack some vocabulary but, if they understand the main idea of the text, they can answer the questions quite well and retell it. They might speak Hebrew, but we should appreciate their participation in the lesson. We can encourage them to speak English by, for example, asking questions in which they must provide short answers and thus improve their speaking skills step-by-step.

According to K. Stanberry and L. Swanson, "The most effective approach to improving reading comprehension in LD students appears to be a combination of direct instruction and strategy instruction. Strategy instruction means teaching students a plan (or strategy) to search for patterns in words and to identify key passages (paragraph or page) and the main idea in each."

In this way teachers should offer them diagrams that contain the quantity of paragraphs in the text and ask them to write the information there. Thus, in order to comprehend the text, they need to integrate the main ideas from the paragraphs of the text they have just written in the diagram with their general knowledge and understanding and then construct a model of the situation in the text. In this way, LD readers will be able to capitalize on a text's comprehensibility and instructional features. Through this technique, struggling students will enhance their general comprehension. At the beginning they might find these tasks rather challenging but after a while they will be motivated to read more frequently, increase their vocabulary and memorize what the text is about. Moreover, due to such diagrams and other graphic organizers they will learn how to organize their own ideas and express them. Graphic organizers help them to not only learn from the text, but they teach them to write coherent sentences or paragraphs, even very short ones, at the beginning. After they have learned such skills, it is time to teach them more advanced strategies in order to help them gain more detailed information from the text.

Reading Strategies and their Role in Successful Learning

Struggling readers, especially in heterogeneous classes, benefit from a variety of instructional approaches that demonstrate reading skills as subject content is taught. Direct teaching, thinking aloud, modeling, discussion, frontal and small-group support are only a few of the approaches that teachers use to help students to become more strategic and effective readers in different contexts. Remedial teachers should provide LD students with detailed graphic organizers to guide them as they read a particular text. Such organizers might consist of a series of prompts that ask the students to preview particular features of the text and note how they are related to the main body of the text. It is an effective way to teach reading strategies (RS).

I. Suyitno indicates that RS include selecting, predicting, confirming, and validating the results of the understanding. Therefore, in LD classes teachers should devote more time to pre-reading tasks and elicit as much information from students as possible. In turn, students can share their personal or other people's experiences that are connected to the topic of the poem or story. It can be done in pairs or small groups with the help of diagrams or frames. "When doing group work, they realize what they need; they can begin to take responsibility for their own learning" (Rosenberg, 2018). Therefore, this is one of the ways to motivate LD students. Since many LD students are visual learners, we offer them diagrams to develop their RS. Those who are aural learners can be taught with the help of listening to their teachers, peers and audio materials. Both ways mentioned previously work well to develop RS. The main reason for applying RS is to enhance students' achievement. According to A. Podolean and O. Korchevskaya, we should teach LD students to use RS in order to help them:

- develop a positive attitude towards reading
- understand the meaning of a text
- explore and understand the genre
- be able to apply critical thinking

As McEwan claims, "cognitive strategies are defined in various ways. They are sometimes called mental tools". They can also be described as "behaviors and thoughts". In LD classes, behaviors include such actions as working with graphic organizers prepared for the following activities:

- pre-reading notetaking
- generating key words
- understanding chronological order of the story
- identifying similarities and differences of the characters
- making a summary of the story
- giving a presentation as a post-reading activity

Thoughts include cognitive processes such as, explaining the actions of the main characters, the key events, the climax of the story and all the possible endings. RS and other reading skills can be taught explicitly while students are learning subject-specific content through authentic reading tasks. "Effective readers use RS to understand what they

read before, during and after reading, which can be done with the help of graphic organizers that contain the sequence of events.” (Podolean and Korchevskaya, 2018). Before reading it is important to elicit the general information connected to the topic of the text and learn the key vocabulary. The teacher should ask them to use prior knowledge to think about the topic, preview the text by skimming and scanning and make predictions about the possible events.

Teaching Critical Thinking Skills

While reading, students analyze the characters and events, predict the following events and use HOTS. They also answer the questions given in the textbook or asked by the teacher. If they work in groups, they can ask each other different questions to elicit as much information as possible. Moreover, they can create a different ending for the text or additional life events of the main characters and imagine what might happen if they meet ten years later or write letters to each other. Students with severe dyslexia and/or dysgraphia do not have to write a lot. They can complete the diagrams offered by teachers or prepare their own and give presentations which develop their speaking skills.

Einstein said, “Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think.” This is especially important while learning poems, stories and novels. According to the National Literature program, critical thinking is compulsory for doing logs or taking the final exam in English Literature. It requires students to express their own opinion and confirm it with the facts that are given in literary pieces.

Teachers in SEN schools and/or classes should use graphic organizers not only to help LD students be strategic readers, but also to help them understand how HOTS may be used in order to “examine and show relationships in a text” (Adler, 2015). Thinking critically is more than just thinking clearly or rationally; it’s about thinking independently – therefore more than one HOTS must be taught. Students are required to explain their choice of a thinking skill and to answer the question properly. It means formulating their own opinions and drawing their conclusions regardless of outside influence. It is about the discipline of analysis and seeing the connections between ideas and being wide open to other viewpoints and opinions.

According to Warner (2014), critical thinking differs from both analytical thinking and lateral thinking in the following ways:

- *Analytical thinking* mainly aims to review the data/information we are presented with (for relevance, patterns, trends etc.)
- *Lateral thinking* aims to put data/information into a new or different context (in order to generate alternative answers or solutions)
- *Critical thinking* aims to make an overall or holistic judgment about the data/information which is free from false premises or bias as much as possible.

In the beginning, LD students might find such tasks difficult and give up but, creative ways of teaching can enable them to do the tasks quite well. K.Cumnis (2017) offers the following method on how to teach the skills of critical thinking with the help of pictures:

- Describe what you see in this picture.
- What are these people doing and why?
- What do you think they are feeling?
- Where are they?
- Do they know each other? If so, how?
- What are the events that have led to this snapshot in time?

I use this method mainly with those who do the Literature Module B and it works well. In the next step I can use the graphic organizers for teaching critical thinking skills. You can be creative and find different ways to incorporate them into your teaching practices.

Teaching HOTS not only enhances students’ ability to analyze literature, but also enables them to answer reading comprehension questions and improves their language skills on all levels. Within the framework of the Literature program, teachers are supposed to incorporate the following HOTS:

- inferring
- cause and effect
- problem solving
- making connections
- explaining patterns
- distinguishing different perspectives

Since in Israeli SEN schools each class has no more than eight students, teachers are able to adapt complicated material to reach each learner successfully. I prepare diagrams for critical thinking exercises to show how the events in the story are connected to each other. They help LD students develop their thought processes.

Conclusion

To summarize, the following statements can be made about reading comprehension. Firstly, a reader's background knowledge, including purpose, strongly influences the reader's development of meaning. Secondly, reading comprehension involves the activation, focusing, maintaining and refining of ideas toward developing complete interpretation, which is possible with highly developed RS. Thirdly, it requires critical thinking, which supposes the reader's ability to summarize the ideas, evaluate the characters' deeds, predict future events and explain everything discussed above with the help of HOTS. Since it might be difficult for LD students, their teachers can help them organize the process of reading and comprehension with diagrams and graphic organizers.

Such tools are very helpful for struggling students. Graphic organizers are a great strategy, which provide a visual representation of information. Teachers can download them or prepare them with their students and use them for teaching poems, stories and novels. Many LD students are good at art, so they can paint or draw pictures of scenes in stories and poems and use them as visual tools in class. In addition, my experience has shown that the students are eager to create their own graphic organizers. The graphic organizers can be used for students at different levels and they can have a variety of purposes. For example, to help students recognize the key words and the main idea, to understand the plot structure, to analyze the texts critically or to teach them HOTS. I also practice this activity in order to develop their speaking and listening skills. Many ESL textbooks with graphic organizers, approved by Israeli Ministry of Education, are very popular in the local SEN schools.

References

- Adler, C. (2015). Seven Strategies to Teach Students Text Comprehension. <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/seven-strategies-teach-students-text-comprehension>
- Alland, G. (2011). Einstein's Educational Philosophy. <https://www.howtolearn.com/2011/12/einsteins-educational-philosophy/>
- Block, M.A. (1996). No more Ritalin. Treating ADHD without Drugs. //Kensington books. Kensington publishing corp., p.100
- Cummins, K. (2017) Hypothetical Visual Prompts and Ice Breakers. <https://www.slideshare.net/kevcummins/hypothetical-visual-prompts-and-ice-breakers>
- McEwan, E. (2004). "The Power of Strategic Reading instruction" http://www.corwin.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/6863_mcewan_ch_1.pdf
- Podolean, A. & Korchevskaya, O. (2017). Developing Reading Skills through Graphic Organizers. *META Conference brochure*, May 2017, p.49
- Rosenberg, M. (2018). Learning Styles and Activities for Them. *META Conference brochure*, May 2018, p.35
- Stanberry, K & Swanson, L. (2009). Effective Reading Interventions for Kids with Learning Disabilities. <https://www.readingrockets.org/article/effective-reading-interventions-kids-learning-disabilities>
- Suyitno, I. 2017. Cognitive Strategies Used in Reading Comprehension and its Contribution to Students' Achievements <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1162686.pdf>
- Walter, K. 1986. Learning from Text. *Cognition and Instruction* 3:87-108.
- Warner, J. 2014. How is Critical Thinking Different from Analytical or Lateral Thinking? <http://blog.readytomanage.com/how-is-critical-thinking-different-from-analytical-or-lateral-thinking>

Julia Koifman was born in Ukraine. She graduated from Simferopol State University in 1995 and received an MA degree in TEFL. In 1999 she immigrated to Israel and received TEFL certification at Shaanan College in Haifa in 2002. In 2006 she started teaching in Beit Ekshtein high school for SEN and in 2009 became an English Coordinator. Julia has published articles about overcoming dyslexia and other SEN. She is a member of IATEFL, TESOL and ETAI organizations and a regular presenter at local and international conferences. In 2018 she won a scholarship for participation in IATEFL conference in Brighton, UK. She can be reached at: jkoifman@yandex.ru.