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HELPING WEAK READERS FIND THE MAIN IDEA OF A TEXT

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Comprehension is the goal for all reading. However, many teachers seem to think that understanding a text is the automatic outcome of being able to sound out words and recognize their meaning. This is not necessarily the case because without the appropriate background knowledge, automaticity and sufficient vocabulary to sustain comprehension, the ability to understand is severely hindered. In addition, for many people, comprehension strategies are also a necessary part of the comprehension process.

Most students can be helped to find the main idea of a text by teaching them about topic sentences or thesis statementsⁱ. As long as they are told what topic sentences areⁱⁱ and a short discussion of the *topic* and *controlling idea* of a topic sentence is given, they should manage rather well on their own.

For these students, it is enough to indicate that topic sentences are normally made up of two parts. The topic, which represents the main idea in broad, very general terms, and the controlling idea, which narrows the general idea and indicates the specific aspect of the general idea, which is to be dealt with in the paragraph. For example, in the sentence:

“A dictionary is a useful book for college students.”

'dictionary' is the topic while the controlling idea is "a useful book for college students". There are many things that can be said about dictionaries, but the paragraph, which starts with the topic sentence above, will only be talking about why dictionaries are useful books for college students.

For some students, however, discussions of topic sentences or thesis statements are not enough. They need specific instruction to help them identify the main idea, especially when the topic sentence or thesis statement is not clearly stated.

Many teachers don't think of comprehension as a subject for special study and don't normally deal with comprehension strategies. Even remedial reading instruction typically focuses on improving decoding and little if any time is relegated to the teaching of comprehension. I would like to suggest, that for those students who just can't manage on their own, learning to identify the main idea requires the same explicit instruction that learning to decode requires. What students already know is what determines your starting point. However, it is important to follow a step-by-step process, making sure that students can distinguish between the essential and the details, what we're talking about and what we are saying about it. This is the basis or foundation for teaching students how to identify the main idea of a text or paragraph.

The first step in the process is to start with a task you know your students can do. For example, ask them to give you examples of something.

List 3 things that are blue.

Here you are giving them the essential, the category or superordinate element, and they have to give the examples. In this case, eyes can be blue, someone's sweater can be blue, water is blue as well as the sky. This is a task, which most people should be able to accomplish without a problem.

The second step in the process is to give examples of something and to ask students to identify the category. To do this, students have to identify the superordinate element - the element that covers and includes all the examples you've just given. In other words, they have to identify what the words have in common, and then be able to decide on the category, which best covers, all elements. For example, if you give students the following words:

Ford, Mazda, Peugeot,

your next step would be to ask them what these words have in common. In this case, they are all names of cars. Cars is the superordinate element. This is a more difficult task, because it's always easier to give examples of something than to look at examples and identify what they have in common.

The next step is to give students a series of related words and have them try and identify which word is the main word (the category) and which words say something about, clarify, elaborate on, or are examples of the main word.

"Roses sweet-smelling thorny"

If you look at this group of words, you have to ask yourself: 'what are we talking about' and 'what are we saying about it'. What's the connection between the 3 words? Which word or group of words can refer to all the others? For example, is there a connection between sweet smelling and thorny? The connection is 'roses'. We can use both 'sweet smelling' and 'thorny' to refer to roses. Can we use sweet smelling and thorny to refer to something else? Perhaps, but that's not an option in this case, because 'roses' is the only noun given. (Remember to point out to students that generally speaking, the main word will be a noun.)

Once students can deal with groups of words, have them identify the main word in individual sentences. For example,

“Pretty, colorful wild flowers covered the roadside.”

What is this sentence about? Here we have two nouns and students have to decide which is the main word. Are we talking about the roadside or flowers? In order to answer this question, students have to know how much information the sentence gives about each noun. The noun with the most information will be the main noun. Some students may say we are talking about ‘roadside’. What does the sentence tell us about roadside? *Only that pretty colorful flowers covered it.* We don’t know where this roadside is, what it is made of. On the other hand, we have much more information about ‘flowers’. We know that they are wild, pretty and colorful, we know where they can be found.

Textbooks often refer to the concept of the ‘subject’. Once students can find the main word in a sentence, they can be told that the main word in the sentence, is normally the subject which is usually the noun preceding the main verb in the sentence. This is a definition and while it is helpful for some students, it proves problematic for others and therefore should only be introduced after students are able to find the main word on their own.

Once students can identify the main word of individual sentences, go on to finding the main idea in groups of sentences. Here students must first identify the main word, which is referred to either directly or indirectly in all sentences, and then identify what is said about it. They must ask themselves, what are we talking about in each sentence? The example below is relatively easy because the main word is repeated in each of the sentences.

“Water can be used to put out fires.

Water has many uses.

Water is also used for drinking and cooking.”

What word is repeated in all 3 sentences? *Water*. What do sentences 1 and 3 have in common? *Each gives us a use for water*. What does sentence 2 talk about. *It talks about uses for water in general*. What is the main idea of this group of sentences? Some students may be helped by talking about which sentence is more general - which sentence is broad enough to cover all other sentences. This may be too abstract for some students, but it's worth mentioning.

Once students can do this, proceed to something that's a bit more complex.

*"Amalia had 3 pairs of Levis. One pair was navy blue.
One pair was light blue (to match her eyes). The third
pair was green. She liked them all."*

To find the main idea of this paragraph, we have to find not only the topic (the main word or words) but also what is said about the topic (the controlling idea). Remember, to do this, students have to be able to tell the difference between the essential (the main idea) and the details. Details are examples, repetitions, or expansions of the main idea.

Start by asking what word(s) is referred to either directly or indirectly in all of the sentences? The answer is 'Amalia's Levis'. What does this paragraph say about Amalia's Levis? *She has three pairs: one navy blue, one light blue, and one green*. All this is detail, an explanation or elaboration of the main word(s) – Amalia's Levis, The last sentence *She liked them all*. isn't a detail or an elaboration of Amalia's Levis. It's new information because it tells us how Amalia feels about her Levis and therefore must be included when talking about the main idea of the paragraph. (*Amalia has three pair of Levis and she likes them all.*)

Once students can do this, have them look at a longer text and see if they can identify the main idea of the entire text. In this case, the main idea will function

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as a brief summary. Bits and pieces will be given throughout the text and the student will have to put them together to form the main idea. This can be, but doesn't have to be in one sentence.

Remember to have students take a good look at the title. What does the title of the text below tell us? The answer is that the son did something to make his father, mother or both proud. In other words, students should watch out for things that the son did.

A Son to be Proud of

Adapted from Christine Nuttall "Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language"

Last week, Mr. Smith's wife, Joan had an accident. Mr. Smith's youngest child, Jon, was at home when it happened. He was playing with his new toy car. Mr. Smith had given it to him the week before, for his third birthday.

Suddenly Jon heard his mother calling 'help, help!' He ran into the kitchen. His mother had burned herself with some hot cooking oil. She was crying with pain and the pan was on fire.

Mr. Smith had gone to his office. Both the other children had gone to school. Jon was too small to help his mother, and she was too frightened to speak sensibly to him. But he ran to the neighbor's house and asked her to come and help his mother. She soon put out the fire and took Jon's mother to the clinic.

When Mr. Smith came home, Joan told him what had happened. He was very proud of his son. 'When you are a man you will be just like your father.' he said.

Last week, Mr. Smith's wife, Joan had an accident. This may be important. We have to wait and see if it's related in some way to the son and what he did. *Mr. Smith's youngest child, Jon, was at home when it happened. He was playing with his new toy car. Mr. Smith had given it to him the week before, for his third birthday.* These sentences tell us about the son, but don't relate to "proud". Therefore, only the fact that the son is three years old may be considered important.

Suddenly Jon heard his mother calling 'help, help!' Not important. *He ran into the kitchen.* Not important. *His mother had burned herself with some hot cooking oil.* Hot oil is important. We now know that Mr. Smith's wife Joan burned herself with hot cooking oil. Now we know what happened, but we don't know how it relates to the son. *She was crying with pain and the pan was on fire.* Not important.

Mr. Smith had gone to his office. Both the other children had gone to school. Jon was too small to help his mother, and she was too frightened to speak sensibly to

him. Other than the fact that Jon was too small to help, these 3 sentences are not of major importance. *But he ran to the neighbor's house and asked her to come and help his mother. She soon put out the fire and took Jon's mother to the clinic.* Here we learn what Jon did. *He ran to the neighbor, who put out the fire and took Jon's mother to the clinic.*

When Mr. Smith came home, Joan told him what had happened. He was very proud of his son. 'When you are a man you will be just like your father.' he said. What's the most important piece of information here? "Jon's father was very proud of him." Add this to what we have so far, and we have our main idea or summary of the text, which is:

John's father was very proud of him because, even though he was only 3 years old, he knew to run to the neighbor to get help when his mother burned herself with some hot cooking oil.

The steps I have discussed above are not necessary for all students. However, for those students who cannot find the main idea of a text, those students who have difficulty distinguishing between the essential and the details, this step-by-step process can be vitally important in helping them comprehend a text.

ⁱ Thesis statements are to essays what topic sentences are to paragraphs. Thesis statements represent the main idea of the entire essay.

ⁱⁱ Students should be told that topic sentences function as umbrellas covering the entire paragraph and representing its main idea. Topic sentences can appear at the beginning of a paragraph or at the end of a paragraph. There are even paragraphs which don't have a topic sentence at all.