

The Story Behind Comprehension, the Classroom Library and the Question Words

After reading and trying to incorporate Nanci Bell's work on Visualizing and Verbalizing into my daily routines, I became aware of another area which required attention. I noticed my student who struggled to visualize did not always understand what I was asking. One day I had this conversation with him during a book interview about the Red Hen written by Janis Asad Raabe and illustrated by JoAnn Koenig (MODERN CURRICULUM PRESS).



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I crouched down beside his desk to have a book interview with him.

"Could you read this page for me?" I asked opening up the early reader on his desk.

"Sure," he beamed and proudly read the page.

"Where are the hens kept?"

"The hens are in a pen."

"Very good. Why are the children looking for the red hen?"

"Um..."

"Was the hen lost or did the children miss seeing it?"

"The hen was lost."

"That's right, the children couldn't find it. Why do you think the red hen left the pen?"

"I'm not sure."

"Was the hen running away or looking for a place to lay her egg?"

Slowly, the light dawned in his eyes, "She was looking for a place to lay an egg."

The paired questions were very helpful, but I wondered if not understanding the question words could also be a comprehension factor. Paired questions usually began with phrases such as do you *think, was, did, could, would, should, will, might* _____ or _____?) Paired questions often did not include the question words (who, what, where, when, why how). I decided to try defining the question words and create class teaching lessons to accompany them.

Question Words:

1. Who

*asks for a person/animal

2. Why

*asks for a reason (needed/wanted)

3. How

*the way/method something is done

*the order something is done: 1st, 2nd, 3rd

4. Where

*asks for a place

5. What

*object *size *colour *number (amount)

*shape *age *description

6. When

*asks for time/season/time period



Teaching Tips:

Where: the question word "where" could also involve a preposition:

above	across	after
along	around	at
before	behind	below
beside	between	
by	down	from
in	inside	into
of	off	on
onto	out	outside
over	through	to
toward	under	until
up	upon	with

When: the question word "when" could also be asking about:

*time of day

*day of the week

*month of the year

*holiday

How many___?

this question word phrase asks for an amount or number.

Ask Question Words in Any Order:

1. Who

*asks for a person/animal

2. Why

*asks for a reason (needed/wanted)

3. How

*the way/method something is done

*the order something is done: 1st, 2nd, 3rd

4. Where

*asks for a place

5. What

*object *size *colour *number (amount)

*shape *age *description

6. When

*asks for time/season/time period



Sample Lesson Showing How to Deepen Children's Understanding of the Question Words through Class Discussions

1. Who was the story about?

Teacher explains the meaning of each question word in context. Who is asking for a person(s) or an animal(s).

The story was about a boy named Ted, a girl named Jen and a red hen.

2. Why were Ted and Jen looking for the red hen?

Why is asking for the reason they are looking.

The red hen was missing from her pen.

3. Where did they look?

Where is asking for the places they looked.

They looked for her in the pig pen, the well, and the tub.

4. Where did they find her? *Where is asking for the place the hen was found.*

They found her in a keg of straw.

5. Why was the red hen in the keg of straw?

Why is asking for the reason the hen was in the keg of straw. She needed a nest to lay her egg in.

6. How many eggs did she lay?

How many is asking for the number of eggs she laid. She laid one egg.

Whole class teaching lessons which defined and applied the question words to different story books proved effective in helping all the students understand more clearly what they meant. Progress was also made with my student that had comprehension issues.



Question Words:

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2. Why

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*asks for a place

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*object *size *colour *number (amount)

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6. When

*asks for time/season/time period

The pace of children in the classroom library varies immensely due to: maturation, the strength of their decoding skills and syntax, how many sight words they know, whether English is the child's first language and most certainly how much background knowledge they have acquired. A child's understanding of the meaning of nouns and verbs also dramatically effects their comprehension, which is why picture book read-a-louds accompanied by discussion and comprehension questions are critical. Comprehension is based upon adding to the body of knowledge a child already has by sorting. New information is sorted by deciding whether it is like something already known or not like anything known. If it is not like something already known, the child creates a new category in his mind altogether.

It is important to directly instruct children that :

- the purpose for reading is either entertainment or acquiring information.
- title of the book, the pictures in the book and the text all work together to tell the story. One will not read a book about a goat which contains only illustrations of a goose.
- good readers do not continue reading something they cannot understand.
- good readers ask themselves questions about the text
- The reasons a reader does not understand might be because: the text is too difficult, the concept is complex or the book assumes the reader has background knowledge not yet acquired.

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