Second language (L2) readers may be unsure about what they read. They generally do not have enough experience with language to be entirely confident about what they comprehend from print. This Bulletin presents four important and useful strategies which content teachers can use with L2 readers to improve their comprehension. Two strategies focus on preparing to read - previewing and "backwards reading" - and two strategies focus on increasing meaning from texts - organized questioning and summarizing.

PREVIEWING
Text previewing involves establishing expectations so that students can comprehend more of the text and how the information will be organized. It involves two approaches: previewing text features; and prereading techniques.

Text features. The framework for making sense of information and assisting predictability involves previewing title, author or source, subtitles, subheadings, illustrations, graphs/charts/tables, spacing, and print size, darkness, and style.

Prereading techniques. These techniques involve creating expectations about content: reading the introduction and identifying the key issues to be learned; carefully reading the concluding paragraph; skimming the text to get the gist; reading the first sentence of the body paragraphs; and scanning parts of the text for specific information.

Previewing a text can be accomplished sequentially through a series of specific written directions to be followed by L2 students, individually or in groups, to become more familiar with text content.

"BACKWARDS READING"
Traditional textbook usage incorporates reading the text, answering study questions, discussing in class, and doing follow-up applications based on the material. In order to provide more substantive oral language practice in comprehending text content, reverse the process:

1. Do selected application activities based on the content of the text;
2. Discuss the content through the activities;
3. Answer selected questions based on the text; and
4. Read the text.

Prior knowledge of the content to be read, plus increased familiarity with new vocabulary are among the benefits of this strategy. Choose selected activities (often listed at the end of a chapter) related to the content to be read.
For example, a social studies unit on city government can be preceded by a field trip to city hall; a science unit on plants can be initiated by bringing in a number of specimens for hands-on observation; and a math unit on weights and measures can be preceded by weighing and comparing the quantities of different solids and liquids.

ORGANIZED QUESTIONING

Becoming a better reader involves improving comprehension, and this means gaining meaning from print from a variety of perspectives through a review process. One model for this is questioning based on Bloom's Taxonomy, modified below to aid the reader in providing a graduated means of answering questions and obtaining a more cognitively complex comprehension of content:

Knowledge (recalling specific information): "Wh" questions (who, what, where, etc).

Comprehension (paraphrasing, putting in own words): "In your own words..."; "Explain", etc.

Applying (gist or main idea): "What is the passage/paragraph, etc. about?"

Analyzing (relationship of details to each other): "Why" questions.

Synthesizing (creating or hypothesizing on the basis of known information): "Suppose..."; "What if...?"; "Imagine..."

Evaluating (reasoned judgement or opinion): "What is your opinion of...?"; "What if...?"

(Please see Bulletins, Volume 2, Nos. 9 & 10 for a more complete description of the above question types).

The suggestion is not to strictly follow the above taxonomy all the time but rather to serve as a reminder that there are levels of cognitive complexity; that language can be developed in the process of eliciting increasingly complex thinking; and that students need to go beyond simple levels of cognition to levels which stretch their language and cognitive skills. Learning which includes an organizational framework such as the above taxonomy will enhance the L2 student's ability to become more familiar with both language and content.

SUMMARIZING

A student's periodic mental review of text information is an important comprehension process because it mandates a hierarchical organization of information from greater to lesser importance. As mentioned above, previewing of text features and prereading can be very helpful to begin the summarizing process. Also, a detailed reading of text enables the student to add important information to "flesh out" a summary. Summaries are an informal way of assessing student knowledge, both in comprehension and expression of content to be learned.

Below are a sample summarizing techniques:

Graphic organizer. Design an organizer with graphics (circles, boxes, lines, etc.) to accommodate the organization of information in the text. Individually or in groups, have students fill out the organizer during and/or after the reading.

Best test. Have students, individually or in groups, design a "test" based on the text information.

Word acronym. The topic studied becomes an acronym. Students brainstorm all they can remember from the reading and then elaborate these ideas to fit the letters of the topic word.

Reading - summary balance. After approximately ten minutes of text reading, a couple of minutes are allowed for students in teams to summarize, through answering a question(s) or completing an organizer, what they have been reading.

Please note that any form of written or graphic summary should be explained ORALLY by L2 readers to help them further embed content from receptive to productive use of language.

SOURCES: