

Teaching Students to Use Visualization to Improve Comprehension

Visualizing text is a proven way to improve reading comprehension. It is a technique that can be taught using this simple, step-by-step strategy from literacy consultant Cathy Puett Miller.

"Proficient readers spontaneously and purposely create mental images while and after they read. The images emerge from all five senses as well as the emotions and are anchored in a reader's prior knowledge." Keene and Zimmerman, Mosaic of Thought

Each day, our students are bombarded with the visual images of TV and video games. In contrast, most students view reading as a passive activity. But a simple technique -- visualization -- can transform students of all ages from passive to active readers; visualization can help students cross the boundary to improved comprehension.

Students can grasp the visualization technique by following a simple, step-by-step plan:

Modelling The Technique

Direct modelling of the active thought processes involved in visualizing text is the first step. Begin with a familiar fiction read-aloud. As you read a short passage, describe images you see in your mind. For example, you might use the following quote from *Where the Wild Things Are*:

"That very night in Max's room a forest grew and grew and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around."

After reading the quote, share the images you visualized as you read it. Think about the words and imagine what the characters looked like, what they were doing, and what their surroundings were like.

Students Practice Visualising

When you finish sharing your thoughts, let students try the same technique on their own. Share a highly descriptive reading selection appropriate for students' listening vocabulary level (up to two years above their reading vocabulary). Depending on the ages of your students, you might choose from the following titles or use a title of your choice that provides excellent descriptive passages.

- Danny Schnitzlein's *The Monster Who Ate My Peas* (ages 4-8, Peachtree Publishers, 2001)
- Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (ages 9-12, Puffin, 1998)
- Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (ages 12-18, Dover Publications, 1999)

Before reading aloud to students, offer the suggestions below.

While I read, close your eyes and listen carefully. Stay alert and think about what happens in the story. See if you can imagine the scene the words describe. Pretend you are making a movie; what would you see from behind the camera? As you listen, when you hear describing words (adjectives) -- such as hot, red, musty, or quiet -- use those words to help paint pictures in your head. Give concrete ideas and connect to prior knowledge. In other words, turn on the thought processes and you will prime students to do the same when they read. Remind them to think about what characters smell, taste, feel, hear, and think. Good readers do that. Also, point out to students that this technique will help them remember what the story is about.

Sharing Visualizations

After reading the selection, direct a discussion in which students share their images. Emphasize that everyone's visualizations will differ. Be sure to acknowledge and value all students' ideas.

- If students create images that do not fit the words, help them question their images and adjust them. (This is another effective comprehension strategy.)
- If they create images that reflect the words, praise them and encourage comparison/contrast discussions.
- If students have difficulty creating an image, try another short read-aloud session and practice modelling again. Ask questions to lead them to create images on their own -- questions such as Does this remind you of anything in your life? or What do you think the dog looked like? or Do you have a dog? How do you think this dog is the same as yours? Different?

Using Drawing To Help Students Visualize

Next, use a different selection from the same or another text. Tell students you will share part of a story (show no illustrations). Ask them to draw their own illustrations as they listen. The physical act of creating a picture can help students grasp the concept of visualization.

Integrating Visualization Into Every Day Learning

After students begin to grasp the concept of visualization, be sure to reinforce it frequently. Make visualization a part of every day activity. Those who have more difficulty with the concept will learn from peers' expressions imagination. Encourage those who struggle to ask other students how they came up with their ideas and to learn from one another. Integrate this exercise into daily class read-alouds and silent reading. Incorporate not only physical images, but also ideas about feelings the characters might experience. (That will exercise students' critical thinking skills, especially their skill at making inferences.) Use the combination of drawings and mental image-making that works best for your students. As you progress, you can move from descriptive texts into expository texts.

By using visualization, you open the door for life-long reading. Most of all, you help develop in students the habit of actively thinking about what they read -- which leads to greater retention and understanding.

Reference

Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop by Susan Zimmerman and Ellin Oliver Keene (Heinemann, 1997).

Cathy Puett Miller is a passionate advocate for early literacy. Known widely as "The Literacy Ambassador," Miller connects children, families, and teachers with resources to create positive early reading experiences.

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