The Case for Direct Explanation of Strategies

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It has been 14 years since we reported that direct teacher explanation of strategies results in significant achievement gains for struggling readers (Duffy et al., 1987). Given today's standard-based world, with its emphasis on raising low readers' achievement, one would expect this finding to be heavily emphasized. However, the reading literature tends to favor less explicit techniques for teaching comprehension and places relatively little emphasis on direct explanation of comprehension strategies. Consequently, this chapter: (1) reiterates the importance of direct explanation, particularly when teaching struggling readers; (2) describes what teachers do to make explanation effective; and (3) argues for developing teachers who use both explicit and less explicit techniques as the instructional situation demands.

BACKGROUND

In my work in classrooms, I often see teachers using instructional techniques such as Directed Reading Lessons, in which teachers introduce students to the selection, guide their reading of it, and discuss its contents with them. Historically, the Directed Reading Lesson has been the favored technique for teaching comprehension. However, Durkin (1978–1979) brought us all up short by finding that such instruction may be little more than “interrogation.” Thus a sustained search began for ways to improve comprehension instruction. Four broad lines of research resulted: (1) research on the relationship between prior knowledge and comprehension; (2) research on metacognition; (3) research on classroom discourse; and (4) research on explicit teaching.
Instructional Strategies Capitalizing on Prior Knowledge Research

Richard Anderson, David Pearson and their colleagues at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois pioneered this line of research. Basing their studies in a schema-theoretic orientation, they established a link between prior knowledge and readers’ construction of meaning (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). A number of instructional techniques for guiding comprehension grew out of this research.

The one I see most often in classrooms is Donna Ogle’s (1986) K-W-L technique. When using K-W-L, teachers guide students to think about what they already know about a topic (K), what they want to learn (W), and what they learned as a result of their reading (L). This technique results in improved comprehension of text content because readers make connections between their prior knowledge and what they are reading. Additionally, there is the expectation that if we practice K-W-L (and/or other guided reading techniques) with students enough, they will infer that they should use these techniques themselves.

Instructional Strategies Based in Understandings about Metacognition

A second line of research grew from studies of metacognition (Baker & Brown, 1984; Garner, 1988). Metacognition is “thinking about one’s thinking,” usually for the purpose of assuming metacognitive control of one’s thinking, or what Clay (1991) calls “inner control.”

Metacognition research spurred study of how to help readers become conscious of the strategic nature of comprehension. In the 1980s, two particularly important techniques were developed. The first was Taffy Raphael’s Question-Answer-Relationship (Q-A-R) technique (Raphael & McKinney, 1983; Raphael & Wonnacott, 1985). This technique teaches students to be consciously aware of whether they are likely to find the answer to a comprehension question “right there” on the page, or between the lines, or beyond information provided in the text. By being aware of the requirements posed by a question, students are in a better position to seek answers to those questions.

The second was Annemarie Palincsar’s reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Students are taught to emulate a teacher’s question asking, with an emphasis on self-questioning, summarizing, predicting, and clarifying. In posing such questions, teachers encourage students to think strategically.

As with K-W-L, both Q-A-R and reciprocal teaching operate on the assumption that after repeated experiences students will infer that they should employ these strategies themselves when reading independently.

The same is the case with Reading Recovery’s version of guided reading, which also has a strong metacognitive flavor (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). In this technique for teaching comprehension, the teacher typically introduces the text, works with individuals as they read the text, selects one or two teaching points to emphasize following reading, and asks children to extend their reading afterward (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Again, the purpose is to guide students’ comprehension of text content in hopes that they will infer from these experiences how to use strategies when the teacher is not available to guide them. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) explicitly state that the purpose is not to teach strategies.
Research on Classroom Discourse

A third major line of research was spurred by discomfort with Durkin’s (1978–1979) findings about “interrogation.” Its focus was the quality of classroom discourse. Courtney Cazden (Cazden, 1986) led this effort, but others also made important contributions (see, for instance, Au & Mason, 1981; Heap, 1982; Heath, 1983; Gaskins, Anderson, Pressley, Cunicelli, & Satlow, 1993). This work helped us understand the socially constructed nature of learning and that oral language determines much of the classroom culture (Bloome & Green, 1984). It also revealed that classroom discourse is not easy to change (Alvermann, O’Brien, & Dillon, 1990). As Alvermann and Hayes (1989) explain:

> Convincing teachers to change their verbal interaction patterns for the purpose of effecting higher levels of response to text appears difficult to accomplish. . . . Teachers have their own experiences, beliefs, and intuitions that are translated into practical arguments and instructional goals to which they are firmly committed. (pp. 333)

Classroom discourse is complex and, as such, is not associated with particular instructional techniques. This line of research has, however, influenced instructional thinking regarding teacher–student interactions and is reflected in various discussions of scaffolded teacher assistance (Duffy & Roehler, 1987; Pressley et al., 1992; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999).

Explicit Teaching

The previously mentioned three broad research areas all emphasize strategic behavior but avoid intentional and direct teaching of strategies and how they work. Instead of directly teaching strategies, they provide guidance in the expectation that repeated exposure will cause students to become strategic comprehenders.

Explicit teaching rose out of concern for struggling readers. Because struggling readers do not pick up on the relatively subtle cues and prompts provided by other activities, research was conducted on a number of instructional techniques designed to provide more explicit information about how reading works. One of these—direct explanation of strategies—is the focus of this chapter. Others include main idea techniques as studied by Jim Baumann (1984); metacognitive strategies as studied by Scott Paris and his colleagues (Paris, 1986; Paris, Cross, & Lipson, 1984); inference training as studied by Peter Dewitz and his colleagues (Dewitz, Carr, & Patberg, 1987); prereading strategies as studied by Jan Dole and her colleagues (Dole, Brown, & Trathen, 1996; Dole, Valencia, Greer, & Wardrop, 1991); explanatory feedback as studied by Phil Winne and his colleagues (Winne, Graham, & Prock, 1993); and transactional strategy instruction as studied by Michael Pressley and his colleagues (Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, & Schuder, 1996; Pressley et al., 1992).

Explicit teaching differs from other approaches to comprehension instruction in two important ways. First, explicit teaching uses “strategy” to mean a technique that readers learn to control as a means to better comprehend (see, for instance, the comprehension strategies described in Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991, and in Keene & Zimmermann, 1997); other approaches, on the other hand, use “strategy” to mean a technique the teacher controls to guide student reading (such as the K-W-L). Second, explicit teaching is intentional and direct about teaching individual strategies on the as-
assumption that clear and unambiguous information about how strategies work will put struggling readers in a better position to control their own comprehension; other approaches, on the other hand, emphasize quality interaction with text content but avoid explicit teacher talk designed to develop student metacognitive awareness of when and how to use a particular strategy.

To illustrate, note how teachers are usually told to use K-W-L (taken from Cunningham & Allington, 1999, pp. 56–58):

- first, the teacher has students brainstorm what they know about the topic at hand and list those things on a chart under the heading “What we know”;
- then the teacher has students think about what they would like to know and list that under the heading “What we want to find out”;
- then students read the selection to see which of their questions were answered and to find other interesting information; and
- after checking to see which questions were answered, the teacher encourages kids to return to the text to clarify points.

The teacher, not the student; is in control of the strategy; the goal is student comprehension of the text, not student control of how a strategy works; and assessment focuses on whether students comprehend text content, not on whether they can control a strategy and use it independently when comprehending on their own.

When a teacher wants students to comprehend text content, less explicit techniques such as K-W-L and reciprocal teaching are unbeatable. However, when a teacher wants students to assume “inner control” (Clay, 1991) of a strategy so that they can use it independently of the teacher, these approaches often leave something to be desired. Many struggling readers cannot, by simply watching a teacher guide their reading, figure out what they are supposed to do on their own. Consequently, they remain mystified and do not achieve the desired “inner control.”

This is not to imply that K-W-L, reciprocal teaching, and other similar techniques cannot be taught in ways that put struggling readers in control of the strategy the teacher is using. It means that, typically, these techniques are explained by reading educators and applied in classrooms in ways that emphasize understanding text content, not in ways that emphasize student control of the mental processes involved in using a particular strategy.

**DIRECT EXPLANATION OF STRATEGIES**

Direct explanation of strategies is the particular form of explicit teaching emphasized in this chapter. It is based on studies conducted by Laura Roehler and I and our colleagues at the Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University (Duffy, Roehler, Meloth, Vavrus, Book, Putnam, & Wesselman, 1986; Duffy, Roehler, Sivan, et al., 1987).

Like other studies of explicit instruction, direct explanation provides struggling readers with explicit information. But our work was distinct in three ways. First, we focused on the mental processing (i.e., the reasoning) that is the guts of comprehension strategies, with the intent of making visible to readers what Clay (1991) calls “in the head” mental activity. Second, we combined explanation with application, so that strategic mental activity was immediately applied in the reading of text. Finally, because we believed struggling readers would be able to assume control of what had previously seemed like a magi-
cal act if they were metacognitive about the thinking one does when comprehending, we sought to make explicit for students the declarative, conditional, and procedural knowledge about the strategies being learned.

With those three ideas as the basis, we conducted two year-long experimental studies of classroom reading instruction (Duffy, Roehler, Meloth, Vavrus, Book, Putnam, & Wesselman, 1986; Duffy, Roehler, Sivan, et al., 1987). The hypothesis in both studies was that low-reading group students of teachers who provide explicit explanations about how to reason with strategies would be (1) more metacognitively aware of how to comprehend and would (2) demonstrate better reading achievement.

**Studying Direct Explanation**

Our intervention with experimental teachers emphasized six interrelated instructional actions (Duffy, Roehler, Meloth, & Vavrus, 1986):

- First, teachers introduced the selection to be read (almost always the text was from the basal textbook adopted by the district).
- Second, instead of immediately jumping into the reading of the selection, the teacher made an explicit statement about what strategy needed to be learned (declarative knowledge), when it would be used in the upcoming selection (conditional knowledge), and the critical attribute one must attend to in order to do the strategy successfully (procedural knowledge).
- Third, teachers provided students with a model of how to think when using the strategy, which we described as "mental modeling" (Duffy, Roehler, & Herrmann, 1988) because it involved "thinking out loud" about the mental processing one does when using strategies, thus providing students with a "window into the mind" of a successful strategy user.
- Fourth, scaffolded practice was provided in which students practiced using the strategy with gradually diminishing amounts of coaching assistance from the teacher. We called this phase "responsive elaboration" (Duffy & Roehler, 1987) because it required creative teacher responses to students' restructuring of their understandings about strategy use.
- Fifth, teachers had students read the selection for two purposes: for text content and for application of the newly learned strategy.
- Finally, lesson closure included explicit statements about the strategy, its use in understanding text in other settings, and how to implement it.

Control teachers, in contrast, relied on guided reading, usually the Directed Reading Lesson. Typically, they introduced a selection to be read (again, usually from the basal textbook required by the district), set purposes for the reading, reviewed vocabulary, directed students to read the selection, and led a discussion of the selection. Strategy (or skill) instruction was provided after reading the selection and was typically limited to basal textbook practice exercises.

In both studies, we observed experimental and control teachers as they taught their respective low reading groups across an entire academic year. Following each observed lesson, students from the low reading group were interviewed to assess their meta-
cognitive awareness. Achievement was measured in the first study with a standardized test at the end of the school year; in the second study, achievement was measured throughout the school year, at the end of the year with a standardized test, and 6 months later with a state-mandated assessment test.

**Results from Studies of Direct Explanation**

In both studies, experimental group students were more aware of strategies and how to use them. Achievement was not significantly better for experimental students in the first study; but when more extensive instruction was provided for teachers in the second experiment, experimental group students not only outperformed control students on a standardized test but also did significantly better on achievement gains during the school year and on the state assessment test administered 6 months later.

In retrospect, three implications are particularly important.

**Can Strategies Be Directly Taught?**

First, the findings substantiated that strategies can be directly taught and that direct teaching of strategies benefits struggling readers.

Despite these results, however, leaders in the field of reading generally continue to resist the benefits of directly explaining strategies. For instance, almost a decade after we reported the effectiveness of direct explanation, Fountas and Pinnell (1996) continue to insist that strategies cannot be directly taught. This resistance is difficult to understand given (1) our empirical findings, (2) the absence of any contradictory data, and (3) the many related studies documenting that struggling readers benefit from explicit teaching (see, for instance, Baumann, 1984; Paris et al., 1984; Dewitz et al., 1987; Pressley et al., 1992; Winne et al., 1993; Dole et al., 1996).

**What Teacher Actions Are Important?**

A second implication regards the nature of explanation itself. Teacher actions that proved to be important were:

- establishing that the student needed to learn the strategy being taught;
- making an explicit tie between the strategy being taught and its application in a story, ensuring that the newly learned strategy was immediately applied in that day's reading selection;
- repeatedly stating and modeling the "secret" to doing it successfully so that students "saw" the mental workings involved;
- providing students with multiple opportunities to perform the strategy themselves, at first with coaching but gradually moving to independent use;
- basing assessment on both the students' use of the strategy and their comprehension of text content; and
- maintaining lesson alignment—that is, maintaining a consistent focus on the strategy to be learned throughout the reading of the text, a feature political campaigners call "message discipline."
What Does Direct Explanation Demand of the Teacher?

The most important implication of our findings is what it says about the crucial role of the teacher. Specifically, good explainers thoughtfully adapt their explanations to fit the instructional situation. Three examples are illustrative.

First, good explainers thoughtfully adapt their plans. For instance, we frequently observed teachers picking up on cues from students and changing plans “on the fly” during lessons. This led us to note that “teachers’ lesson plans are temporary documents that must be modified as the dynamic and responsive instructional exchange unfolds” (Duffy & Roehler, 1989, p. 27) and that explanations “unfold in unpredictable ways depending on how students restructure what teachers say” (Duffy & Roehler, 1987, p. 519). In short, explaining comprehension strategies is not like lecturing or other rigid forms of explanation. To the contrary, “explanation involves subtleties not normally associated with traditional views of explanation where information is presented in a one-way, teacher-dominated lecture” (Duffy & Roehler, 1989, p. 31).

Second, good explainers thoughtfully adapt the modeling they provide. For instance, when we noted that some treatment students were more metacognitively aware than students in other treatment classes who supposedly received the same kind of explanations, we did a post hoc analysis of treatment teachers’ lesson transcripts. We found that all the experimental teachers were explicit but that the modeling of the most effective experimental teachers was more substantive (Duffy, 1993a; Duffy, Roehler, & Rackliffe, 1986). In a typical main-idea lesson, for instance, less effective teachers just defined the main idea, pointed out some examples, and inserted prompts during guided reading; but the most effective teachers made thoughtful and substantive adjustments, based mainly on student cues, as they modeled how to link an author’s ideas together.

Finally, good explainers thoughtfully adapt across lesson boundaries (Roehler, Duffy, & Warren, 1988). For instance, effective teachers would explain a strategy in one way on some days, and on another day the same teacher would explain the same strategy in a different way. Similarly, effective teachers linked a strategy taught on one day with a strategy taught on another day to build the understanding that strategy use is a coherent thinking process, not a matter of memorizing a long list of isolated strategies (Duffy, 1993b). Additionally, the most effective teachers situated instruction within larger, authentic projects or problems that often took weeks to complete (Duffy, 1997). For instance, a teacher might involve students in solving a schoolwide safety problem, assign various readings on that topic, and then use those readings as occasions for explaining needed comprehension strategies.

Summary

In addition to establishing that strategies can be directly explained and that doing so benefits struggling readers, our research also established that explanations cannot be scripted, proceduralized, or packaged. Instead, good explanations require thoughtfully adaptive teachers who “harness various ideas, select from a variety of principles and create different instructional combinations” (Duffy, 1992, p. 447).

Unfortunately, the thoughtful component of teacher explanation is often overlooked. Instead, teacher explanation is sometimes assumed to be a rigid, proceduralized technique in the tradition of scripted instruction such as DISTAR (Englemann & Bruner,
1974). Nothing could be further from the truth. Although direct explanation, like DISTAR, is direct, clear, and unambiguous, the similarity ends there. A teacher, not a program, decides what strategies to teach; a teacher, not the program, develops an explanation; a teacher responds to cues from students and does not compliantly follow a script; the instructional emphasis throughout is on development of high-level, not low-level, student responses; and a priority is placed on situating explanations in authentic learning occasions. These are not DISTAR-like characteristics.

It is true, of course, that thoughtless teachers who provide bad explanations can make students into passive recipients of information (see, most recently, the concern expressed by Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; earlier similar concerns were expressed by Pearson, 1984, and by Tierney & Cunningham, 1984). However, as we reported in our comparisons of less effective and more effective explainers (Duffy, 1993a; Duffy, Roehler, & Rackliffe, 1986; Roehler et al., 1988), thoughtful teachers do not do so. For instance, when I was demonstrating direct explanation of comprehension strategies recently with sixth graders in a local school, teacher-observers commented on how I blended explicit explanatory information about strategy use into an ongoing dialogue in which students were intensely engaged with text content.

That is what good explanation is. It blends explicit information giving and sensitive responsiveness to students in order to develop both conscious awareness of how a strategy works and richly textured understandings of text content (Duffy, 1997; Duffy, Roehler, Meloth, & Vavrus, 1986). Rather than rejecting explanation because some teachers explain poorly, it would seem that we would be better off teaching teachers to explain well.

**WHAT RESEARCH REMAINS TO BE DONE?**

No doubt we could profit from more research on the inner workings of direct explanation. For instance, we need more descriptive data about mental modeling and what ingredients make it work. Similarly, we need more substantive information on how to scaffold, such as the study recently reported by Rodgers (1999). Additionally, we need to learn more about how mental modeling interacts with coaching or scaffolding, about how to maintain lesson alignment, and about how teachers create cohesive networks of understanding across lessons.

However, I do not believe that direct explanation per se should be the focus of future research efforts. There are two reasons for this.

The first is that direct explanation is not a panacea—something that works all the time with all students. Such practices do not exist in the real world of classroom teaching. Rather, different practices are appropriate in different situations. K-W-L is the best technique to use in some situations, reciprocal teaching is the best choice in other situations, and direct explanation is best in still other situations. All are tools in the teacher’s repertoire. The trick is to select the right tool for the right situation, not to rigidly insist on using only one kind of technique.

Second, direct explanation, like any instructional technique, is effective only to the extent that a teacher is analytical and adaptive in applying it. Comprehension is a multilayered conceptual endeavor, not a technical one. Instruction must be similarly multilayered and conceptual, not technical. Hence the technique itself is not as important as the
teacher's ability to be thoughtful and sensitive in making adaptations that account for the multilayered and situational nature of comprehension instruction.

Hence the research focus must not be on the instructional technique; the research focus must be on thoughtfully adaptive teaching. Specifically, we need to abandon the search for "foolproof" instructional techniques and concentrate instead on research that helps us develop teachers who possess the psychological mindset to be adaptive. Six broad concerns need to be addressed in this regard.

1. *We must stop basing policy and teacher education on a "what works?" notion.* Such thinking is rooted in the flawed assumption that what makes comprehension instruction effective is a technique, a method, a program, or a procedure when, in reality, it is a teacher's *use* of these that makes the difference (Duffy, 1991). Favoring one method or approach and disparaging others disempowers teachers, creating in their minds the expectation that success lies outside themselves. The expectation we *should* be developing is that what makes the difference is teachers' professional decision making when using a method or technique, not the method or technique itself. Consequently, policy makers and researchers should stop looking for answers to put in teachers' heads ahead of time and focus instead on developing teachers who think for themselves.

2. *Teacher analysis is essential.* Four levels of analysis are needed. First, teachers must decide which students need explicit explanations and which will benefit from less explicit instruction. Second, if it is determined that a reader is struggling, teachers must determine specifically what strategy (or strategies) must be taught to put the student on the road to successful reading. Third, when conducting instruction, teachers must be able to analyze students' statements during instructional interactions, to make judgments about students' interpretations, and to decide how to intervene in ways that promote learning. Fourth, at a very high level of complexity, teachers must be able to analyze instructional situations across lessons and to determine how to establish conceptual congruity, alignment, and authenticity. Although informal, on-line data collection is important at all four levels, what teachers do with the data once they are collected is crucial. We need research that helps us learn how to develop teachers whose instructional actions are situationally appropriate because they are rooted in data-based analysis.

3. *We need to study teacher disposition as well as teacher knowledge.* Being analytical is not enough if one does not also have the will to follow up on what an analysis reveals. Having the will means having a certain spirit, a willingness to risk, and courage. As Cuban (1992) points out, teaching requires teachers to act; to act, teachers must choose. Choosing inevitably creates conflicts with values, beliefs, and preferences. In reading comprehension instruction, for instance, a teacher may have a strong preference for a particular form of guided reading; consequently, it may not be easy to switch to direct explanation for a particular struggling reader. Similarly, providing alternative instruction for a few struggling readers creates a classroom management and time resource problem involving difficult choices, to say nothing of teacher energy. Being able to persevere and make tough choices about such issues is as much a matter of the spirit as of the mind (Duffy, 1998). Improving comprehension instruction means helping teachers develop such spirit. The key to doing so lies with freeing them from the expectation that we (i.e., reading educators, program developers, etc.) have answers. Instead, we must develop in teachers the fundamental principle that good teaching is not so much a matter of following the advice of various "authorities" as it is a matter of inventing instructional re-
spontaneous responses to situational demands. Only by being put in charge can teachers develop the spirit and strength to make the kinds of choices Cuban (1992) describes.

4. *We need to abandon the concept of teacher “training.”* As I have argued in the past (Duffy, 1994) and as Hoffman and Pearson (2000) have argued more recently, training works only when the task is done the same way repeatedly. The reality of comprehension instruction, however, is that it is never done in exactly the same way twice. Sometimes one technique or method is appropriate; sometimes other techniques or methods are appropriate. Sometimes a technique or method is used in one way; sometimes it is used in another way. Training, however, encourages adherence to rigid procedures, a characteristic that is incompatible with the realities of comprehension instruction.

5. *We need longitudinal study of teacher learning.* Becoming a thoughtfully adaptive teacher is a career-long endeavor. It can be initiated in preservice settings. But as studies of teacher change indicate (see, for instance, Duffy, 1993a), in-service teachers continue to learn the more subtle aspects of thoughtfully adaptive teaching long after completing preservice teacher education. The extent to which they engage in such adaptive thinking is often a function of school context. Teachers can be creative and thoughtfully adaptive to the extent that the school leadership promotes and supports it, to the extent that such thought is congruent with the school’s traditional way of doing things, to the extent that required curriculum materials allow it, to the extent that assessment practices do not suppress it, and countless other contextual variables (Duffy, 1993b; Elmore, 1997). We need research, such as recent initiatives by Grossman, Valencia, and their colleagues (Grossman et al., 2000) and by Hoffman and Roller (1999), that examines teacher education from the preservice level into actual on-the-job teaching in schools having different culturally embedded ways of doing things.

6. *We need to learn how to integrate teachers’ voices into the teacher-learning enterprise.* We want teachers who are thoughtfully adaptive professionals who control their own work and are analytical, creative, flexible problem solvers in their classrooms. Those characteristics cannot just be talked about in teacher education. Teachers must live those characteristics during teacher education if they are to be thoughtful later in their own classrooms. This means reading professors need to promote and authorize thoughtful professional decision making, even when student thinking diverges from a professor’s favored ways of doing things. Similarly, in-service professional education must be rooted in the voices of teachers (see, for instance, Afferbach, 2000). Learning how to do this well requires careful study.

In sum, because teacher judgment is a key to effective comprehension instruction, the dominant research question must be, How do we develop teachers who have both the ability and the will to make such judgments?

**CONCLUSION**

The world has changed since we reported our teacher explanation findings in 1987. In those days, it was commendable to teach struggling readers well; today, however, it is *mandatory* that we teach them well. Consequently, all teachers should be prepared to switch to tools such as direct teacher explanation when readers do not respond to less explicit forms of reading instruction.
Unfortunately, however, most reading methods texts de-emphasize explicit, direct explanation. Although such texts often make vague reference to the need to be “explicit,” direct explanation is seldom developed in detail. With the exception of Keene and Zimmerman’s (1997) *Mosaic of Thought*, teachers are seldom taught how to provide mental modeling, how to scaffold students’ understanding of mental processing, how to maintain lesson alignment, and other difficult instructional abilities associated with direct explanation. In today’s world, we cannot afford such omissions.

Both teacher educators and policy makers have important roles to play in correcting this omission. Teacher educators must make clear that success does not lie in subscribing to their particular ideology or to their favored methods of instruction and cultivate instead thoughtfully adaptive teachers who use a broad range of comprehension techniques, regardless of what the teacher educator may personally prefer. Policy makers, for their part, must abandon the “quick fix” mentality in which restrictive instructional programs are mandated. This practice has two negative consequences. First, it tends to polarize the debate, with teacher educators defending the methods they favor and attacking the mandate, rather than aggressively encouraging teachers to use a variety of instructional techniques. Second, it conveys to teachers the erroneous message that teacher compliance to authority, rather than teacher responsiveness and judgment, is the key to effective instruction.

The bottom line is that there are many effective ways to teach comprehension. Success depends on thoughtfully selecting and then adapting techniques that fit the situation. Sometimes direct explanation is appropriate; sometimes something else is. Consequently, the question is not whether direct explanation is a “best practice.” The question is whether we can stop investing ourselves in particular techniques, methods, or approaches as if they are universal panaceas and, instead, invest ourselves in authorizing teachers to make pedagogical choices based on what an instructional situation demands.

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