

Clarifying

Description

Clarifying belongs to a set of reading strategies called *Collaborative Teaching*, but it can also stand on its own. Clarifying is an umbrella term for a set of cognitive strategies that students can use to identify where they have comprehension difficulties and how they can get at the meaning of a word, phrase, sentence or passage. Students are encouraged to identify problem areas and consider specific fix-up or repair strategies when understanding breaks down. Clarifying strategies need to be adjusted for different kinds of texts and need to take into account a variety of reasons for comprehension difficulties (insufficient background knowledge, weak decoding skills, unfamiliar vocabulary, or general problems with gaining meaning from print).

Purpose

Clarifying strategies teach struggling readers to do what proficient readers do: They stop reading when a text no longer makes sense and implement various repair strategies. Engaging students in identifying unclear concepts, structures, and passages helps students to learn self-monitoring techniques. Understanding and practicing repair strategies helps students to look for synonyms or other text clues. Rereading can help pick up information that may have been missed. In using various fix-up strategies students realize that the answer to a comprehension problem may be found in their mind (as they think about things more deeply), in the text itself (related words or other text clues), or in an outside source (another text, an expert, or a dictionary).

What to Do

1. To introduce the point of the strategy, create a short text that contains nonsense words that need to be clarified and that eventually can be understood if fix-up strategies are used.
Example: When presenting an oral text, you can mumble (say "mumble, mumble") at various points, encouraging students to stop you when they don't understand by raising their hand or holding up a red "STOP, I don't get it" card. If presenting a written text, you can start with a simple sentence like, "The fire fighters rushed to the blazing fire and when they got there, they pulled out the heavy houses." Ask students if the sentences make sense and if not why not. Invite them to use a fix up strategy, such as using their background knowledge about what equipment firefighters use and their knowledge of English spelling.
2. Select a text that contains several words or structures the students are not likely to know. Use the Think-Aloud strategy to illustrate clarifying and repairing comprehension difficulties.
3. Use a new passage to engage students in guided practice. Teach the Click - Clunk Strategy (students say click when they understand a word or passage, and clunk when the meaning is not clear). Consider sentences like *I was astounded by his nerve. How could he ask to*

borrow \$200 dollars when he had not repaired the money I had loaned him the previous month. The traffic was just awful. Help students to realize that sometimes errors occur in a text, and sometimes they are due to carelessness (like skipping a page). The point is for students to stop when the text no longer makes sense and think. Help students understand that sometimes lack of comprehension is because the writer is careless and sometimes because the reader does not pay close enough attention (such as skipping a page before reading the third sentences above).

4. Break students into small groups or pairs. Designate a team leader in each group who uses the Think-Aloud strategy to identify unknown words or unclear sentences or passages. The team leader works with the group to see if these difficulties can be addressed and meaning can be clarified. They then report to the rest of the class.
5. As you introduce new readings, show students how to annotate texts to indicate where they have difficulties (with markers or post-its) and highlight various fix-up strategies they should try, matching them to the nature of the difficulties. Periodically review the strategies.

Keep in Mind

Allow students to signal understanding or lack of understanding both verbally and non-verbally and focus on both listening comprehension and reading comprehension. Encourage students to use signal cards to let you know when you are speaking too fast or when they lose track of what's being said on an audio-tape or video so that they see that they can use similar strategies with written texts as with oral texts

Explain that when something needs to be clarified when someone speaks, we often use non-verbal communication to signal lack of understanding (e.g., leaning forward or frowning). And when a video stops making sense, we often hit the pause and replay button to see if we may have missed something. Sometimes we ask other people for help.

Explain to students that similar strategies can be used in reading: stopping to think when something doesn't make sense, identifying the unclear concepts or words and mentally rewinding and paying close attention are ways of catching on and not losing the thread of a story.