

IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH PEER PERSUASION AND COMPETITION

by James E. Ford

Because improving reading skills, like reading itself, is largely an individual matter that goes on in silence, it is difficult for the teacher to determine whether any thinking accompanies the activity. Coming up with methods that will ensure that thinking will happen is even more difficult. In the reading classroom these problems are addressed primarily by having the student respond to multiple choice questions designed to test comprehension. The multiple choice format is itself one of the least demanding types. Adding to these difficulties is the fact that the lone student is pressured to concentrate and accomplish only by unfocused external course pressures and whatever internal fortitude may happen to exist as he multiple-guesses his way through the exercises.

The teammate persuasion technique is designed to ensure that the student not only does something, but that he knows *why* he is doing it as well. The technique requires only the usual classroom matter but adds reasoned discussion between two classroom members acting as teammates. There is, therefore, immediate peer involvement and pressure from the teammate, as well as the incentive to do well in competition with the other teams in the class.

Each student reads the selection silently and answers the questions—the usual procedure. Then the teammates compare answers. If a disagreement turns up, the teammates debate the rightness of their respective choices until one convinces the other. (Sometimes, when neither is at all sure about the correct answer, both will explore the possibilities together until they can agree.)

Reading and debate does not proceed haphazardly, but rather the students are taught to follow the few simple steps which follow. They are told:

1. **Be sure you understand the question first (by following the same steps, below, used to understand the reading selection itself).**
2. **Be sure you understand the lexical meanings and grammatical functions of the individual words:**
 - a. Settle on the closest dictionary definition
 - b. Analyze the syntax (eg., subject or object)
 - c. Determine grammatical reference.
3. **Settle on the most appropriate context:**
 - a. For an individual word, other words forming its sentence
 - b. For a sentence, the other sentences forming its paragraph,
 - c. For an idea, a more inclusive idea.
4. **Don't stop at the apparent correct answer; eliminate the wrong answers as well.**

When the teacher at last supplies the correct answers, the teams should go through the same processes until they have explained why any wrong answers were chosen.

In addition to its use in reading comprehension exercises, this technique can be easily adapted to writing drills, especially those involving grammar problems. Also, in both the reading and writing areas, it can serve as a diagnostic tool. If the teacher will listen to the teammates' discussions—or, better still, take turns acting as the teammate of each student—he or she will be able to pinpoint problem areas by knowing not only the student's responses but, more tellingly, the reasons the student gives for making these responses.