

Using Structure for Efficient Reading

... Meyer and her colleagues have studied the effects of rhetorical organization on native English speakers' reading comprehension.

In one study, ninth graders each read two texts, one written with the comparison structure, the other with the problem/solution structure. In analyzing the recall protocols these students wrote immediately after reading and again a week later, Meyer found that if the students organized their recalls according to the text's structure, they remembered far more content, retaining not only the main ideas especially well, even a week after reading, but also recovering more details. These students also did better on a true/false test on the content of the passage, and they were also the students who had demonstrated good reading comprehension skills on standardized tests. Conversely, those who did not use the text's structure to organize their recalls tended to make disorganized lists of ideas, so that they recovered neither the main ideas nor the details very well. These also were the students who scored poorly on the standardized reading tests. Meyer has conducted similar studies with older readers, including university undergraduates, with the same results.

In a recent ESL study (Carrell 1984a), results similar to Meyer's were obtained. Using expository texts that conveyed the same content, but that structured that content with either a comparison, problem/solution, causation, or description top-level rhetorical organization, it was found that the ESL readers who organized their recalls according to the structure of the text version they read recalled significantly more ideas from the original text than those who did not use the structure of the original text to organize their recalls.

Meyer and one of her graduate students (Bartlett 1978) went on to show that the relationship between use of the text's structure in organizing one's recall of the text is not only highly correlated with the amount of information recalled, but causative. Bartlett spent a week teaching a group of ninth graders to identify and use four of the five types of top-level text structures (all but the time-order type). This group read and was tested for recall of texts on three occasions: before training, a day after training, and three weeks after instruction. A control group did the same tasks but received no instruction about the text types. The trained group remembered nearly twice as much content from the texts after their instruction (both one day after and three weeks after) that they could before. And on the tests after instruction, the trained group did twice as well as the control group. Moreover, the classroom teacher in the experimental group wrote a follow-up letter sometime after the experiment attesting to the lasting effects of the instruction on the reading comprehension and recall behavior of his students.

Carrell, Patricia L. (1987). Text as Interaction: Some Implications of Text Analysis and Research for ESL Composition. In Connor, U. and Kaplan, R. (Eds.) *Writing Across Language: Analysis of L2 Text*, 47-56. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.