How understanding text features benefits reading comprehension

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Included in the five main focuses of the English achievement objectives in the New Zealand Curriculum (2007: 18) are: *language features that enhance texts* and *the structure and organisation of texts*. These refer to the characteristics or features of texts, and how those characteristics or features are arranged. The ability to visualise the features of a text type, and how those features are arranged, is vital to the construction of meaning when reading.

When a student is able to visualise in this way, they understand texts at a much deeper level, and so have real control over them. This control comes about because a student who can visualise a text type understands how writers construct meaning through the features they choose to use and the way they arrange those features. It is this understanding that is fundamental to reading comprehension.

Crucially, when a student has this understanding, language is perceived not as a set of rules but as a set of options available for constructing a variety of meanings. So, through learning about various types of text, students learn not about discrete and isolated forms of writing but instead about the construction of written texts in general: it is through the analysis of particular forms that students begin to learn about the writing system as a whole.

It is important you make sure your students appreciate they are learning about particular text types not as ends in themselves but as a means of learning about the writing system. Simultaneously focus their thinking on the features and organisation of a particular text type *and* on how they can use what they know about that form in order to learn about other forms, about the writing system, and therefore about language in general.

Students who understand writing at the system-level are not deterred when they meet texts with atypical features and/or organisation. Instead, they thrive – confidently exploring how the writer has made use of conventional and less conventional writing techniques in order to express ideas.

The following are descriptions of visualisations of *typical* narratives and science reports; they are based on those described by Vellutino (2003).

Narratives

Students who understand the features and organisation of narrative texts will know that they have a main idea/theme, and will comprise a beginning section introducing the main characters, a middle section where some sort of connection/ conflict arises between characters, developing to a crisis point, and an ending section where the connection/ conflict comes to some kind of resolution. They will also know that the story will be set in a particular place/s, cover a period of time, and will probably contain dialogue. As they gain expertise, students will learn that writers of narratives make use of tools such as material processes (action verbs), mental processes (sensing verbs), verbal processes (saying verbs), metaphors, similes, allegory, and symbols.

Because a student has knowledge about the features of narrative texts, they will be able to organise and process the text in ways that facilitate comprehension. Consider the example of a story about a girl named Teresa and her next door neighbour Mr Boyd. After reading, "Teresa's next door neighbour was old Mr Boyd", the student who

is familiar with narrative text will expect to be presented with a story having Teresa's neighbour as central to the action, and will be focused more on Mr Boyd than Teresa when reading what follows. When they go on to read, "Mr Boyd tried to squirt a stray cat with the hose, but he missed", the student will expect to read text explaining why he missed, and perhaps some discussion about how Mr Boyd felt about missing, how Teresa felt, and how the cat reacted. And when they read that Teresa calls Mr Boyd an "old toad", they will not be thrown by the metaphor, but will appreciate the comparison of Mr Boyd to a toad, and how the writer's use of this tool helps illuminate the meaning of the story. These expectations and understandings help focus the reader's processing of the text in ways that aid comprehension.

Science reports

In contrast to narrative texts, students who understand the features and organisation of science reports will know they have an opening general statement, and that each paragraph has a topic sentence, with meaning built up step by step. They will know that they are concerned with facts, contain language used to compare and/or contrast, language that classifies, and technical language. They will know such texts are usually set in no particular time, will not include characters or individuals, and will be written in an objective style. As they gain expertise, students will learn that writers of science reports make use of material processes (action verbs), relational processes (linking verbs), and tools (such as nominalisation) to condense language.

Again, because a student has knowledge of the features and organisation of science reports, they will be able to organise and process such texts in ways that facilitate comprehension. Consider the following excerpt which gives a factual description of the adaptations of wading birds. After reading, "Each species has adapted to a particular zone between the high and low tide lines. The length of their legs is a clue to whether they only feed at the edge or can venture some way into the water", the student who is familiar with this type of text will expect to go on to read a detailed description giving examples of particular wading birds' legs and where those birds feed. And when they read "Each species *has* adapted to." and "The length of their legs *is* a clue to." they will recognise *has* and *is* as relational processes used by writers to express the link between two pieces of information. They will not, however, expect to learn about two wading birds called "Jack" and "Tane", or to be told how "Jack" and "Tane" feel about being wading birds. The expert reader of science reports will organise and process these texts in ways that are quite different from the ways they organise and process narrative texts.

Key competencies most exemplified by this support material:

Key competencies				
Managing self	Relating to others	**Using language, symbols, and texts**	Participating and contributing	**Thinking**

References

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